

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

There is a vast imaginary world going on that most people don't know about. At any given time, 500,000 people around the world are playing a video game called Eve Online. This isn't the kind of game where you go around shooting monsters or trying to move a little a character through a maze. Eve takes place in a virtual galaxy. You can be anything you want in this world. You can live on a space station. You can fly around the universe with another crew. You can mine raw materials off other planets.

But none of that stuff was built by CCP, the company in Iceland that created the game -- which means that every ship, every space station was built from scratch by the players from raw materials they mined off these planets. There is an in game space currency, but you need to pay real money to have it. Some people in EVE don't do anything else but building things and sell them to other players on like an inter-galactic eBay. And since you play Eve through your Internet browser, you can interact with any player in the world in real time.

I don't play EVE because I would suck at it. I usually play video games where I get to be Batman – and that's about it. I swing around the city and fight bad guys. But when you create a character it's just a fake name and picture of your avatar. Otherwise, it's mostly your point of view as you interact with this world. Although sometimes you can zoom out and look at the awesome ship you created.

To play Eve, you need to be very patient, highly technical and have a taste for Machiavellian politics. Yeah, this is not some utopians future where everyone flying around waving at each other. There is a fierce competition to control as much space as possible.

To survive in Eve you need to form coalitions with other players. As the game have evolved over the last 14 years, the alliances between coalitions have gotten so big, the balance of power in the game resembles pre World War I Europe.

Most of the time, the opposing sides are at a standstill. Everyone is flying around in packs, talking to each other on secure channels, protecting their space -- until a war breaks out.

That's what happened on January 27, 2014.

This story starts with a player called Manfred Sideous, or Manny. By the way, these aren't their real names. Most of them prefer to go by their in-game names.

MANNY: The day started at 2am for me, when I got a text message that the sov had dropped.

The sov bill he's talking about is an auto pay box on the website which allows his coalition, Pandemic Legion, to hold claim on a giant space station they created.

Manny swears he paid the bill. The problem was with the company that runs the game, CCP.

MANNY: The way the sov system works if you didn't have auto pay selected when it came to billing cycle the sov dropped. There was a bug however that CCP later fixed that they alluded to in patch notes, caused in rare instances for the sov to not be paid even though box was checked.

ELISE: He claims to this day, he had everything checked,

This is Elise Randolph, who is in Manny's coalition. Most of the players in Eve are men but for some reason, a lot of them use female avatars. Anyway, Elise is very close with Manny but he just doesn't believe him.

ELISE: He will swear up and down he did nothing wrong, but everyone else including CCP the bill wasn't paid the sov turned off and your station goes from being invulnerable to vulnerable.

That's pretty common in Eve. You'll hear two sides of a story where they can't both be right but every player in the world has a strong opinion about it.

So all Manny has to do is re-check the auto pay box, right? The problem is even he does that -- it takes a day to process and reclaim this area of space where they have their biggest space station. Meanwhile:

GRATH: All of our stuff in the station, all the memberships was in the station,

Grath Telkin is one of Manny's top lieutenants. At the time, their coalition had been battling another alliance called the Clusterfuck Coalition or CFC, which had almost 40,000 members. The CFC had aligned themselves with players in Australia and Russia. Remember if this game is going on in real time, you need allies to have your back when it's 3am in your time zone.

GRATH: Eve is very time zone based. Russians and Australians control night time that's the way it is and always been, and nothing we can do, there's not enough people awake when it's 5pm in Moscow for us to defend against Russian attack, so we try not to attack Russian space in Russian primetime, attack when harder to defend, this is 5am and Manny didn't care and he called for everything.

Meaning all hands on deck – they're going coming to get us.

MANNY: In order to fight the odds we were presented we had to put an incredible amount of assets on the field in order to be competitive.

But it's very early in the morning on the East Coast, even earlier on the West Coast. Meanwhile, players around the world are noticing the station is up for grabs.

SORT: We saw what was happening and we decided to take a swing for the fight.

Sort Dragon is part of an Australian coalition that's hostile to Manny's coalition, Pandemic Legion.

SORT: Before a fight both sides would calculate how many capitol ships, we looked at hostile numbers and what we had, as it stood we had more ready to go.

These ships by the way have great names like Dreadnaughts, and Supercarriers.

When the game went online in 2003, the developers thought there was a limit to how big the ships could get. But the players surprised everyone by building these enormous ships called Titans. I'm not sure what the in-game currency is but in real dollars they cost about \$2000 real world dollars to make. And they take thousands of hours to build.

JIN'TAAN: They're 70 kilo long, gigantic death machines they have doomsday can kill any other ship in the game with one shot,.

Jin'Taan was a neutral player in the fight, but he also sees himself as a war correspondent. In fact, there's an entire media landscape of blogs and podcasts that just cover Eve, and this was a big story unfolding in real time. So there he was in England, watching hundreds of these massive ships converge around the same area of space.

JIN'TAN: They brought everything. They threw every Dred, Titan, Super at their disposal, pounding meat into that grinder calling every ally they possibly could.

Elise Randolph says if you were to watch the game at this point, what you'd see is a galaxy full of ships firing at each other, and blowing up in slow motion.

ELISE: And luckily Eve has mechanic where a lot of people in the system, time in that system slows down so the server can handle things going on, time slows down to 10% normal time.

It's actually kind of beautiful to watch.

The tide of this entire battle turned when the decision was made by Manny and his allies to target the Flight Commander or FC from the enemy coalition from Australia. In other words, they decided to blow up the head honcho on the other side who was calling all the shots.

JIN'TAAN: They went for head shot they wanted to kill enemy FC and stop him from coming back deal with decapitated enemy force and move into kill.

The guy inside that Titan, that everyone was trying to kill, was Sort Dragon. It was bad idea for two reasons. But Sort Dragon's ship was really, really big, so it took a long time to blow up. And with all their firepower was aimed at him – Manny and his allies were vulnerable to being picked off.

SORT: It took two and a half hours to kill me and in that time we killed six of their equivalent ship, it calls down to the calls, calls in their side made incorrectly, cost them the fight and cost them the biggest number of Titans.

You blew up then you regenerated somewhere else?

SORT: Yes, but I had another ship, another account logged in on the field, when they killed my Titan I alt-tab to another account, and kept calling targets with that account.

GRATH: And from that point, the fight was never the same we were never the same again. And we were never able to trade blows when it first kicked off.

Grath Telkin knew it was a fatal error to focus all their firepower on Sort Dragon. Watching it all play out in slow motion was heartbreaking for him.

GRATH: And the only thing I could do is hold people's hand as they died over 19 hours. Some of those Titans were the first in the game. So the amount of money we lost in cash value like more money people make in lifetime I got to sit and watch it die, it was really morbid day there wasn't a lot of angry making sure everyone who did die we spent every dime to replace it as soon as we were free and safe.

Grath also ended up being the guy who negotiated the surrender. His alliance agreed to hand over the space station, if they could take all their stuff with them. It turned out to be a good deal.

GRATH: My alliance loved me to death. We went from everyone losing everything owned, all our stuff free and stuff we lost were Titans, the next day better people were happier got stuff free.

Also, Grath needed to take a break. This fight was the culmination of a series of battles that had been going on for three months.

GRATH: 3 months in a war? It sucks. It's a video game. I've been fighting same war for 3 months, it's not 'Nam.

In the end, The Bloodbath of B tack R5RB – which is its official name – was the largest battle in the history of the game until that point. Over \$350,000 dollars worth of ships were destroyed in a single day – that's 350 thousand real dollars, not in-game currency. And it made the news – the real news. This is the BBC:

GRATH: Everyone's like did you see this fight in Eve? I was in it. The side that lost.

It was especially surreal for Manny, who shouldered the blame because of that unchecked auto pay.

MANNY: I was especially surprised getting interviews requests from mainstream media like Washington Post and NY Times and it floored me. Friends were linking me news articles from media outlets around the world, like stories from New Zealand, and from Asia and Western Europe and South America, it was pretty crazy.

The video game company CCP actually built an in-game monument to commemorate the battle. Manny has flown his ship out to visit it.

MANNY: It's a little bittersweet for me, but in the same vein it was cool to be part of it.

The other reason why he doesn't feel so bad – they eventually beat back their enemies and retook the station. It wasn't just good strategizing. Something happened in real life that weakened their enemies.

See, all the English-speaking players in Eve refer to the Russian coalition as the Russians, but they're not all Russian -- they're just players in the Russian time zone. That includes Ukrainians.

SORT: It was around time stuff happened in Ukraine, Russian alliance there was infighting from Ukraine and Russia and one used it as reasoning to disband alliance they built together over the years, that was enough of a big hit not financially but moral but the group then got morale boost and took back all the space they lost and then some.

In talking about Eve, it's hard to suss out what is real. The world in the video game is virtual, but the interactions between the players are very real. What they're fighting over isn't real but it cost real money and took a lot of time build.

But what's definitely real are their lives outside the game. They have jobs and families.

Which made me wonder who are these guys, and what drives them to live a double life in a virtual galaxy? That's where things get really interesting – just after the break.

BREAK

As I talked with these guys about Eve, I kept wondering the same thing. Where do they find the time to play?

SORT: So it's 1:22 am and only reason I'm awake is lead fleet in hour and half, It comes down to dedication and if I expect my people to take time off work or something, I expect to lead from the front.

But Sort Dragon does strive to have a work/life balance, or in this case its a game/life balance.

SORT: When there's no wars in real life, in EVE, I will spent more time with wife, newborn son, do jobs I need to do and I consider it accumulating brownie points, something does come along, I need this time for my game, and my wife is understanding I'm very happy of that.

I heard that a lot -- very understanding wives. And some of their wives are gamers. A lot of the guys I talked with said they started playing in college when they had time to kill. Some of them are in jobs that feel monotonous and EVE makes them feel truly alive. Although a lot of them have very challenging, technical jobs -- Jin Taan is an aerospace engineer -- and playing EVE is a way to use those skills in a much more creative way.

But Grath Telkin had a reason for playing that was not like any of the others.

GRATH: I'm a heavy gamer, I learned a long time ago they can't put me in jail if I play video games --

Moment?

GRATH: Oh yeah, for sure. For 100%. I spent 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25 and 27 incarcerated, The number of my friends from Baltimore died from heroin overdose, I lose 6-7 a year, drunk driving accidents, I've lost a son, the number people die violently is high and I've probably made it out of that trap because of my interest in computer games.

Some of the video games he was playing, he just needed good aim to blow stuff up. But what sucked him to Eve was that you needed real leadership skills. He eventually rose to be a Fleet Commander or FC.

GRATH: You know, I'm a construction foreman, so it's second nature for me to bark orders, and it lead to me excelling in the game in that regard in sheep herding, I used to

be FC, now I'm more of an HR guy really, I manage people instead of whole fleets, and that's it, I tell people what to do in a video game, not to be confused with real life.

You're a foreman but not overseeing 150 guys.

GRATH: No like five! At the height of career when I was 28, I was overseeing three crews of five guys. I believe that being CEO of company finding right people to do right jobs, you don't do much as CEO besides delegate tasks, talking real life and in game, as CEO you don't do that much, you have people under you do everything your job is manage people that's your job.

Grath vets his crew, like there're applying for a real job. But he has good reason to scrutinize new recruits. Eve is rife with double agents, people pretending to join one coalition while they're spying for another.

And while vetting these guys, Grath gets a kick out of knowing that many of them have much higher profile jobs in real life. A lot of guys taking orders from him are in the military.

GRATH: We have army rangers, I've got a submarine commander, CEO of cell tech company.

Some of the FCs like Elise Randolph care about the feelings of the crew. It's one thing when he's managing people at the law firm where he works – but his crewmembers aren't being paid to spend time with him. People in the game are paying money to spend time with him.

PETER: If everyone dies you make a bad call that's one thing, spend hours and nothing happens, feel the worst, made these people cancel dinner plans and didn't have fun, sat together waiting for something to happen.

But more often, you get leaders with a hard-core attitude like Sort Dragon.

SORT: There's no such thing as democracy, successful alliances run by dictators. you find people like to follow, they may have high paying job, have a boss, they may be high person in real life but come in Eve and follow because they spend their real life leading people and they find it better to be lead in Eve and do what someone else says and have some fun.

Jin'taan says that's another aspect which draws people to Eve. You can act out your darkest impulses in the game.

JIN'TAAN: I think that's at its core what it's about be a tribal asshole simulator, you get to live like there are not consequences brutally destroy other people's tribes.

I mean do you need that to succeed, can you win by being a nice guy?

JIN'TAAN: Yeah but you can definitely succeed by nice but not by being dumb.

Are there moments it's gone too far, all is far in love and war or friendship and war but moments you've gone too far?

JIN'TAAN: When people start to bring in real life stuff that's when line is drawn. There is that understanding that Eve is a game, you can't be a massive asshole, be an asshole in the game, that's what it's there for don't be an asshole outside of it.

Easier said than done. That's why most of the players don't like to give out their real names. Sort Dragon had to go public when he joined a counsel of players that advises CCP on how best to run the game. The company even flies them out to their headquarters in Iceland. And during his time on the counsel, CCP changed the game in a way that a lot of players didn't like, and they blamed him. Now they knew his real name.

SORT: People telling me to kill myself, ringing my house, disconnect my house phone.

I heard a few different variations of that story, when people were shocked to find their enemies in Eve were trying to mess with them in real life. They have a strict code of honor that's supposed to prevent that.

My favorite story is one that Grath Telkin told me. There's a guy on his crew who goes by the name Sith Rex. In real life, Sith Rex is a Louisiana State Trooper. By the way, the fact that Grath Telkin is friends with a cop is huge – he didn't spend that much time in jail by being nice to cops. Anyway, this guy Sith Rex is told Grath that one day he invited another cop over to his house, and Sith Rex discovered this other cop taking screenshots of Sith's computer because the browser was open to Eve. Sith Rex discovered his friend – a fellow officer on the force – was actually part of a rival coalition in EVE and he was spying on him in real life. What's

worse, Sith Rex had just asked his buddy on the force to write a recommendation for him because he was applying to the FBI.

GRATH: This is supposed to be your partner in arms, and he's definitely screwing you over, this guy was supposed to be his reference for his application to be in the FBI. That's some only in Eve shit, nobody come to your WoW raid and report what's going on ever!

But storytelling is one of the prime ways you can motivate your followers to understand who your enemies are, and why they need to be stopped.

SORT: Yeah one of the biggest things gone into alliances and started stories like started politics someone starts smear campaign, do that in Eve internally even externally smear campaign, this person robbed this person or said this about someone.

Jin'taan says that's the most effective way to smear players in Eve, to claim they're cheating, or that they're changing the way the game is played and taking away whatever it is that you love about Eve.

JIN'TAAN: Aw, they stifle new players, they take all these resources from people who could use it.

But I think that's why Eve is all consuming. It's a grand narrative. People who play the game are always talking about the game itself in these heroic terms. And you can become a legend in the game. You can quit and years later, everyone will still know the part you played.

SORT: Because you look at daily grind and everything is the same, get up go to work, go home, go to sleep, etc. When in Eve, you feel like you don't matter -- if you play WoW, you don't affect the game, you don't have anything except account, shoot this, but in Eve even smallest person can affect the game, people who think they aren't special in another game, you can be truly special in Eve.

JIN'TAAN: Eve online is a space opera that you get to be. You are the space opera in Eve. There's nothing on this scale of magnitude there's nothing else you get to say I was there, I saw B tack R. You don't read about lore events, you make them, you make the history of the game.

ELISE: And that's one of the things that newer players love, I know mechanics and when I talk to new players, mechanics questions? No, tell me about this war because you were there.

It's like grandpa what did you do during the war kind of question.

ELISE: Yeah ... it's so fascinating some of the stories, you literally make it up if you tried because it's real life.

Sort of. The sense of loss feels real. When someone blows up your ship that you spend thousands of dollars and hours putting together – it's painful.

SORT: When you lose something in Eve, they know because they play the game what it would be like for them to lose, they understand the sacrifices you make and what you lose in Eve.

The sense of comradely is real within the coalitions.

SORT: The friends I have in Eve some of them close than my family.

MANNY: I've forged some of the greatest friendships in my life in Eve.

And during combat, the adrenaline rush is real.

GRATH: The first time you get into a fight and you're done and for 20 minutes hands shaking from adrenaline rush from that fight, you'll know what I'm talking about.

In the end, I think that Eve allows players to experience something people have fantasized about since the beginning of civilization – the glory of being a hero in war, the victor in a grand conflict. Which is interesting because Call of Duty is a much more popular video game – and there you get to experience the gritty, gory reality of war where you don't know what the hell's going on except you have to kill the people shooting at you.

Eve is virtual enough where you get to experience the pain and gain of serving in combat, but in a war that feels like matters, where you understand the politics very clearly and why you're fighting.

And at the end of the day – or when the sun comes up -- you can turn off your computer, and go back to your real life, mostly unscarred.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening.

Special thanks to Sort Dragon, Grath Telkin, Elise Randolph, Jin'Taan, Manfred Sideous, and all the other guys I talked with. Sorry if I couldn't fit into this episode, but I love hearing your war stories. And if you'd like to learn more about Eve, there's a bunch of really interesting videos on YouTube of speakers at their annual fanfest, including economists and sociologists who study Eve because it's the perfect test subject group.

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