

FANFEST 2007

2007 MAY HAVE PASSED INTO HISTORY, BUT MEMORIES OF EVE'S LARGEST FANFEST EVER STILL LINGER ON AND, FOR MOST OF THE PEOPLE THERE, WILL NEVER BE FORGOTTEN

 My boss was curious as to why I had asked for a swath of days off in November, and why I had done so many months in advance. He was even more curious as to why I had asked for an email back stating explicitly that I had claimed those days for vacation time. Then, months later in mid-October, when Project Scheduling started to eyeball start dates around the first week of November, I pulled out a piece of paper I'd printed months ago and waved it around. So sorry, but I've got plans.

Months of anticipation later, and after a lengthy bit of flying, my plane was touching down at Keflavik International Airport in the early morning of Fanfest Day One. Familiar faces met me in the security and immigration area: several of the media guys I had met at last year's Fanfest, including folks from Warcry and TenTonHammer, plus some from other media outlets that I was introduced to for the first time. There is little that's more humbling than having a grinning face from the industry's media show you an iPod loaded with your own podcasts.

Some things change and some things stay the same. Last year Air Canada decided it liked my luggage so much that it would keep it to itself in Boston for a day. This year, thank God, my luggage stayed with me and made it to the beautiful Grand Hotel. Like last year though, a highly attractive girl at the front desk told me my room wasn't ready yet, so I had to retreat to the restaurant to kick back and relax for a while. But eventually a room was readied, and I crashed after setting an alarm on my DS to wake me up after a couple of hours of much needed sleep.

HEADING INTO EMPIRE

This year's venue had changed from the conference area of the Nordica to Laugardalshöll, providing a much larger space for a much larger Fanfest. This year there was almost double the attendance, which was



WORDS & PICTURES: WINTERBLINK

A fighter, a lover, a giant among EVE players and Mr. Warp Drive Active since 2003, Blinky is one of EVE's biggest stars

amazing to see. I made my way to the new venue by a five-minute walk through brisk Icelandic weather. First-day attendance was a tad light due to some peoples' flights coming in later in the day, but the main thrust of it is to meet up with everyone. So I wandered around a bit getting the lay of the land before heading up to the new Jita area.

The intent of Jita was to provide alliances with some tables and chairs to settle around as a group. This worked out pretty well, and when the masses of players began to show up on the second day, the Jita area began to live up to its name. I went upstairs to the upper area to find the Mercenary Coalition area, and was greeted by the Charlie The Unicorn-inspired hails of my compatriots.

EVE TV was busily capturing the event, doing interviews with players and recording the seminars for later broadcast. All of the crew was so busy it was tough to get a moment to chat with them, but I managed to shake hands with spiralJunkie whom I met last year under equally busy circumstances. Also making an appearance was the multi-talented and entirely huggable StevieSG, whose personality in real life is just as endearing as you'd imagine it would be.

Other EVE TV members, such as LoxyRider and the rest of the crew, were usually hiding off in the super-secret, closed-off EVE TV room, doing all that they do to film the Fanfest and broadcast it out to the masses who couldn't make it to Iceland in person.

One of my favourite parts of Fanfest is hanging out with pilots with whom I play the game, and MC's showing this year was much larger than before. Whether they were people I'd met the year prior, or those I was meeting for the first time, I was struck by how much the entire group gels like we're old 'real-life' friends. From what I saw of areas with clusters of pilots who fly together, this seemed to be the norm.

I was only able to attend a couple of seminars on the first day,

including Valerie ‘Pann’ Massey’s ‘Fansite Basics’, which sought to educate people on what kinds of things to look out for if they’re considering making an EVE Fansite. CCP supports community involvement and contribution, and this seminar gave a good idea of how to get started.

The highlight for me that day, though, had to be seeing Tony Gonzales give a special reading of a sample chapter from his upcoming EVE novel. The depth of thought and feeling that he puts into his writing is a perfect match to the technical and design prowess CCP wields with the game itself. It serves to bring the game to life in a way which only certain people like Tony are capable of doing, through his very visual style of writing. This was patently evident during his reading, where he had the entire room enraptured with his glimpse into the world of faction politics, and I for one wished he could have gone on and read another chapter or two.

TAKING IT EASY

To end the first day, people could go on a Fanfest outing to the Blue Lagoon, a very famous Icelandic geothermal spa. I went last year, but after taking a look at the worsening weather, decided it might not be the best choice to go simmer up to my neck in warm water while my head got pelted with freezing rain. It’s not so much a problem with that, it’s the part where you have to get out of the warm water and get back inside the building before the freezing winds turn you into an EVE fancicle. While I didn’t go, I can do nothing but recommend the place. Just pick a day with some decent weather.

Instead, I took part in what is now a yearly tradition: the MC blobbing of Red Chilis restaurant. I’m sure every year the poor staff at this place cringe when we walk through the door with 20-plus hungry EVE players. While great for the day’s takings, I’m sure the kitchen staff want to murder us all. But if you’ve got a craving for a 400-gram burger or a rack of ribs as long as your arm, this is the place to go.

We wound down in the lobby of the Grand Hotel, a good-sized group of friends chatting with each other over our beers and sharing anecdotes of EVE and real life. At a certain point, a member of the hotel staff approached us and I was sure we were going to get asked to take the proceedings elsewhere, that we were being too noisy. Instead, he proclaimed he was working on a research project of some kind, related to getting his degree, and was using EVE as topic. He pegged us for EVE players – honestly not all that difficult – and hit us up for our opinions on various aspects of EVE. It was a surprising thing to see how this native Icelander viewed the game, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last conversation with people in Reykjavik that ended up as a deep discussion about EVE Online.

Eventually the lobby lights were turned down low, and we continued our mellow gathering around the rock fireplace in the Grand’s lobby,

➡ I TOOK PART IN WHAT IS NOW A YEARLY TRADITION: THE MC BLOBBING OF RED CHILIS RESTAURANT. I’M SURE EVERY YEAR THE POOR STAFF AT THIS PLACE CRINGE WHEN WE WALK THROUGH THE DOOR

above the slowly shifting coloured floor lighting. At some point we called it a night, and decided to get some decent sleep for the coming day.

REFRESHED AND READY

Day two and Fanfest was in full swing, jam-packed with things to do and people to see and meet. Fanfest attendees were abundant now, and every area of the new venue was packed with people. With two floors to spread out in, it was somewhat tough to take it all in, but the size afforded a manageable area of space for everyone to get around, socialize, and check out the events.



Both seminar rooms, named Tranquillity and Singularity, had busy schedules of presentations on various topics. At the same time downstairs, Pod Kill Plaza opened up for the competitors to fight in the PVP Tournament. Presentation-wise, I took in several of the ones in Tranquillity, the larger of the two.

The Council of Stellar Management, with Dr. Eyjog and Xhagen, introduced some of the concepts CCP has been kicking around for the promised player council. EVE has grown to the point where its size is comparable to the population of Reykjavik itself, and it’s entirely fascinating that CCP has looked to add essentially a form of democracy

for the players to take advantage of. Personally, I can’t think of any other game that’s tried anything as remotely robust as this, giving the players the ability to nominate and vote for representatives to voice the popular opinion to the game publisher itself.

The Alliance Panel Discussion gave some alliance leaders the opportunity to get up on stage and do a short presentation about their organization. There were some excellent presentations here with some seriously funny moments, from the likes of FIX (‘We are not f**king pets’), PIE (‘I’m not going to mention any of our failures’), and Goonfleet (‘Those are the Welp days...’). It was great to see how all of the presenting alliances approached their presentations in their own unique way, much like how they differ in how they operate in-game. Most importantly, it was awesome that CCP left some time in the Fanfest schedule for the players to strut their stuff on stage.

MEETING HEROES

Next up was another of those presentations that I didn’t want to miss, mainly because a similar one last year was amazing to watch. That is, the Live Visions presentation with B. Börkur Eiríksson, one of the artists at CCP responsible for the unbelievable artwork adorning the website and Chronicles in this very magazine.

The nifty bit here was watching Börkur walk through the process of creating these incredible scenes, as he started in real-time, smudging blobs of colour, and made his way through various prepared versions, adding to each as he went and showing the process of making something out of nothing. As someone who loves to work with graphics, I’m floored by the creativity and skill that Börkur exerts almost casually. It’s the visual equivalent to Tony Gonzales’ writing finesse, and was similarly amazing to witness.

Last for me that day was Torfi F. Ólafsson’s discussion on Ambulation. Now there’s been a lot of naysaying in the community about Ambulation, with people panning it as not having any real place in this world of internet spaceships we inhabit. But in typical CCP style, the attention to detail here is staggering.

There’s a costume designer working on the outfits so the clothing is functional, practical, and realistic. An architect is making sure the amazing visions of the concept art are translated into workable, liveable spaces that will feel correct to inhabit. Foley techniques make sure the sounds aren’t just canned and repetitive, that clothes will rustle and footsteps will change with the environment and gear. Crowd simulation, body image adjustment, mood settings, you name it – it’s all getting the works. It’s truly staggering to see

IN THE HOUSE OF THE EXILED

This year’s CCG tournament at Fanfest was a little smaller than last year’s, drawing only 15 people, among them E-ON’s CCG guide writer, Boda Khan...

Before the show, I narrowed my own deck choices into three viable possibilities, of which I finally picked Caldari – mainly due to the speed of their income generation (thanks to the trusted combination of By The Emperors Decree and Sansha’s Scout Outpost) and their access to some amazingly cheap ships like the Kestrel and the Cormorant.

The tournament required us to play four rounds using Swiss pairings to determine the top four, who went on to play two more single-elimination rounds to determine the overall winner. My first three rounds went brilliantly and I didn’t lose a single game until I faced a tough opponent in round four. Although I beat him in two out of three games, I had to face the same opponent again in the semi-final, and this time lost the round one game to two, placing me third overall in the event. Those games were particularly tough, and perhaps the hardest games of The Second Genesis I’ve played to date.

A lot of cards from the new Exiled set made an appearance during the day: several players used the upgraded pirate faction starbase to prolong the struggle, and my own use of the Guristas Nihilist was key to overpowering people relying on Patrol and Ambush in defence. Encountering the character Tairei Namazoth (who makes all ships Limited) was particularly tricky, but my real downfall was encountering the mighty Guristas Massacrer, which (thanks to the clever play of other Guristas cards) didn’t give me enough time to attack or defend myself.



☹ just how far along Ambulation has come since a year ago when the first little bits were shown.

There were a lot of great moments on the second day. Running into the E-ON Pub Team (note the double entendre, very clever guys) was a pleasant surprise, especially considering how I somehow went the entire Fanfest last year without meeting E-ON's resident cat herder, Richard 'The Maker of Shoes' Shoemaker, and the rest of the MMM Publishing crew. These are some seriously nice guys who were great to chat with, and were very giving with their stacks of free beer tickets. Clearly I must make their area a regular haunt again next year!

One thing I haven't spoken of so far is easily one of the most important things about Fanfest – CCP employees. Some might expect that they were hidden off in some faraway room for press access only, but nothing could be further from the truth. Front and centre, on stage and off, they were out and about with everyone else, meeting players and hanging out. As my second Fanfest, it was thoroughly enjoyable to come again and meet CCP people I'd met from last year and greet like old friends, and meet the many, many new faces.

MC once again claimed sovereignty of a large cluster of tables at Red Chilis for a wonderfully unhealthy dinner, finish in time to return to the Fanfest venue for The Great and Marvellous EVE Show. It should go without saying that there were some seriously hilarious moments, and I'm hoping that this becomes a regular for future Fanfests.

We then retired to the lobby of the Nordica hotel, and had what could only be described as an epic run-in with some Goons. Some notable moments included a drunken Stoffer, Seleene getting serenaded by Suas with a Goontar, and the raising of the MC banner alongside the Goon's Bee flag. The only things missing were the tinfoil hats.

END IS NIGH

Waking up on Day Three was tough, not so much because of alcohol drunk the night before, but because of the knowledge that this was the final day of the Fanfest. However, it was a big one. Reynir was first up with an excellent look at the history of CCP and EVE, bringing everyone in attendance up to date on how all this madness came to be. Looking back at the blood, sweat, and tears that went into the whole endeavour really makes you appreciate the game just that little bit more.

The new Trinity2 graphics engine improvements were shown by Halldor Fannar and NVIDIA's Phil Scott, showing us what big brains can do with enough time and beer. EVE's already beautiful, but the whole team at CCP is taking (by the time you read this, has already taken) what we love and elevating it into the stratosphere in terms of graphical fidelity and performance improvements. Utterly jaw-dropping.

The rock star of CCP, Oveur, took the stage for a hilarious presentation about some of the new Trinity features and enhancements. There wasn't a lot of new information *per se*, but it was an excellent summary of some of the new features, gear, and enhancements we can now find alongside the graphical tweaks. We were also shown the Trinity teaser, which practically made everyone in the room crap their pants. I for one cannot wait to see what the full trailer ends up looking like. (Check out the new EVE: Trinity trailer on the free Fanfest DVD which came with this issue.)

Rounding out the keynotes, last but definitely not least, was CEO of CCP, Hilmar Pétursson, giving us a look at where we've been in the last year, and what his plans are for the future, including the construction of a supercomputer that promises 'no lag'. We're going to hold you to that, Hilmar!

EVE TV invited me to do an interview, so I didn't get a chance to sit in on the CCP Panel presentation, but it was entirely cool to be in front of the camera, on set with KIAEddZ and Tony Gonzales, with spiralJunkie leading us with questions.

After some seriously expensive Pizza Hut and a quick jaunt back to my hotel to change, I returned back to the venue for the big Fanfest finale – appropriately monikered 'The Party at the Top of the World'.

A giant portion of the venue was now open to everyone, with purple lighting, a sizable stage, and enough beer to drown the 'last day sorrows' of a thousand people.

☹ THE ROCK STAR OF CCP, OVEUR, TOOK THE STAGE FOR A HILARIOUS PRESENTATION. WE WERE SHOWN THE TRINITY TEASER, WHICH PRACTICALLY MADE EVERYONE IN THE ROOM CRAP THEIR PANTS

There's almost too many incredible moments to mention. RöXöR's performance was amazing, providing a perfect musical soundtrack to the festivities. Developers and players moshing. A passed-out BoB guy with a 'Frozen Corpse' sign taped to his chest. A small group dressed as pirates. Beer girls done up with EVE makeup and hair. Everyone cutting loose with their friends, drinking and enjoying their time together.

Quite simply, a party unlike any other.

DOWNTIME APPROACHES

Over the next couple of days, people left Reykjavik for their homes in other areas of the world. I said goodbye to old friends and new ones, and watched others around me do the same. The lobbies of hotels became emptier, restaurants returned to a slower pace, and I went for a walk alone near the bay north of my hotel wondering how I was going to get all of this down on paper.

As I stood there with the sun setting, looking at the water crashing against the rocks, I remembered a conversation I had back at the hotel on the final night after the party. At the entrance was a woman smoking a cigarette, who asked me if I was in town for 'the CCP thing'. I said yes, and she began asking questions about the game. Soon her husband joined us outside in the brisk evening air and got into the conversation as well.

Now most gamers who are familiar with the genre would ask things like 'how's the PVP?' or 'is the crafting system good?' However, these two were much more interested in the game's community and social aspects, interested in how people met, and how in-game events affected those relationships. It was amazing to them that this game would affect so many people so much that they'd leave their homes for a long expensive flight to Iceland just to meet people.

I didn't really know how to answer them at the time, most likely from having an impressive blood-alcohol level. But in retrospect I think the best answer I could give them is that we as players don't really 'play' the game as much as we inhabit it. We shape it in a much more powerful way than any patch or nerf could ever hope to do, through our deeds and relationships with others just like in real life. We all live in that single universe, and thus are bonded through the various triumphs and trials that we all go through.

That may sound corny, but hey I was there with a thousand of you and have pictures to prove it. That commonality brought us all there to shake a stranger's hand, hug a Dev, and sit down to have a pint with a person you just met but ☹ have known for years.

See you all next year.

If you haven't already done so, stick the DVD that came free with this issue into your computer or DVD player, and kick back to witness just how special Fanfest really is. When you're done, lend it to a mate...

