

# **“You don’t ever stop playing *EVE Online*, you just take a break”: Rethinking what it means to quit a Massively Multiplayer Online Game**

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To date, much of the research about Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) and the people who play them has remained focused on the study of current players. Aside from the work of Pearce (2009) and Dutton (2007), comparatively little is known about who quits and for what reason(s). Rather than assuming non/participation in MMOGs begins and ends with personal interest, in this research I argue that the voices of former participants can add further insights of interest to game scholars wanting to better understand why players gravitate towards particular games and not others.

## **EVE Online**

To address the gap whereby “quitting” remains underexplored, in this research I describe responses from 133 former *EVE Online* (EVE) players who were asked in an online survey why they discontinued participation in this particular MMOG. Rather than asking current EVE players about their theories as to why some players quit, this research draws directly on the experiences of former players and their reason(s) for canceling their accounts. Talking to “quitters” has been fruitful in other fields, such as Seymour and Hewitt’s (1997) investigation into why students drop out of science, technology, engineering, or math (STEM) majors. By including both students who stayed in the STEM fields and students who quit, Seymour and Hewitt were able to find that both groups were similar in terms of performance, attitude, and behaviour. Only a small percentage (~10%) left because they felt a non-STEM major was better suited to their abilities, refuting the idea that students who drop out of STEM “just can’t hack it”.

EVE serves as a particularly illustrative case for a study of quitting as it is a MMOG that experiences a large degree of subscription churn; Feng, Brandt & Saha (2007) found that 70% of new players will quit about a year after creating an account (p. 22). Furthermore, previous research on this MMOG has argued that its developer, CCP Games, actively leaves out key pieces of information from the new player tutorial to discourage all but the most dedicated new recruit from continuing to play (Paul 2011; Paul 2016).

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## Why do players quit *EVE Online*?

The research question driving my data collection asked, “What reason(s) do former players give to describe discontinuing their participation in this game?” Participants were asked why they are not currently playing *EVE*, how many times they had previously quit *EVE*, and if this current departure temporary or permanent. I found the reasons for no longer playing *EVE* was highly dependent on if the respondent indicated if they were permanently quitting or taking a temporary break from the game.

Respondents who quit temporarily described constraints to leisure time, sometimes citing school e.g. “*I have finals*”. Other responses also described financial-related reasons for temporary breaks from the game: “*Can’t afford it! Resubbing this Christmas*”. These temporary breaks were always a result of external constraints, usually indicated a time they intended to return (e.g. the end of an exam period). At the other end of the spectrum were reasons that had more to do with a lack of enjoyment gained from playing *EVE*, and these responses seem to indicate a permanent departure. For example, a former player who indicated they quit once and do not intend to return to the game wrote: “*It was interesting to give it a try, but ultimately I could see why people call it ‘Spreadsheets in Space’. After a month of play, it was already beginning to feel more like work*”.

In addition to the two groupings discussed above of former players who have discontinued their *EVE* play temporarily and those who have made a permanent departure from this game, there was a third group of respondents who seemed unsure if they would return to *EVE* in the future. In each of these answers, the respondent uses hedging words and seems ambivalent about whether or not they will renew their subscription at a later date. It is this third grouping that ultimately makes it difficult to talk about “quitting”, as sometimes players themselves are not fully aware if this is a temporary or permanent departure. While burnout or MMOG-fatigue might be a possible reason for this ambivalence, this also serves as a reminder that play is never static and that interests, amount of time spent playing, or even opinions about a particular game (in this case, *EVE*) can shift over time.

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