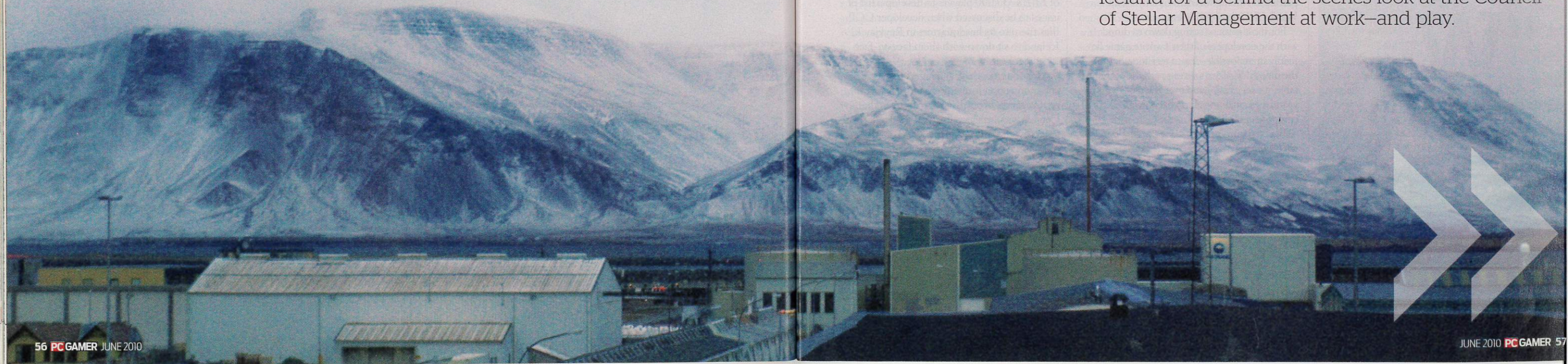


WAR AND PEACE

Inside, it's life-and-death confrontations, cutthroat competition, conspiracies, betrayals and white-collar crime across the span of a hostile universe. But outside the virtual world, developers and gamers work together to shape the future of **EVE Online**. *PC Gamer* goes to Reykjavík, Iceland for a behind-the-scenes look at the Council of Stellar Management at work—and play.





EVE players Greg Russo (left) and John Zastrow (right) get to know Lead Technical Producer Torfi Olafsson (middle) over drinks.



The architecture near CCP is a pleasant mix of old and new.



Another restaurant conquered in the name of EVE Online.



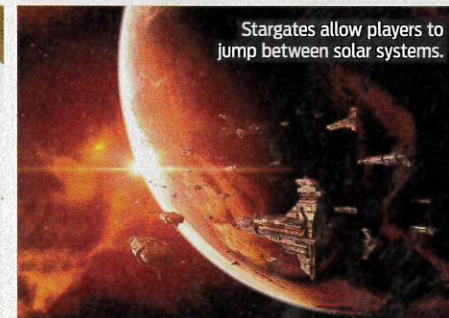
The CSM represents this entire galaxy.



"I'll give you 10,000 ISK for that french fry. Final offer."



CCP's cafeteria produces all manner of tasty treats.



Stargates allow players to jump between solar systems.

While PC Gamer's policy is to avoid printing words inappropriate for a magazine published for all ages, we've decided to make an exception for this story, and leave in the strong language that characterized many of the exchanges we observed while covering the Council of Stellar Management. —Editor

“Well, at least I remember to pay my bills on time...” Ward hides his widening grin by taking a sip of wine. A series of good-natured ooooh's ripple out across the table and conversations cease as everybody pauses to see how the two men sitting on either side of me are going to respond. We're eating a fancy meal at a classy

Italian restaurant in downtown Reykjavík, and two EVE Online players just got called out for mismanaging internet spaceships. That kind of chatter is unusual enough to hear over a plate of prosciutto, but they weren't merely being called out by some random joe on the forums—this particular ribbing was delivered by Noah Ward, EVE's lead game designer.

For most gamers, sitting down to dinner with the developers of their favorite game lies firmly in impossible-dream territory, but for the nine EVE players sitting with me at the table, it's very real—and over the past two years, these meetings have become an essential component of the game itself.

Every six months, elections are held in EVE Online to elect nine players to the

Council of Stellar Management (CSM). And in an appropriate parallel to the kind of tactics players deploy every day in EVE Online, these seats are won through rigorous campaigning and corporate politics. The elected player representatives then work with the rest of EVE's 330,000 players to develop a list of issues to be discussed when developer CCP flies them to its headquarters in Reykjavík, Iceland to sit down with them face-to-face twice per year.

After four months of talking with constituents, poring over forum posts and debating the relative merits of one issue over another, the Council members have finally arrived in Iceland to meet with the developers at CCP. And it's obvious they're loving every second of it.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS Council members define their expectations for the winter CSM



"I've spent more than 80 hours on meetings and writing and rewriting proposals already. I want to get a better understanding of how CCP and the development process works—and how I can influence that in order to make EVE a better game."

—Tim Heusschen

"The CSM needs to demonstrate some tangible results in order to motivate players to participate, campaign and vote."

—Jason Renouf

"This summit is happening after the new expansion, and we're coming in with chips on our shoulders saying, 'Your expansion's fucking awful for these reasons.' We came here with rage...We're here trying to push forth an agenda, because if nothing else, we are among the biggest nerds who play this game. Clearly, we want the game to be better."

—John Zastrow

The first day: Worlds collide

If you haven't been playing EVE Online, you've been missing out on some of the most astonishing developments and emergent gameplay moments of the past decade. EVE is a futuristic sci-fi MMO that revolves around player-made corporations battling for economic, political, and planetary control of the galaxy, and also revolves around one simple principle: if you want to do it, you can. This lawless, profit-driven Rapture-in-space has seen mercenaries spend months and months on planning in order to infiltrate a corporation and tear it down from within, launched more than a few careers in human slave trafficking and developed an economy so dynamic that CCP hired a real-life economist to manage it.

But the economist works at the macro level and doesn't intervene in cases like that of Goonfleet, which had been one of the largest corporations within EVE Online until its leader forgot to make routine fund transfers before leaving on a real-life vacation. As a result, just weeks before the summit, Goonfleet lost most of the facilities and planets it controlled due to an inability to pay the maintenance fees. When the leader returned to a group on the verge of

mutiny, he looted what little assets Goonfleet had left, fired everyone from the corporation and fled to another part of the galaxy.

So Ward's friendly wisecrack had to have stung a bit for at least a few players at the table. In fact, after a betrayal like that, I expected Asher Dratel and John Zastrow, the two members of Goonfleet on the CSM, to be seething with bitterness and anger. But they hardly seemed phased by the loss, and were eager to rebuild their alliance under a new banner. They laughed with everyone else at West's prodding and happily told their side of the story.

This might strike most people as a little weird, especially considering that many other MMOs shenanigans like these could result in real-world litigation. But every EVE player is comfortable with this dichotomy. On the one hand, EVE is dark and dangerous: nobody can be trusted, everyone has their price and a swift, merciless death awaits you around every corner if you're not careful. But on the other hand, players are optimistic, cooperative, entrepreneurial and often downright brilliant in the ways that they find to bend the game world to their ideas and purposes.

EVE's society is always on the verge of

WHOOPS! THERE GOES THE SPACE STATION!

The defining moments in EVE Online's history



June 2003

One month after launch, player pirates overrun trade routes by camping travel points. CCP creates Black Ops armies to defend the routes, but releases a memo from the NPCs that sums up the EVE universe: "We can no longer guarantee the safety of our citizens. All efforts to restore order have failed."

April 2005

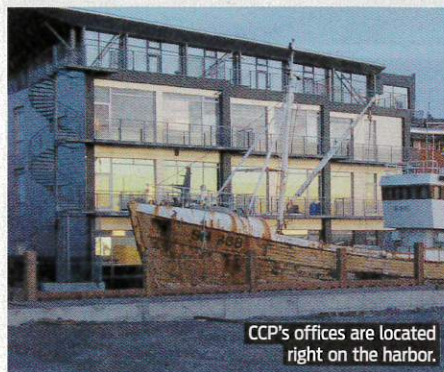
After months of patiently infiltrating every level of a corporation they were hired to destroy, Guiding Hand Social Club operatives jumped ship, stealing everything not tied down and blowing up the rest. The target corporation loses 30 million ISK (EVE's currency) in assets, bankrupting it instantly.

Summer 2006

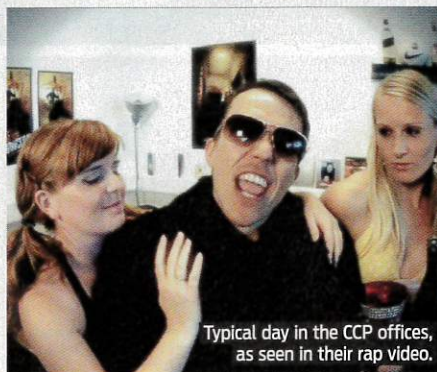
In the largest bank heist in EVE history, one banker makes off with 790 million ISK (estimated to be worth \$100,000 at the time) that he convinced investors to put into his virtual bank, before proceeding to spread rumors of his real-life death to throw vengeance-seeking investors off his trail.



Discussion topics ranged from Covert Ops frigates to football.



CCP's offices are located right on the harbor.



Typical day in the CCP offices, as seen in their rap video.



Sabotage: EVE's form of free market competition.



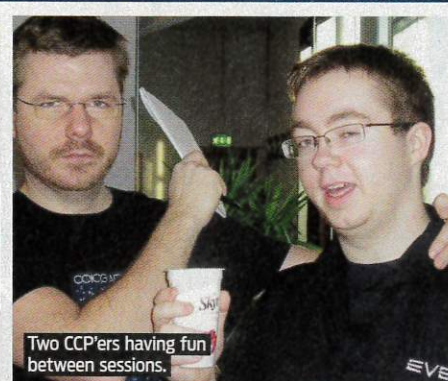
Office building mullet: professional up front, party in the back.



I still have no idea why this happened.



Don't let the beauty fool you; EVE's galaxy is a harsh place.



Two CCP'ers having fun between sessions.



EVE's ships are often outlandish and always deadly.



John Zastrow's lawyerly instincts often showed in the discussions.

DRUNK DEVELOPING

CCP has fun in some very unique ways.



The Drunken Joyride

It began with one CCP employee deciding that, instead of golfing, he'd rather just hop on a golf cart and deliver booze to his colleagues. It ended with—I'm told—at least four people hanging off the sides of the golf cart with wine bottles in their hands until they crashed into a fence.

Pulling a Michael Richards

To be fair, CCP Researcher Pétur J. Óskarsson insists that he didn't mean for his response to be racist, but when asked the riddle, "What do white people and elephants have in common?" on stage in front of the 2009 EVE Fanfest audience, there has to be a better answer than, "They are both superior."

Open Mic Night for Griefers

CCP invited Darius Johnson, the Goonfleet leader, to be a part of an official panel during last year's Fanfest. He showed up half an hour late, completely drunk and dressed in a leather aviator's costume. His NSFW speech included explaining how he avoids EVE's language filters and that the Goonfleet's goal was "not to destroy the game, it's to destroy your game...Nothing makes me happier than blowing your shit up."

anarchy; most alliances function in the sectors of space where there are no ruling government bodies or police force to restrict players' actions. Sometimes it's messy. Sometimes things go wrong. But there's very little centralized authoritarian control applied in most MMOs that establish what can or can't be done. In EVE, players collaborate with developers. Just like they're doing now, around the dinner table, as everybody exchanges their favorite stories from a digital world still just a few years old. Stories that seem to emphasize that EVE Online is breaking out of its original mold and becoming whatever players want it to be.

Stories about CCP itself—not all of them flattering—were passed around the table just as merrily. I had flown into Iceland knowing little more than that you didn't want to do your banking there, but by the end of the CSM, one thing was very clear: If Reykjavík was a college party town, then CCP would be the biggest frat house on campus. Yes, it's a very serious developer of fine games, but just look at the facts: the majority of employees are young males; breakfast, lunch and sometimes dinner are served in the company's cafeteria by two grandmotherly Icelandic women; free snacks,

sodas and energy drinks can be found in every kitchen; and "I was drunk" is the only excuse needed for showing up late in the morning.

And that's not even taking into account the sheer number of "this one time when I was drunk" stories that everyone at CCP seemed to have on hand. The raucous, booze-fueled mayhem even extends to official CCP events (see "Drunk Developing"), and this spirit—both laid-back and slightly crazed—contributes to CCP's innovative development structures that incorporate player feedback with unprecedented efficiency. Where Blizzard is the buttoned-down suit assuring players, "Don't worry, we've got everything under control" (and they do), CCP is the hung-over rock star smashing guitars, trashing hotel rooms, using excessive amounts of pyrotechnics and crowd surfing at every opportunity.

The second day: Spaceships are serious business

If someone had asked me to predict what the first topic debated by the CSM would be, I certainly wouldn't have guessed an hour-long discussion of political philosophy. But I probably should have. The 13 people in this room—nine

elected players, three CCP developers, and one moderator with experience working for the European Union—are breaking new ground in game development. The CSM functions as a representative democracy, and they're in charge of making sure the system gives voters adequate input without letting them overrun the entire development system—no easy task. John Zastrow, the only returning CSM member, jokingly referred to himself as "the George Washington of this CSM," and he may not be too far off. If their plans are successful, years from now game developers could be looking back at the members of this year's council as the Founding Fathers of a development structure that, for the first time in history, incorporated player feedback in a deep, meaningful way.

But the meeting certainly wasn't spent entirely on lofty beard-scratching philosophy—it was still about a videogame, after all. This meeting, and all the meetings throughout the week, for that matter, were marked by the odd juxtaposition that exists in EVE: it's a very serious, business-driven game that's riddled with outrageous memes and the nothing-is-sacred irreverence of the internet. CSM members introduced themselves to CCP employees by

saying, "Hi, I'm a space councilor!" in silly voices, and pictures of Kitlers (cats that look like Hitler) were brought up on projectors alongside flowchart diagrams that broke down the game's development process.

The third day: Rocking the boat

As anticipated, the players weren't shy about telling the developers what they thought needed fixing. The fist-pounding, shouting and occasionally messy exchanges between members would've fit right in on a reality TV show. One particularly bitter CSM member started his address to Sveinn J. Kjarval, the head of the Game Master group, with "I don't hate you, but..." and proceeded to explain why he pretty much did hate him. It was a cathartic experience for the players; Zastrow told me, "Being able to look a game designer in the eye and pound your fist on the table to express your displeasure is something you just can't do trolling forums. I can see the expression on their face change when I tell them what I think and see that it's having an impact."

Considering the anger directed their way at times, as well as the occasional angry

FOUNDING FATHERS

It didn't quite make sense to me how Pétur J. Óskarsson, the Researcher at



CCP who manages the CSM, and Dr. Eyjólfur Guðmundsson, CCP's on-staff economist, could easily trust a game they care enough about to refer to it as "our baby" in the hands of players that are entirely inexperienced with game design. When I posed the question to them, Óskarsson told me, "EVE is our baby, and these players are a part of that baby." Guðmundsson chimed in, "Like any good parents we always do what we think is best, and these talks with the CSM help us figure that out." While I was naturally suspicious of the players, they (and everyone else I talked to at CCP) believe in player empowerment so much that it never even crossed their mind to not trust their players.

Óskarsson's own credentials are in the form of a 21-page paper that established the impetus behind, the justification for and the implementation of the Council of Stellar Management. The report went so far as to analyze the theory of the evolution of societies and how EVE went through each step, citing the works of philosophers and social theorists, including Karl Marx, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes.



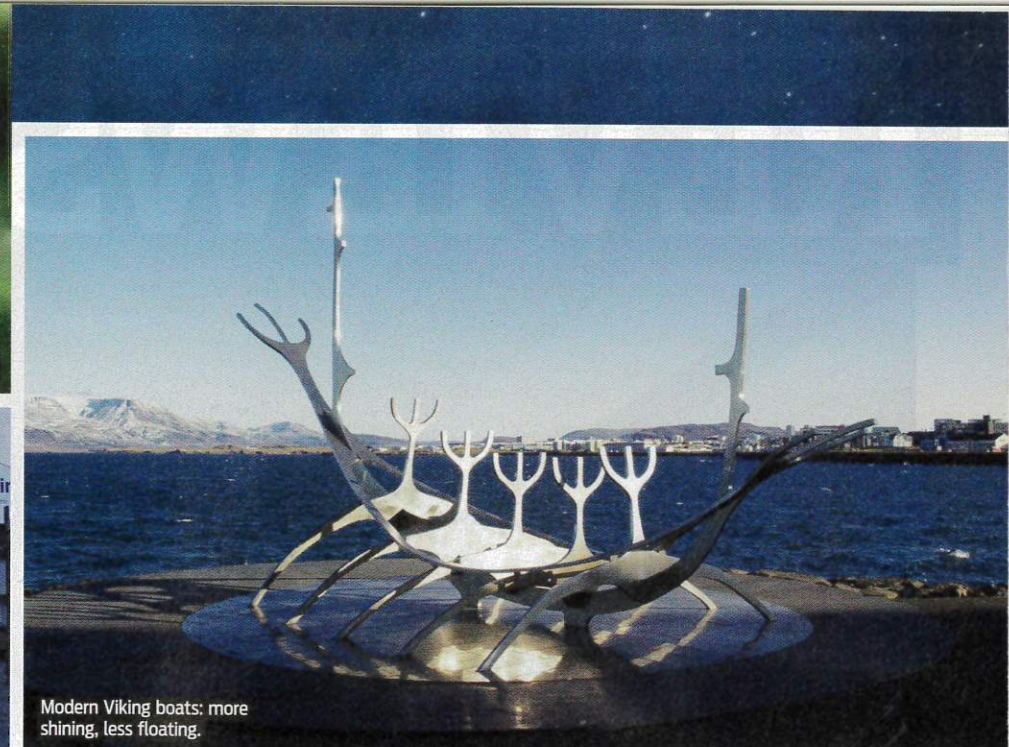
Soda, energy drinks and coffee kept both sides fueled through the long meetings.



A rare quiet moment near the CCP offices in Reykjavik.



Game Masters listened patiently to CSM feedback.



Modern Viking boats: more shining, less floating.



The moderator was essential in keeping the discussion focused.



Onward and upward to a bigger and better EVE!

accusation from a CSM member that someone else's opinions, statistics or responses were "bullshit," I was impressed with the completely unshakeable composure CCP employees constantly maintained. At times, even I was ready to leap over the table and

HOW IT WORKS

Step-by-step breakdown of the process agreed on for the CSM to request developer resources.

1. CSM members talk with other players and among themselves to develop a list of 10 issues they want the CCP development team to address.
2. The CSM sends the list to Pétur J. Óskarsson, who presents it to the development team.
3. The development team estimates how many development hours each of the projects would take and sends it back to the CSM through Óskarsson.
4. Taking into account the time required for each of the changes, the CSM arranges the issues into a prioritized list and returns it to Óskarsson.
5. Óskarsson presents the final list to the developers and makes sure that they are considered and included in the development process. Óskarsson reports back to the CSM as progress occurs.

take one or two CSM members by their collars and let them know that they were acting like jerks, but the developers (represented in each session by department heads and rank-and-file employees across a wide swath of departments, including Programming, Design and Community Development) always maintained an imperturbable stoicism, like Greek heroes holding their ground against a lethal hydra of nerd rage. It's not easy to stand there and take a verbal lashing from your harshest critics, but instead of banning dissenters from the forum and retreating to their development cave to pretend that the naysayers don't exist like some developers (you know who you are), CCP flew some of the most vocal critics to Iceland to let them scream in their faces so they could understand their concerns, and every player there respected them for it.

The occasional emotional brush fire notwithstanding, the atmosphere of the meetings, now past the halfway mark, was overwhelmingly positive—two groups with different perspectives coming together to understand why the other side felt the way they did, and trying to figure out how they could synthesize both

perspectives into a concrete policy or game mechanic that would improve *EVE*. CSM rep Tim Heusschen told me that he was particularly impressed with how seriously CCP took the CSM meetings; his favorite moment was seeing two developers grab pens to write down a suggestion he made. In fact, the developers took away a lot of good ideas, including one that a dev told the Council "is so good on so many levels that it arouses me somewhat."

The fourth day: Money where the mouth is

But the most arousing experience for the players had to be when CCP agreed to give the CSM tangible power within the company. On the last day, the devs announced that after the earlier discussions about improving the CSM's ability to affect change, the CSM was being raised to the status of its own department within CCP. This is revolutionary; in one swift move, the CSM went from what could be considered a glorified focus group to what CCP considers to be a "stakeholder" in the company, given equal consideration with *every other department* in requesting development time for

a project. That means the CSM—and the entire playerbase it represents—has as much influence on development projects as Marketing, Accounting, Publicity and all the other teams outside of the development team.

This is, of course, the stated intention. But has any developer gone to such lengths for its fans? I've spent a week observing CCP, taking inventory of concerns and complaints from even the most aggravating of grievers among its players; there seems to be little question that CCP genuinely believes in the importance of the players' feedback through the CSM, and the step to incorporate it into the company's internal process goes a long way toward proving that their belief in player-driven experiences is no mere gimmick

or promotional device. If anything, *EVE Online* appears to be achieving what many social virtual worlds backed by millions of dollars of capital—including *There* and *Second Life*—have failed to do: to create an autonomic, player-driven society in cyberspace. This is what CCP believes produces the absolute best games, and it's willing to take extraordinary risks to prove it.

The last day: 3 a.m.

Walking between bars in the wee hours of the morning on my last day in Reykjavik, we ran into a group of Icelanders singing and dancing down the street while another group threw beer bottles on the ground in the alleyway next to us. It suddenly hit me that *EVE Online* could

only come out of a place like Iceland—a place where packs of friends wander the streets drunk until 6 a.m., doing pretty much whatever they want; a place where the only government presence I saw all week was an information center; a place where the people pretty much monitor themselves. CCP adopted this people-centric culture inside their company and inside their game, and now they're proving that giving the power to the players can work for game development as well. Self-governance has never looked quite so sexy. ■

See also: bit.ly/9lkrY9 – GoonFleet leader's profanity-filled presentation at Fanfest; bit.ly/amzSUT – The official meeting notes for the CSM summit; bit.ly/d3uaPI – Pétur's 21-page paper on the CSM; bit.ly/d2KeSx – Post-CSM forum discussion

PARTING THOUGHTS

"I'm willing to cut the devs more slack in terms of timeliness of adding some features, but I'm not gonna give them a total carte blanche on ignoring certain things."
—Asher Dratel

"I foresee great things."
—Tim Heusschen

"This could be the single most significant change in the history of *EVE*, and I'm certain it will be viewed with interest by the rest of the gaming industry...a huge leap forward."
—Jason Renouf

"The CSM has been working for two years now. Hopefully, it will work for at least 10 more."
—Tomas Ljumovic

"We can help CCP; we'll save them from themselves."
—Greg Russo