



IT'S FANFEST TIME! OR IT WOULD BE HAD IT NOT BEEN DECIDED TO CANCEL THE ANNUAL GATHERING FOR 2010. BY WAY OF ADMONISHMENT, WE GATHER TOGETHER CCP'S OLD-UNS TO REMINISCE ABOUT THAT VERY FIRST PARTY ON TOP OF THE WORLD; BACK WHEN CREDIT WAS ABUNDANT. EXCEPTIONALISM WAS ALL THE RAGE AND POS MEANT SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY (KIND OF)



TEXT: ZAPATERO

A veteran of the first five Fanfests, Zap couldn't attend in 2009 due to his bride vetoing the idea of a honeymoon in Reykjavik. Divorce papers have since been filed

➞ We all have our reasons for wanting to go to an EVE Fanfest. Likely there are a number of them, such as meeting up with in-game acquaintances, finding out what crazy ideas CCP might or might not implement at some indeterminate time in the future, or the chance to experience something of a country that is more distinct than your common-or-garden United Nations member. For CCP, the motivation to host in 2004 what has since become an important fixture in the EVE calendar was rather more simple, or it would be if anyone could remember what it was.

"It was my idea," chuckles Aðalsteinn 'Alli' Óttarsson after a few minutes of fevered recollection. "I'm pretty sure it was," he adds, suddenly not so sure.

A low murmur is heard among the huddle of devs assembled in one of CCP's meeting rooms. We're talking to them via the magic of Skype (audio only) and it's late afternoon. Memories have perhaps become a little frazzled after a long day. EVE's Senior Technical Producer, recognizable to most as Fanfest's master of ceremonies, decides to share the credit with EVE's long-since departed Marketing Manager, Síggi Ólafsson (who, incidentally, is also the father of E-ON). Nathan Richardson, CCP's Executive Producer, feels compelled to settle the matter: "Síggi and Alli were sitting in a room at Klappartígur, our old offices, and they thought it was a good idea at the time."

Done. There, it's official.

THE F-PLAN

Fanfest was, of course, a splendid idea that made perfect sense, and not just because official gatherings for players of MMOs have been taking place since the days of *Ultima*. A potential EVE Fanfest was always going to be a bit different from your typical Las Vegas shindig, however, not least because of the surroundings. But if anyone had any reservations about tempting enough people from abroad, they were soon sated by looking at the success of the annual Iceland Airwaves festival, to which international visitors had been regularly coming since 1999, packing bars and clubs all across Reykjavik. The template was already in place; all that was required was for Alli to call in a few favours from some old Airwaves colleagues: "We piggy-backed all of the infrastructure that was already in place because Iceland Airwaves had deals in place with hotels. We could quickly tap into that."

Given the relative size of the EVE player base in 2004 (around 40,000), combined with the personal expense for them to come to a premium destination like Iceland, it was obvious that attendee numbers weren't going to put too much strain on the immigration authorities. Indeed, it looked as if CCP was looking for an excuse to host a glorified staff party, rather than kick off an increasingly lavish annual conference for pretend space pilots.

"It wasn't really about a party; that came later," says CEO Hilmar Petursson. "It had to do with the fact that when the idea sprung up, we had been working on the Shiva expansion for a long time and everyone was waiting for it. The idea was somehow, on some level, to present it to a group of players to see what they thought." ➞

CONSTRUCTING FANFEST

⌚ While the tiny planning committee got to work arranging venues to host parties and presentations, as well as what would feature in them, work continued on EVE's first proper expansion, soon to be rebranded Exodus, an expansion that would introduce players to Deadspace, destroyers, starbases and something called sovereignty – the theme of the expansion being about trying to get corporations and alliances to settle the nullsec regions on account of the relatively small number of players who, at the time, held court over large swathes of territory.

The final days before that first Fanfest at the end of October 2004 were disruptive. CCP's relatively small team of less than 80 had to complete the ambitious expansion, arrange its demonstrations and presentations, as well as clear the decks for a long weekend of socialising

⇒ FANFEST HAS ALWAYS BEEN A VENUE WHERE WE SHOW OUR INTENT IN WHAT WE WANT TO DO, NOT NECESSARILY JUST WHAT'S COMING OUT IN THREE MONTHS

and hardy partying. The cramped offices had to house boxes of merchandise that were to be sold, presentation materials and hired-for-the-event computers. Some were even forced from their offices and had to work in corridors.

Being shown around by the aforementioned Sigg, your humble reporter remembers sensing that some people at CCP were thinking Fanfest was a terrible idea, especially in the run-up to the biggest release since the original game went live.

In spite of some doubts about how many players would make the trip across the Atlantic from Europe, North America and elsewhere, expectations were soon shattered when tickets went on sale. Hilmar feared a few dozen, but hundreds signed up: many of them local, but as a proportion of the player base, almost as many as have attended since were soon planning their first trip to Reykjavik...

ON THE DEFENSIVE

Despite being held across three days, the first EVE Fanfest schedule wasn't nearly as packed as those that followed. Both Thursday and Friday were 'free days', the only official meeting place being the Media and Community Center, upstairs in Solon, a cafe/bar just around the corner from CCP's old offices. With free internet access (it was a big deal in those days), a steady stream of developers and some EVE t-shirts draped across a table, it was a popular if unspectacular meeting area.

On the Friday evening, as part of Airwaves, Jón 'RealX' Hallur was booked to play a set of EVE tracks at Kapital, nearer to where CCP's current offices reside. Almost motionless behind his laptop, what the set lacked in dynamic visual splendour was more than made up for by hearing EVE's soundtrack remixed for the first time.

The party during and after RealX's performance was to be a revelation for CCP's CEO. He was under the impression that his keynote speech the following day would have to calm an angry mob, who through their forum protests seemed frustrated with the game and the direction in which CCP was taking it. He needn't have worried.

"I remember my presentation was defensive, a justification for Shiva being delayed. But as soon as we went to the party we saw that everyone was violently happy. The vibe from the Fanfest was very different to the vibe from the forums." Surprised, and more than a little relieved, Hilmar went home, tore up his apologetic speech and spent the rest of the night writing a new one.

EVE AIRWAVES

Hosted at the draughty and bleakly utilitarian Loftkastalinn, the third day featured the now-familiar round of presentations, the most memorable – probably still the most memorable in Fanfest history – being a demonstration of atmospheric flight in EVE from then-Lead Designer, Kjartan Pierre Emilsson. Not only did the sight of EVE frigates skimming the landscape cause gasps to erupt from the crowd, CCP itself was a little taken aback.

"When Kjartan, during the final meeting, popped out the flying over planets, no-one had seen it," remembers Hilmar. "He'd hacked it overnight and just showed it. That was a huge moment for me because I didn't know it was even possible."

"Fanfest has always been a venue where we show our intent in what we want to do, not necessarily just what's coming out in three months," says Nathan. "If Fanfest isn't going to be the venue for the visionary aspect of where EVE is going, I don't know what venue should be."

"It's become a way to socialize our ideas," adds Hilmar. "We might have an idea we think is awesome and then we get a particular type of reaction at Fanfest and then we see it's not the right moment. It's a great way to gauge a reaction. It helps us a lot to prioritize and Fanfest has become part of our feedback mechanism."

EVERYTHING COUNTS

If Fanfest has become such an integral part of CCP's 'feedback mechanism' surely we have a right to ask why CCP has seen fit not to hold a Fanfest in 2010 – although given how forthcoming the community has been with its opinions, maybe the mechanism could do with some respite.

The truth is, of course, that as much as Fanfest serves to reinvigorate CCP's efforts, it also drains a great deal of resources away from development, and with each passing year, with steadily increasing numbers of attendees, more and more devs are naturally diverted from their day-to-day duties. Just to give you some idea of the scale of how



things have changed, in 2009 the EVE Store at the event did four times as much business as it did the previous year.

According to Nathan, the first Fanfest probably involved no more than 10 CCP people which, although a significant number in what was an 80-person company at the time, hardly compares to the 50-100 that are drafted in to help these days, or the extra hours they put in through the night to ensure tech demos run smoothly. Just to help organize and handle the DUST demo in 2009, 10 developers were needed. Little wonder that in order to cope, a full-time Events Co-ordinator was taken on to deal with 2009 and beyond, Oddur Örn Halldórsson – CCP's new Mr. Fanfest.

"There's a huge crew that we hire all the time, of course," he says, "but inside CCP, the number of people that work on it gets bigger and bigger each time."

ECLIPSING THE PAST

"One of the reasons we moved Fanfest to March is that doing it October/November time is very close to the expansion cycle," says Hilmar. "A lot of developers were complaining that they weren't able to really enjoy Fanfest because they had so many expansion-related priorities, whereas March is different."

As has become its way, CCP is keeping a tight lid on its plans for Fanfest in 2011, though if past events are any indication, there will be plenty of impromptu hints and announcements about the future of EVE and its in utero sibling, DUST 514, and of course a great deal of insight into Incarna, an expansion that has been a long time coming. Perhaps not as long as planetary flight, but that can probably wait for another year.

Will Incarna and DUST be playable? CCP won't say, but with Fanfest outgrowing its fourth venue, Hilmar is keen to say goodbye to Laugardalshöll by "cranking it up to 11 on all fronts," with an over-the-top Gallente theme. "The production is going to be slick, a little disco, green and very Gallente," he says.

Beyond 2011, Fanfest will take up residence in the new conference venue, Harpa, currently still under construction. The plan is for Fanfest to stay rooted in March, certainly until 2015 when Iceland will be the prime location to view the total solar eclipse. Expect that year to be the most spectacular and probably the most expensive Fanfest there's ever been. If you're only going to go to one Fanfest, make it that one and start saving now.

FIRST TO THE TOP

Whatever CCP has in store for Fanfest in 2011 and beyond, however long and loud the final night party becomes, it can't really ever hope to eclipse the intimacy and impact of that very first Party at the Top of the World in 2004. Even though it started out slowly, with staff milling around an empty bar surrounded by hundreds of thirsty EVE players, it soon kicked into gear. It was the launch of the galaxy's greatest drink, Quafe, famously served by Nathan and CCP's Chief Marketing Officer Magnus Bergsson, who unlike many there that night, remembers the beginnings of an almighty hangover vividly: "We would toast with almost everyone that we served, which ⌚



The Quafe Queen hasn't had to defend her title since the first EVE Fanfest, but with next year's gathering having a Gallente theme, perhaps New Eden's premier soft drinks company will be looking to sponsor something new

⇒ AT FANFEST 2015, ICELAND WILL BE THE PRIME LOCATION TO VIEW THE TOTAL SOLAR ECLIPSE. EXPECT THAT YEAR TO BE THE MOST SPECTACULAR FANFEST THERE'S EVER BEEN



“It was basically everyone at Fanfest,” he recalls. “We later both rolled out of the bar harmfully intoxicated.”

Also never since repeated was the parade of Quafe Queens, EVE’s very own beauty pageant. Given the howls coming from the predominantly male audience, most of whom seemed unlikely to survive until the next day, the ladies probably weren’t enjoying themselves as much as their audience, but they were game enough to smile their way through, until the evening petered out and players and developers sauntered out into the early hours of a typically brisk Reykjavik morning.

“It was just so surreal and beautiful to realize that all our blood, sweat and tears had resulted in this wonderful gathering of people at the edge of the world,” remembers CCP’s Creative Director Reynir Harðarson. “It all of a sudden became ‘real’. Talking with people full of enthusiasm about our little game just made it all worthwhile and we realized that it had taken on a life of its own. I remember talking with Richie [E-ON editor, Zapatero] over a glass of Quafe Ultra and this realization had just hit. I was highly sentimental, and it was a beautiful moment. I think we hugged. What a Fanfest it was!”

ICELAND, FOREVER

Fanfest has undoubtedly become a significant part of the EVE calendar, and no matter whether 2004 was your first or 2011 will be, they never fail to provide anything less than lasting memories. For Alli, it was the close of Fanfest 2004 that will never be forgotten, where he insisted the entire dev team pack the tiny stage and the players rose to their feet to applaud them. “That was a very impromptu moment, nobody had planned for it,” he says. “It was awesome.”

“We could all *fit* on one stage – that was awesome!” adds Nathan. “We can’t do that anymore!”

“It’s difficult, there are so many moments,” says Hilmar wistfully when asked the same question. “The proposal on stage (at Fanfest 2005) – I cried during that. Then there’s a guy that always gives me a bottle of gin at every single Fanfest. Amazing. There’s a guy in the UK – he’s a coal mine worker. He always comes, tracks us down and talks about how awesome the game is. It’s so invigorating.”

Which is why, for at least as long as Hilmar is at the helm, or for as long as CCP is headquartered in Reykjavik, Fanfest will remain a uniquely Icelandic event.

“The idea is to allow the people that make the game interact with the fans and get them more enthusiastic about making it even better,” he says. “That’s very difficult to produce if we don’t hold it in Iceland.”

“Fanfest is a celebration of EVE, its players and its staff,” adds Oddur. “It’s not about the presentations, it’s about the camaraderie, all the shenanigans and the fun we’re having together. It’s simply a celebration of EVE – something that we want to do and continue doing.”

➡ **THE CLOSE OF FANFEST 2004 WILL NEVER BE FORGOTTEN BY CCP, WHERE ALLI INSISTED THE ENTIRE DEV TEAM PACK THE TINY STAGE AND THE PLAYERS ROSE TO THEIR FEET TO APPLAUD THEM**

