Feudal Alliances in a Hyper-Capitalist World: Power and Organization in *EVE Online*

Oskar Milik and Nick Webber
Northwood University, MI | *Birmingham City University, UK*
omilik@gmail.com | nick.webber@bcu.ac.uk

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Abstract:

EVE Online is a MMOG which has gained notoriety for player organizations boasting thousands of active members. The complexity of these groups presents substantial challenges, and leaders have explored multiple approaches to organization and governance. They often employ structures and language drawn from historical social systems, family, or nationality to create social order.

Here we examine the use of feudalism in *EVE*: as a structure of power, an indicator of legitimacy, and a mechanism of waging war. We demonstrate that even as leaders incorporate feudal language into their organizations, their application of these concepts is influenced by capitalism and individualism. We argue that the final social and economic system is neither truly feudal nor capitalist, but instead an accommodation between the two, shaped by player knowledge, experience, and in-game needs. We conclude that such systems support legitimate structures of power which encourage player participation and produce more sustainable player organizations.

Keywords: Digital Games, Social Control, Social Organizations, Feudalism, *EVE Online*

Introduction: Understanding and Researching EVE Online

Designed and published by CCP Games in 2003, *EVE Online* is a Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) built around the concept of 'complete hypercapitalistic freedom' (Ólafsson, 2013). *EVE* uses a single shard (server) to host a community of somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000 players, all of whom can directly interact. Players are able to adopt a huge range of roles, as miners, traders, politicians, or even spies, and *EVE* is often described as a 'sandbox' or 'open world' game, in recognition of the extensive freedom and agency it affords. . Yet unlike many other games, especially role-playing games, these options are not linked to specified character 'classes' (such as warriors in World of Warcraft; see Milik, 2018). Instead, a single character can undertake all of these tasks, given enough desire and time.

EVE is, however, notoriously difficult to learn, something reflected both in academic literature (Paul, 2016) and in player discourse about the game's 'learning cliff.' Consequently, although it attracts more than 12,000 new players each week, the game struggles to retain these players. Some 90% of players who try the game leave within seven days, with many others falling away subsequently (EVE Online 2019, 29:40-31:00). Indeed, *EVE* developers suggest that it takes six months before someone can be regarded as a 'bone fide *EVE* player.'

Much of *EVE*'s difficulty comes from the freedom made possible by the virtual sandbox. Players have the capacity to form political and social organizations, and the ability to create armies of tens of thousands of ships to compete for territory and prestige (BBC, 2013). Similarly, the game's open systems allow for a very active and realistic in-game economy, the scale and complexity of which is evidenced by the historic presence of full-time academic economists on CCP's staff (Stanton, 2014), and *EVE's* longstanding presence in literature on virtual economies (e.g. Castronova 2003; Lehdonvirta and Castronova 2014). These processes make the virtual world of *EVE Online* unique - there has not been, to date, a game both so open to free agency and able to house competing populations at this scale.

In 'New Eden', *EVE*'s universe, corporations take the role occupied by guilds or clans in other digital games - player organizations which permit the structuring and management of communication,[i] interaction and cooperation, along with the nurturing of shared identities. Alliances are organizations consisting of multiple corporations, capable of creating systems to control territory in the game, and are the most commonly used unit of measurement for PvP (player-vs-player) conflict in the game. In 'null-sec' space, part of the game environment where

players are not protected from one another by non-player/AI security systems, players working collectively in an alliance can gain control of regions (territory), and this allows them to access valuable resources. Large organizations fight to control as much territory as possible, and once captured, seek to exploit it efficiently and effectively. Yet, to accomplish this, organizations need to attract and deploy huge numbers of players. Just the process of mining resources in 'null-sec' requires multiple participants: miners, transporters, escorts, logistics specialists, scouts. Greater operations, such as military conquests, require even more people. Consequently, territory-holding alliances in *EVE* often need thousands, if not tens of thousands, of active members. Perhaps as a result, alliance human resource systems are sometimes more complex - and more secure - than some real-world corporate HR networks (Milik, 2016).

It is important to keep in mind that these social systems and actions within the game exist in relation to a virtual world - a game about individual interest, capitalism, and selfishness. The individuals within this social situation are there by choice - participation in *EVE* is entirely voluntary, and in fact most players pay a subscription fee to engage with the content described in this article. Combined with the time requirements of the game and the fact that many players believe that much of the gameplay is "grindy," there are many reasons for players to ignore instructions from senior corporation or alliance members, to stop contributing to their organization, or simply to stop playing all together.

To account for attrition, these organizations must not only attract new players, but also acclimatize them to the complexities of the game so that they continue to play. Often, organizations frame game structures in terms of commonly-understood social systems, such as tribes and nations, and many early alliances relied on ethnic or cultural ties to bring people together (see Goodfellow, 2016). However, as attempts to create more powerful alliances and coalitions brought together disparate groups of people, new models were sought. One of the most readily identifiable of these was that of feudalism.

In this article, we analyze the employment of feudalism in *EVE*, both as an organizational model and as a widely-used metaphor to explain player relations. We discuss how feudalism is used not only to recruit and retain players within a comprehensible framework, but also as a means to legitimize power structures and as a system of social control. As we demonstrate, however, this is in many ways a metaphorical feudalism, and we move on to argue that this is limited in shape not only by the context of the game - as a hyper-capitalist environment - but also

by the lived experience of *EVE*'s players. Even so, *EVE*'s feudalism might offer a rejoinder to Seth Giddings' (2018: 766) questions concerning ludic economies, and their capacity to "exceed or suggest alternatives to late capitalist and neoliberal formations." Even so, our exploration suggests that it is inappropriate to understand social systems purely through player discourse, and it is impossible to completely trust simple metaphors for complex social systems, whether in standard world or digital world contexts.

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of these issues, we have used a multi-disciplinary approach to study the universe of *EVE Online* and surrounding media. The quotes in this article are taken from player chat logs, public blogs, and online forums. In addition we also draw on *EVE*-specific news organizations and historical notes and publications on the game world (e.g. Groen, 2016). This material was analyzed both through a historical model - placing events in the social, political, and economic framework accessible to the individuals involved - and a sociological model, where the language, visuals, and discourse were processed through an ethnomethodological lens (Garfinkel, 1967). The work emerges from a broader project to understand how specific social structures and concepts - here, feudalism - have been imported by players into the game and then spread between individuals in the digital realm.

Defining a Feudal System

The language of feudalism is widespread in commentary on *EVE Online*. It is visible in declarations by *EVE*'s political leaders (Milik, 2015); in both mainstream and *EVE* community journalism (Webber 2017) about the game; in blog posts where players reflect on their game experiences; and in message board discussions between players about aspects of the game and its political structure. By the 'language of feudalism,' we mean not only the word 'feudal,' but associated terms used to invoke a (predominantly Western medieval) feudal imaginary, such as 'peasant,' 'vassal,' 'knight,' and 'lord.' As we go on to discuss, such feudal ideas are often employed as an accessible metaphor in attempts by *EVE* players to 'make sense' of the game environment, and to communicate the organizational and power relationships within it. In practice, therefore, feudal language is put to a range of uses: much as in academic work, feudalism in *EVE Online* lacks a single, established meaning.

Feudalism is employed in a range of academic disciplines, including history, political science and economics, to refer to a spectrum of political, economic and military ideas, usually

describing the organization of historical societies. These include not only medieval Western European kingdoms (*c.*400-1500 CE) and China's Zhōu dynasty (*c.*1046-256 BCE), but also societies such as those of Russia and Japan, which remained feudal until much later. Academics have generally applied feudalism in one of three ways (Møller, 2015, pp. 21-3): to describe a method of government grounded in ties of dependence around service and/or land; to refer to economic relationships in agrarian societies between landlords and agricultural workers (drawing on Marxist frameworks); or to refer to 'feudal society' (Bloch, 1939) - in which authority was fragmented, a warrior caste was supreme, dyadic ties of obedience and protection bound individuals together, and land claims rather than salaries were the principal form of remuneration for service.

While the use of feudalism in *EVE* broadly echoes these models, with descriptions evocative of these historically-situated relationships, it also reflects a range of popular understandings of the medieval West - what we might think of as 'filmic' or 'schoolroom' representations of feudalism. Here, for example, *EVE* player Neoo Gabriel (2014) discusses *EVE*'s 'drone regions' in a forum thread:

> I always thought that the drone regions were the best example of feudal gameplay in EVE. You had the Lords, which set up the industry Stations where they would skim a refining percentage (tax) from all the drone alloys that were gathered there, who in then used those minerals to build Supercap components and then the hulls themselves. Then you had the Knights, who were the pvpers that fought other alliances and were supported by the Lords in ISK and in hulls to protect them. Then you had the Peasants, who were the normal players that farmed the rats and made their ISK form the dropped minerals in the refinery stations (highsec types).

In Gabriel's description, a personification of feudalism (lords, knights, peasants) structures our understanding of *EVE* play. The opening line is instructive; his "*best* example of feudal gameplay" points to something broader than one specific instance. This wider presence is visible in player Shik Koken's (2016) more abstract description of relations in *EVE*'s 'wormhole space:'

> wormhole organizations fall on a spectrum that range from cooperative on one end, to feudal on the other end… Wormhole feudalism structures an organization around relationships derived from the very few (CEO/directors) controlling POS residency/all assets in exchange for service or content from acquiescent line members.

While Koken's description may not incorporate the same medieval allusions as Gabriel's, its metaphorical call back to our academic definitions is clear.

Importantly, these descriptions are not limited to idle discussion between players on game-related forums. Both detailed and more abstract applications of feudal language are employed by *EVE*'s most prominent leaders, individuals with access to significant platforms. In a 2011 interview for game site *Rock Paper Shotgun*, The Mittani, then leader of a coalition called 'The Imperium,' indicated that 'There are three types of government in Eve, Space Feudalism, Space Communism and Council Systems' (Smith, 2011). Elsewhere, Mantou, leader of major Chinese alliance 'Army of Mango,' observed:

> What is called feudalism is simply a means for the country to be divided, distributed into fiefdoms for lords to rule. The monarch rules the feudal lords, and in turn the feudal lords rule the people. The case is similar in EVE: the alliance distributes territory to the corporations, the alliances manages the corps, and the corps manage each player (Mantou, 2016: 165).

These 'leaderly' conceptions of feudalism both reflect and structure the attitudes of the broader *EVE* community. Feudalism describes not only an organizational structure ('space feudalism') but is also used in a more general manner to explore, and explain, hierarchies of power and reciprocation. Thus, although Mantou and The Mittani are broadly critical of feudal structures in *EVE* - The Mittani refers to feudal alliances as the "type of alliance that cascades [i.e. fails] easier than any other" (Smith, 2011) - the language of feudalism is embedded in *EVE* discourse.

In action, then, we see these two senses of the feudal brought together: *EVE*'s 'feudal' structures are grounded in a narrative tying ownership of space (land) to participation, and participation to the protection of that space. In so doing, this narrative seeks to recast players from people seeking entertainment into distinct social entities upon whom obligations are placed.

This is done with the expectation that (new) players so socialized (Becker, 1953) would be more willing both to engage with the group and to perform 'necessary' actions: generating resources, perhaps, or going to war (Terranova, 2013; Paul, 2018). In essence, the feudal structural model, and its associated medieval allusions, has been used as a means to power over the social world of the game: over players, resources, and even wide-ranging diplomatic negotiations between organizations. What we are asking here, then, is how does this work? *Why* does this work? And what does that mean?

It may be of value to briefly address the study of digital environments such as *EVE Online*. In studies of both historical social systems (such as feudalism) and of media (such as digital games), action has been explained through economic models. Early research on digital games, for instance, attended to the economics of arcade and pinball machines (Fiske & Watts, 1985) and later work to the economic behavior of players in online worlds (Castronova, 2003). The relationship that an individual has with an economic system, however, is complex. There is always a desire to spend inefficiently, and players of digital games often want to subvert the very models intended to offer economic reasoning within a game - such as by cheating in *SimCity* (Giddings, 2018). In analyzing the experience of *EVE* players, we are discussing their perception of these systems, rather than the systems' exact nature; not observing an idealized feudalist or capitalist economic system, then, but rather the way this system is processed by players.

Feudalism as legitimacy

In the discussion that follows, we incorporate relatively straightforward models of legitimacy and of power. In order to connect with major sociological theories, we use Weber's definitions of power and legitimacy (1922) and Foucault's understanding of power as information and knowledge (1995). As this article focuses heavily upon the structure and operation of organizations in different contexts, we also use some concepts from organizational theory (Abrahamsson, 1993) and organizational communications (Weick, 1995). Our purpose in doing so is to situate this project in discussions which address how individuals experience the relationships of power in their lives and in political systems. Our interest is not in the structural model of feudalism as such, but instead in the behavior and understanding of those who would operate within it.

Many traditional arguments for the legitimacy of power, such as those established in the Western medieval period to support family- and religion-based leadership, rest upon primary (non-voluntary) membership (models generally undermined by the Enlightenment; see Barnett, 1994). In an online game, however, where social interaction is, as noted above, both anonymous and voluntary, such models may not be viable. As Bainbridge (2011: 189) has observed, games of this kind lack familial structures, and this perhaps weakens their capacity to support 'traditional' societies. In *EVE*, at least, players are obliged to look beyond traditional models to structure and legitimize their power. In doing so, they often adopt 'charismatic' (affective) and/or 'legal-rational' (contractual) approaches, and many of the largest, most successful groups in the game have been built around systems of this kind. 'The Imperium' is among the best-known examples: a coalition formed by members of the 'Goonswarm Federation,' led very ostentatiously by The Mittani.

Yet if charismatic leadership - often autocratic in character - is seen as important in establishing an organizational culture where authority is legitimate (i.e. understood and respected), this is not to say that 'traditional' models are rejected entirely. Indeed, *EVE*'s 'feudalism' remains grounded in traditional ties - of friendship, or small-group loyalty. When new players first engage with a major organization, they often find themselves very distant from, and unable to communicate with, its leadership - its CEOs and directors. Instead, they operate within a small group, usually a corporation which has joined an alliance, or coalition of alliances, for joint power. These large organizations can be tremendously complex: the Honeybadger coalition from 2013 consisted of two alliances - TEST Alliance Please Ignore, and BRAVE Newbies - with TEST alone containing some 67 corporations. Some of these played specific roles, for example the coalition's leading corporation, Dreddit, ran most operations, whereas Brand Newbros, served as a player recruitment wing. In such a structure, a new player may feel relatively unattached to the central group, but will often feel strong ties to their immediate group. A small corporation often feels like a family and this encourages social engagement outside the game or in other game spaces. Much like feudal relationships, this system is not simply a series of land-leases, but instead a network of trusted connections that spur loyalty and self-sacrifice. These bonds then act as the basis of authority, with players willing to sacrifice time, energy, and resources on behalf of their corporation.

Consequently, when a corporation has obligations to an alliance or coalition, members need neither accept nor know about those obligations personally. Instead, members must simply feel that their friends and colleagues have a need they can fulfil (reducing both anonymity and voluntarism). Through that fulfilment, they participate in military or economic activity on the corporation's behalf. This political system thus establishes a form of social contract, encouraging involvement and participation. Players accept corporation leadership, and therefore become active, participatory members of the alliance and/or coalition. Through this process an abstract concept - of coalition-level warfare, for instance - is consolidated into an actionable and immediate social situation that can be easily understood and processed.

Feudalism as power

The attractions of feudal models to *EVE*'s most powerful leaders are immediately apparent: this is a legitimizing system that they can implement easily and which players can recognize, either from schoolroom history or popular culture. This creates clear and operable hierarchies of power. As already indicated, large alliances are substantially concerned with the control and exploitation of territory, and the amount of territory an alliance controls is an index of its power, not only in terms of strategic dominance, but also economic access and political influence with other organizations. While this is consistent with historical feudal structures, to explicitly describe this system of power as feudalism is to connect it to popular understandings of feudal societies. In the (Western) public imagination, such societies have land-owning lords, land-working peasants, and land-protecting knights, ruled over by kings and emperors. This is made explicit in the construction of The Imperium: its leader, The Mittani, declared himself emperor, holding an official coronation at *EVE*'s Fanfest convention (Webber & Milik, 2017). This declaration may have been mocked - on Reddit, for example - but it achieved its purpose: to establish the type of power this coalition leader holds. The Mittani, reportedly, serves as a 'head of state', issuing declarations, commanding armies, and building alliances, and making little use of the game client. On receiving a temporary ban from *EVE Online* in 2012, he responded: "My ban is completely meaningless to this alliance and this coalition. As most of you know, I am kinda famous for never actually logging into EVE" (Mittani, quoted in Milik, 2015).

The Mittani, then, depicts himself as acting within *EVE* through other members of his coalition - his followers. In historical feudal societies, the economic centering of land meant it

was not only used in a manner akin to a salary, but also as a principal method for leaders to reward the loyalty of their followers. In *EVE*, a similar practice is visible, in the 'allotment of space' by 'land-owning lords' (Milik, 2015, p. 777) in exchange for military and economic support during warfare (which often ends with territorial expansion for the winning side).[ii] Feudalism, then, is a hierarchical system, in which mid-level leaders can increase their personal power and landholding by using the (human) resources of their group to accomplish tasks for the leaders of the larger organization. Thus, leaders at all levels have a vested interest in defending the feudal model and push their followers to do the same.

Even as control over territory is used as a boon and possible reward, so can it be used as a tool of domination and control. We have already discussed the legitimate (consensual) use of power, but obedience may also be obtained through coercion. An alliance can take away a corporation's territory, or declare them an enemy, in order to ensure they follow the dictates of the leadership. In one case, a leader removed an alliance, took their space, and replaced them with someone new, 'an infinitely better ally to have on our northern border and covering as opposed to [the previous alliance]' (quoted in Milik, 2015, p. 14). Such actions often force the removed group to leave null-sec, pursue new alliances, or disband completely. Coercion preserves power, but is not considered legitimate, creating the need for consistent supervision, as members no longer participate voluntarily, and may rebel against being exploited as a resource. In turn, this produces the need for further systems of surveillance, as well as greater threats of punishment as these systems become more complex (Foucault, 1995). If coercion begins to fail, alliances leave of their own volition, act against the interests of coalition leadership, or even join opposing organizations in an attempt to establish a better situation for themselves. These behaviors are reminiscent of historical power dynamics in which leaders feared protests from the nobility or general populace (a notable example, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, led to the creation of the first formal constitution in Europe; see Zamoyski, 2009). They would seek legitimate systems of traditional power, relying on religious or familial bonds, but if those failed, they would need to dedicate consistent military resources towards controlling the population.

The application of these systems also helps to firmly stratify *EVE* society, reinforcing the position of group leaders as overlords with obedient soldiers at hand, while at the same time diminishing those involved in non-military play. Rather than pledging military service, some corporations pay a monthly rent to gather resources, with the expectation that the land-owner

(the holding alliance) will protect them from outside attacks. These so-called 'renters' are seen not only as the lowest members of the social order, but as a threat to the system itself: 'bad for EVE' (rob117, 2014: /cjhlclu).[iii] Other players describe renters as 'plebs or peasants' (/cjhlbj4), who 'don't want and do not partake in what really makes nullsec interesting' (/cjhl43d), and 'who pay for doing some of the more boring stuff in EVE' (/cjhw1qg).

Labor power

The tension between landlords and agricultural workers, those who produce resources from the land, is a tenet of Marxist models of feudalism (Terranova, 2013), which these responses to renters seem to echo. *EVE*'s powerful organizations (landlords) are keen to exploit the territory they control, itself a resource-intensive exercise requiring many workers, and renters are a solution to the problem of an undersupply of players willing or able to conduct such exploitation. Resources are produced through labor, which can be transformed into objects such as ships or, through the marketplace, into ISK, *EVE*'s in-game currency. Similarly, exercising military power does not simply mean owning ships. Ships must be piloted, fleets must be led, and these activities often take hours of players' time (one famous battle, the Bloodbath of B-R5RB, took 21 hours to complete; see Pitcher, 2014).

The common factor across these activities is the requirement for labor, indicating a direct interconnection (or even convertibility) between military and economic power. Economic power, generated through labor, relies on military power to recruit players and maintain territorial safety, which in turn requires economic resources to produce the necessary ships. It follows from this that the capacity to mobilize labor power is of central importance to effective leadership in *EVE*, and it has been suggested that 'the most valuable resource in EVE is motivation' (Messner, 2018). While some of the game's most prolific players see whole areas of the game experience as 'not fun' (Carter, Bergstrom, Webber & Milik, 2016), many individuals play extensively, putting long hours into the game. As we have already suggested, null-sec alliances expect players to invest a certain amount of time and energy into services for the group, a situation seen in many games, especially MMOGs (Andrejevic, 2013; Terranova, 2013), and frequently tied to the ability to progress in the game (often referred to as 'grinding' by players or 'gated content' by developers). As a framework, feudalism delivers to these concerns. Social ties act very strongly to diminish the feelings of alienation and detachment that repetitive actions such as grinding

would create. Feudalistic thinking encourages small groups to knit loyalties together effectively, into a larger structure which can fulfil the leadership need of mobilization for both military and non-military purposes, requirements which echo those of many historical agrarian societies. *EVE*'s Fanfests and player get-togethers around *EVE Vegas* (Webber & Milik, 2017) reflect the kinds of events used in the past to unite cultural groups.

Since the value of the group contribution in *EVE Online* is so central to group survival in null-sec space, organizations measure and monitor it very closely. A few major groups, for instance, used 'pap links' (HTML registration links) to track character involvement in (battle) fleets (Milik, 2016). Even though player involvement allows both players and their groups to advance in terms of game objectives (accessing content, increasing character power or level) and by comparison with other players (PvP content, visual representations of power (Paul, 2011)), these policies, which are in essence surveillance processes, are seen by many leaders as a necessary way to establish the value of specific players and subgroups to the larger organization.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the use of such approaches can be seen negatively by players. A range of Reddit threads on the subject, for instance, portray pap links as a failure of leaders to create 'fun fleets' or otherwise incentivize participation. Indeed, some argue that this reduces players to objects, seen simply as the number listed under their forum name: 'the big goon in the sky watches your forum account to see how many paps [per] character you have' (Anon, 2016: /d0rqt9u). It is also notable that there is no relationship between pap links and player skill or ability, and in fact many *EVE* players claim to go AFK (away from keyboard) after establishing a presence, having successfully 'clocked in' (Taylor, Bergstrom, Jenson, & de Castell, 2015). This type of behavior, in response to the monitoring of participation, is evocative of work in the offline world, and evidence suggests it is understood by players in precisely this way.

While this diminishment of the agency and status of players is in line with the treatment of renters, and with Raimo's (2014) comparisons of *EVE* with feudal Japan, where 'money earned [people] no respect or social status whatsoever,' the connection with modern, industrial practices of labor management seems to reassert *EVE*'s imagined capitalist framework. Although Raimo's statement may have been true of the *EVE* of mid-2014, it was no longer true just a year later, when an *EVE* casino owner named LennyKravitz2 was able to convert his vast wealth into a huge mercenary coalition - purchasing military resources and hiring labor power - and successfully conduct a war against The Imperium, at the time the largest single player

organization (Webber & Milik, 2017). This, of course, fits neatly with a capitalist conception of the *EVE* universe, but it is intriguing that discourse around this particular event was rarely placed into a clearly economic framework.[iv] Instead, it was most often discussed in terms that were couched firmly within the feudal perspective we have explored: the forces of the Imperium were portrayed as greedy land-owners, reliant on weak and incompetent renters. They argued that a revolution of players dedicated to 'fun' could overthrow these feudal lords, and create 'content' where territory was available and worth fighting over.

Money as power

The purchase of the service of a large mercenary army is not, however, at odds with conceptions of historic feudal societies. Indeed, the concept of 'bastard feudalism', where military retainers were indentured for financial payments rather than swearing fealty in return for land, is well-established in historical literature (see in particular Hicks, 1995). This was a structure which was similar to, and ran concurrently with, more 'ordinary' feudalism, with neither representing an exclusive form (Ross, 2018, p. 1027). We can see bastard feudalism in private armies and retinues, which sat outside the land-based hierarchies of service and protection: 'instead of stable hereditary tenancies, Bastard Feudalism consisted of payments of cash for short-terms that were easily terminated' (Hicks, 1995, p. 14-15). Although the name implies otherwise (a legacy of Victorian viewpoints), bastard feudal relations were a legitimate and normal part of feudal society.

With that said, LennyKravtitz2's role cannot be overlooked in considering the relationship at play between feudalism and capitalism in *EVE*. He was not a major landowner, but instead had generated his economic success through the provision of services (he was a casino owner and tied to some major *EVE* banks), and was able to expend enough financial resources to challenge the game's largest empire. And if players couched this act in feudal terms, those terms were used to critique The Imperium's loss, not to recognize the explicitly feudal nature of the conflict. Feudalism had been defeated by capital accumulation.

It must be remembered that null-sec is a specific part of the *EVE* universe, and while it may appear to operate a territorial economy, it does not exist in isolation. The most uniform (widespread) form of power in the game more generally is, in fact, financial. Accomplishing activity of all kinds in *EVE* requires the investment of ISK, the in-game currency, and so ISK can

be understood as a principal source of agency in the game. ISK is required to build a ship, to purchase the skills to pilot it, and to buy the ammunition to fire its weapons. At larger scales, ISK is required to build space stations, and to purchase the fuel needed to power them; and such stations are necessary to hold sovereignty over the contested space of null-sec. ISK, then, represents economic power, but is also the source of all power (military, economic, political, social, and diplomatic); to survive, organizations must generate funds.

As we have noted, this is achieved in the first instance through player labor: hours of mining, ratting, and production. For large organizations to remain viable, hundreds, or even thousands of their members must continually generate funds; every space station has to be fueled and funded, every territorial claim has to be purchased, and in most cases, warships have to replaced using centralized funds. While resource and value generation can be conducted on an individual level, through donated property or labor, other funding mechanisms, such as taxation, can also be applied at an organizational level. For a long time, the most effective such system was 'moon mining', in which organizations used moon bases to generate very rare and valuable resources which could then be sold. Subsequently, 'ratting' (the destruction of pirate NPC ships for items or bounty) and fleet mining have become the most common tools to generate wealth. Large organizations optimize these modes of economic activity, using their resources to access null-sec systems where these activities are particularly efficient, providing the tools (ships) required, and the logistical and protective support necessary to maximize the transformation of labor power into economic resources and (increased) value.

Is this Feudalism or Capitalism?

While we have argued that the concepts and language of feudal social systems are employed by the players of *EVE Online* in a direct manner and in a deliberate reflection of what we might think of as a 'popular' understanding of historical feudal societies, there are many ways that the terms, ideas, and organizational structures we have discussed resemble the workings of contemporary capitalism, even when seen through a 'feudal' lens. Certainly, they rely more heavily on market activity than might otherwise be expected of historic feudal societies, in which 'market behavior played no more than a subsidiary role' (Cominel, 2000, p. 6). In some ways this is not surprising. Not only is the *EVE Online* universe designed to be hyper-capitalist, as we have already noted, but *EVE* players can be seen to evaluate their play -

their labor - in terms of contribution, value, and reward (Paul, 2011). *EVE*'s players do not, in their play, escape their out-of-game socio-cultural background. The vast majority of them have been raised and socialized within capitalist societies; to compete, to see their time and labor as valuable resources, and to see capital as a measure of relative power and success.

As players draw on ideas of feudalism, then - ideas often loosely-formed and lacking in detail - they do so in light of this capitalist framework. Foucault's observation that power is rooted in information is pertinent here: *EVE* players' information is restricted by their experience, and their power to understand and shape their world is then limited by their lack of information. Indeed, the association of power and information also serves to explain the fact that feudal systems are employed at all. Returning to the ideas we discussed at the outset of this article, new players seek a ready means to acclimatize themselves to *EVE'*s universe but find themselves in a position of relative weakness. They lack information and understanding, compared to longstanding, successful players. They are then introduced to the game's social norms, rules, and structures by those who are already well established, and the flow of information is almost entirely one-sided. In offering feudalism as a framework for understanding, *EVE*'s leaders take advantage of this inequality of information to redirect benefit to themselves as leaders, in keeping with the game's hyper-capitalist reality of pragmatic individualism.

This draws out an important distinction for the purposes of understanding how players employ the concepts they advance. Leaders use feudal models, but also think in a specifically capitalist manner. Their idea of success is the control and exploitation of the value available in resources within a territory; their idea of power is based on the exploitation of the labor of other players to achieve these ends, usually performance-managed (via, for example, pap links) in return for rewards, such as reimbursement (payment for lost ships), access to better markets, and protection during group events or mining operations. While the architecture of power, and the language around it, incorporates feudal ideas, it is not possible to see these models and mechanisms as entirely feudal. Equally, however, it would be inaccurate to portray them as wholly capitalist. Instead, we see different understandings of social systems being fused, utilized, and taught within different contexts. The concept of a feudal hierarchy remains valuable to the players of *EVE Online*, even if it does not correspond directly with historians' understanding of what these ideas might mean. Players attempt to employ shared social understandings in a way that makes them readily comprehensible to others.

This distance from historical constructions of feudalism does not diminish the meaningfulness of the use of the idea by *EVE* players. Although a range of academic historians have attacked and rejected the concept of feudalism during the last 50 years (see, for example, Brown, 1974; Ward, 1985; Reynolds, 1994; Cheyette, 2010), concerned that it exercises an unhelpful constraint on our understanding of medieval European society, feudalism remains in widespread use as both academic and vernacular shorthand, in the latter cases as a synonym for hierarchy and oppression (Cheyette 2010, p. 119). For *EVE Online* players, however, the most important aspect of feudalism lies neither in its power dynamics nor in the systems of land-ownership that help to define it. Instead, as with broader vernacular use, feudalism is a social system which is understood to have existed, which included those who fought and those who worked the land, and which was about land, lordship and loyalty. As discussed above, that is not necessarily accurate, but for the purposes of the in-game experience, that fact is irrelevant. Players can use this idea as a means of sharing an understanding of what is expected of them. Leaders take on responsibility for recruitment, building armies, and retaining loyalty, and use those as resources to occupy and protect territory. Lower-ranked players, in turn, adopt the roles of warriors or land-workers - roles that make sense both in a cursory background in feudal systems, and also within the game.

Conclusion

Much as with social and political systems in the 'real' world, the political systems of *EVE* shift over time. The feudal model became popular due to the rise of moon mining (see above), which depended upon territorial control. Prior to this, territorial claims were largely seen as status signifiers for groups but did not significantly affect the production of resources. With the change in production, however, came a political shift: the hegemonic power at the time, an alliance called Band of Brothers, was overthrown and replaced by Goonswarm, which adopted a feudal model. Somewhat ironically, this war was won through the use of massive numbers of Rifters (very small ships; see Milik, 2015), an approach more evocative of conscript warfare than of feudal combat.

For a variety of reasons, the feudal model decreased in popularity over time, a process perhaps encouraged by the capitalist elements we have identified. The formal adoption of renting models led some organizations to construct new systems for profiting from their territory. This

challenged some players' perceptions not only of how *EVE* 'should' be played - renting, as we have said, was seen as 'bad for *EVE*' - but also their understanding of feudal models. The labeling of (aspects of) feudal models as 'not fun' reduced the value of those models for recruitment and retention efforts, and somewhat astutely, some players felt that this modified feudalism was really just turning owned territory into capital, to receive returns on investment. In part, it was this concern which led so many alliances to accept LennyKravitz2's offer of a share of his own resources to join in a war against the Imperium.

While we may connect events in *EVE Online* to debates in academia, and acknowledge the value that the system of feudalism has as an object of discourse and as an analytical tool for researchers exploring player interactions, there is also a great limitation here. In recognizing the language of specific historical models, it is easy to assume that the individuals using that language have a clear understanding of the models they are applying. It is, however, essential to understand that these concepts are a form of discourse; an act of language to explain a complex world. Rather than feudalism acting as a determining factor for interaction, it is used as a means to explain action to individuals fully socialized into capitalist thinking. The world of *EVE* is an ideal site in which to see this type of construct; it is designed to be hyper-capitalist, and so actions that do not fit neatly into the capitalist model (such as self-sacrifice on behalf of one's alliance) require explanation. Yet *EVE* is not the only online world to see the mobilization of feudal language in a capitalist mode, something also visible in the rise of economic class-based conflict in *Fallout 76* (Hernandez, 2019).

It is important to note that discourses and explanations of feudalism in *EVE* are also closely connected to systems of power. Leaders in the game have been quick to learn that establishing social and political systems purely through capitalist models leads to instability and eventual failure. In order to attain stability, these leaders have turned to other conceptual systems as a basis of their legitimacy: to nationalism, elitism, and feudalism. All these models exist within a capitalist environment and are used to gain capitalist rewards, but they explain why players might act counter to their immediate interests and offer them an understanding of their immediate social situation. As a purely economic leader, LennyKravitz2 would never have been able to convert his economic and military might into a sustainable, long-term territorial claim. The capitalist nature of his military 'rental' made him unable to consolidate the kind of power that The Mittani claimed through his 'imperial' crown.

If capitalist power structures in *EVE* seem inherently unstable, reducing participant engagement, the employment of feudalism demonstrates that players can be encouraged to frame their experiences differently, in ways that, in essence, encourage them to play less individualistically. Through the social construction of narratives, histories and legitimizing structures, successful leaders are able to create organizations which develop and reward required behavior in other players. Yet *EVE*'s feudal model is neither wholly feudal nor wholly capitalist, but a functional blend of the two. Importantly, it is not a purely economic model, and while it may thus incorporate the kinds of "older, (stranger) modes of value and exchange" which Giddings (2018: 766) suggests animate digital culture, its challenge to capitalist assumptions is in fact mounted, as early game studies literature proposed, through "images, value systems, and player behaviors" (2018: 767). Leaders who successfully incorporate such structures are more effectively able to call upon the participation of other players - in the form of time, effort, and most importantly, loyalty. In turn, when faced with "rational" economic choices, ordinary corporation and alliance members can be seen to rely on other legitimizing factors to make their decisions (for example, small-group loyalty), even when those factors are based on mis-representations of the past. *EVE*'s feudalism, then, perhaps offers one form of social response to the provocation of capitalist individualism.

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[i] For example, by restricting communication hierarchically so it is much easier to communicate with peers and subordinates than with corporation leadership.

[ii] Notably, these are rarely grants of ownership, instead taking the form of 'permissions' to operate in and exploit that space, an arrangement closer to subinfeudation (feudal sub-letting) than alienation (giving land away).

[iii] These are citations to comments in a Reddit thread, and directly locate the quoted comment when appended to the full URL in the references section. In this respect they serve the same function as page numbers.

[iv] With some exceptions; the Imperium leadership, for instance, argued strongly that the war should be called the 'Casino War' to emphasize the central role played by the economic might of their opponents. More on this below.