

## Esc.(ape) Online

“EVE Online million dollar battle: Twitch streams for tonight’s war”

-- The Express, Jan 23rd

“Fans uncover new characters hidden in code for upcoming MMORPG expansion”

-- The Mirror, Jan 26th

“Online community raises \$119k in memory of departed Developer”

-- Gamasutra / TechInvestors, Jan 22nd

“12,000 gamers struggle through biggest online battle”

-- Neowin, Jan 27th

Familiar, aren’t you? Spied the headlines? Maybe even know one? - ‘Gamers’ who invest years in their Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game of choice. The online battles, resource-wars, stings, counter-stings: a functioning economy based on industry, espionage, firepower and betrayal - virtual assets stolen, lost, traded, or destroyed. This very week saw EVE Online tout a single battle with losses totalling 560 billion in-game ISK; nearly \$1m in real-world currency!

However, the prominent hardcore are merely the tip of an online iceberg, here. Huge numbers also come from a mainstream audience pool; turning to these online fantasies for entertainment. And understandably so. They offer the unrivalled freedoms of excitement, creativity, exploration... friendships. Community. Ever-changing, ever-evolving, adult sandpits on a spectacular scale. Why not escape online, just for a while? Away from drudgeries of routine, and ineffable current geopolitical turmoil.

What may surprise, though, is that in practice these MMORPGs turn out to be far from utopian in nature. Into this sandbox we - as humans – evidently bring our flaws, faults, and demons with us. Toxicity ensues, with cyber-bullying rife. Many games exhibit targeted abuse towards non-native English speakers, and practically all demonstrate unchecked levels of misogyny. Despite indications for a balanced male:female ratio amongst online gamers, two-thirds of female players have received such harassment - forcing many to play under male avatars to avoid the vitriol.

“Esc.(ape) Online” takes us inside this complicated, exciting, phenomena; where everyone projects only how they wish to be perceived. Digging below that facade, a study in humanity straddling both the real and virtual worlds.

This episode establishes the key players, and the dual-universe setting, whilst also posing as an effective action-adventure standalone piece: NORTH, an insecure leader, blinded by a lingering grudge, endangers his team - overextending them in a heist which goes south. They ultimately escape by the skin of their teeth, shepherded through by the genuine, charismatic, leadership - and flying skills - of their ‘lieutenant’ KIERAN: a natural **pilot**.