THE UNIVERSE AT WAR

The Great Galactic War of *EVE Online*

By JIM ROSSIGNOL

There's a war going on. Unlike the 20-minute conflicts that characterise other multiplayer games, this is a deathmatch that has taken place between fleets of *hundreds* in a continuous process that has lasted *years*. It's one of the most bitterly contested conflicts imaginable, fought by an international cast of veteran space pilots. An entire galaxy is at stake. As a gamer, you probably even know someone who is caught

up in it; as many as 20,000 people have fought in its constant battles. This war is the Great War of *EVE Online*; the largest virtual conflict ever waged.

SOMETHING RUSSIAN

This war is being fought right now, between two mighty factions, in the outer reaches of *EVE* space. On the one side we have the mighty Band of Brothers, elite pilots pumped up with power and success. On the

other, we have a grand coalition: the Russian players of *EVE Online*, focused around the Red Alliance, have joined forces with the comic collection of Something Awful forumites known as the GoonSwarm. Something Awful forumites aren't just there to play *EVE*. They're there to maintain a reputation – as the gaming world's premier jokers and griefers. They're the lunatic geniuses behind the floating penises in *Second Life*, the same group that managed to

A carrier caught in a belt makes for a juicy kill.
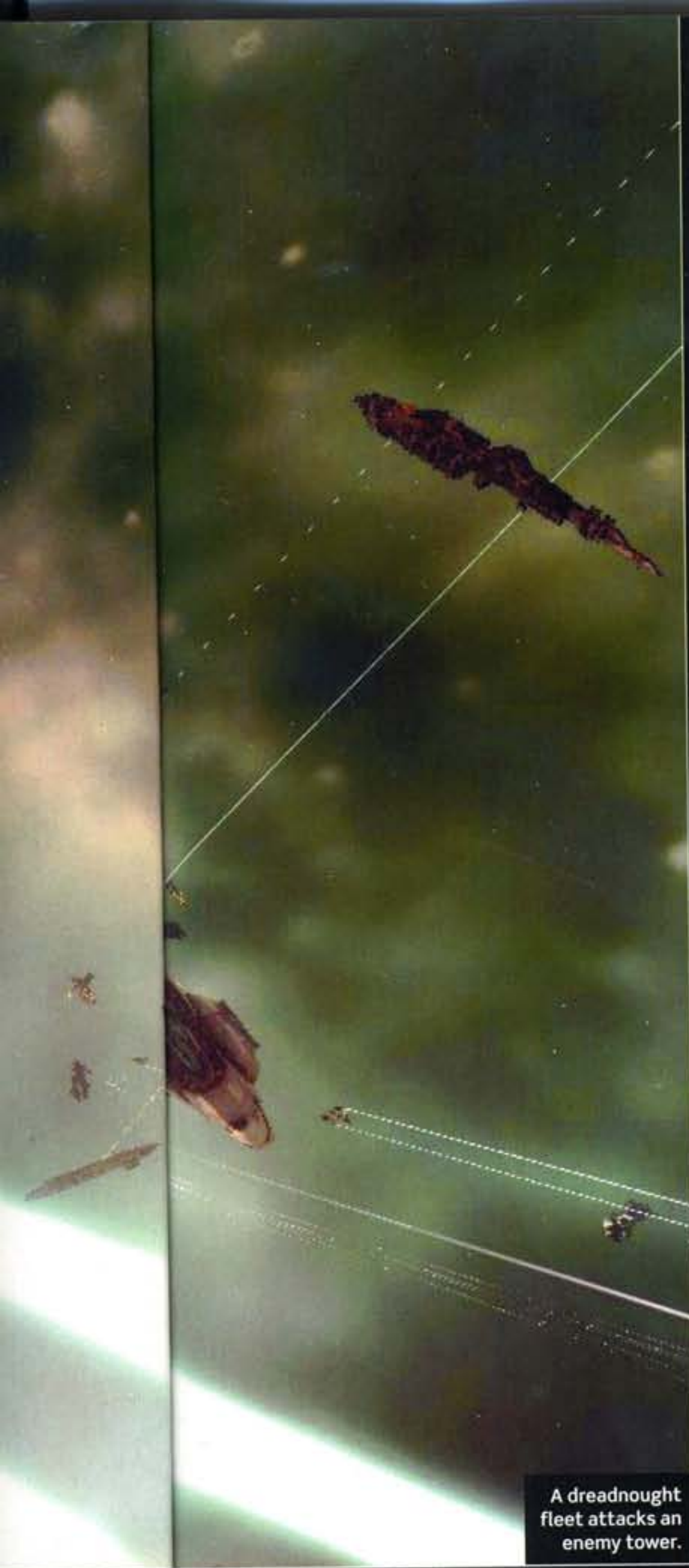
A dreadnought fleet attacks an enemy tower.

A cast of thousands

These are just four of the several dozen alliances involved

BAND OF BROTHERS

A formidable military alliance that has been able to rely on an impressive industrial network to build multiple Titans and Motherships – the high-end ships of the game, and the units that will often determine the course of a battle.

RED ALLIANCE

The Russian-speaking alliances whose determination and tactical awareness have made them the key superpower in the *EVE* galaxy. It's arguable that there is no longer any single force that could take on the Eastern powerhouse.

MERCENARY COALITION

The ultimate mercenary consortium. While they were allies of BoB, the Mercenary Coalition lived in their space and did a lot of damage to their enemies. Now, as BoB's foe, they have caused more strife than anyone could have anticipated.

GOONSWARM

The Goons have numbers on their side: the biggest alliance by several hundred members, GoonSwarm ask that you also be a member of the Something Awful forums before you can sign up to their teeming ranks.

kill their own faction leader in *WoW*. They're not playing *EVE* to win. They are, as one forumite put it, "in it for the lulz".

The Russians and the Goons created the RedSwarm Federation, an ultimate alliance of hardcore combat pilots and internet griefers. In the space of a year they would become unstoppable.

Two years ago, however, Band of Brothers were in the ascendant. They ruled vast swathes of *EVE*'s 0.0 space. As you'll see in the maps plastered across the following pages, *EVE* is set up like a giant doughnut. In the centre is high-security space where players are free to go about their business trading, mining and ratting (killing the game's AI pirate factions for loot) without too much threat from other players. You can shoot at a friend or an enemy, but the AI security forces (Concord) will almost immediately step in; you won't last long under a sustained barrage from Concord's lasers.

Player combat thus shifts to the outer ring of *EVE*, the 0.0 space. In 0.0 space, there are no AI police forces, and no chance of salvation if ambushed. Fights are brutal, and to the victor go the spoils. It's a dangerous place to be: survival demands tactical planning, and many, many friends.

Why venture into such a place? Out of the desire to become rich. 0.0 space is full of vast mineral deposits that can be mined and turned into hard cash. And such space can be owned and claimed; vast space stations deployed that project power, serve as home bases to player fleets and act as a refuge and point of defence. 0.0 space is dangerous, sure, but the risk is worth it.

Over the years Band of Brothers had carved themselves a nice slice of 0.0 space stretching from Fountain to Period Basis. They were in what many thought was an insurmountable position – their 2,000 battle-hardened and well-equipped pilots had trounced all opposition. GoonSwarm had originally joined *EVE* as a small group of just a few hundred, and began colonising a small portion of 0.0

> **BoB had made the highest-profile kill of all time**

space: Syndicate, within striking range of BoB territory. Like others before them, they were routed by BoB's pilots. Their newbie ships were exploded in their thousands.

Having had enough of this, BoB moved on to other things. They were soon to begin a campaign against the largest military-industrial bloc in the game, Ascendant Frontier. Despite their size and wealth, Ascendant Frontier (ASCN) were a weak and juicy target. Using the vast fortune that ASCN held, their leader, Cyvvok, had built himself a giant trinket – *EVE*'s first Titan. The Titan was *EVE*'s largest ship, a behemoth valued at around £4,000 in real-world cash. BoB attacked en masse. Even Ascendant Frontier's hundreds of combat pilots couldn't hold them back. ASCN began to crumble, the empire falling apart as the peaceful traders and mining corps that plied their trade under ASCN's protection fled to safety. In the final humiliation, BoB claimed the first Titan kill, in controversial circumstances. Cyvvok was offline as his Titan went down.

With the highest-profile kill of all time under their belts, BoB were riding high. ▶

Huge warp bubble camps block off entire spaceways.

▶ With Ascendant Frontier defeated, BoB were able to begin setting themselves up as Roman-styled imperialists. With a nod to the classic tactics of history, vassal alliances were created in the conquered territories. Xelas battled insurgent Fountain, FIX looked after Querious, and where Ascendant Frontier once stood, alliances such as RISE were installed as regents. Vassals could play peacefully alongside – and expect protection from – BoB's vast armies, as long as they paid tithes for access to stations.

By the start of 2007 the military masterminds had dominion over eight regions, which was the largest single empire since the opening months of the game. The money poured in. Band of Brothers had cemented a reputation for being the most effective fighting force in the *EVE* universe.

While the vassals made money and the industrial corps produced capital ships, the drilled, trained BoB military began to look for another target. They were regrouping and re-arming, readying for yet another conquest. BoB were so wealthy, so powerful (and had won so many alliance PvP tournaments) that they seemed unstoppable.

Meanwhile, the GoonSwarm had been contacted by Red Alliance and the two hard-bitten corps had decided to pool their resources. Back in the summer of 2006, much of the rest of the game had aligned against the Russians, and Red Alliance had been pushed back to a single station by a conglomerate of aligned pilots, including ASCN. In August 2006 that alliance (consisting of perhaps ten thousand pilots)

Once-great alliances were forced to retreat

fielded a 500-man fleet to take the system. I was actually part of that fleet. It was an awesome sight: several hundred people in the same teamspeak channel, as well dozens of capital ships heading out from a single station. The fireworks were spectacular. Watching a dozen dreadnoughts arriving to pound on a single tower was an astounding sight. But we lost. After a weekend of fighting at the 'siege of C-J6' my alliance withdrew. The game mechanics, they argued, made their losses too great to continue. The lag and disconnects produced by a massively multiplayer game desperately trying to keep up with the movement of so many players took too much of a toll.

The coalition designed to drive Red Alliance from the game had failed. Now the hard-working Russians capitalised. GoonSwarm had joined them, and the experienced and hardened Something Awful forumites were growing into a force to be feared. The alliances that had previously been aligned against both groups soon began to fall. By Christmas 2006 RedSwarm had found their stride and valuable station systems were being captured weekly. Station by station, their enemies faltered and then fell. Once-great alliances such as Veritas Immortalis and Lokta Volterra were stripped of their territories and forced to retreat. RedSwarm's borders were expanding, toward the fringes of BoB space.

Band of Brothers were preoccupied. They'd begun roaming around, preparing for their next action. *EVE* watchers have suggested that this is the point at which BoB could have saved themselves. If they had ▶

DEKLEIN

FADE

CLOUD-RING

OUTER RING

SYNDICATE

FOUNTAIN

DELVE

QUERIOUS

PERIOD BASIS

BRANCH

TENAL

DEKLE

VENAL

FAD

TRIBUTE

CLOUD
RING

VALE OF THE SILENT

GEMINATE

SYNDICATE

Breakout begins

The tide turns for Red Alliance

The tiny red blip on this map shows the point at which Red Alliance turned back the enormous coalition of empires arrayed against them in 2006. At this point all the regions marked as green were aligned against the Russians, while the grey indicates areas that were not directly involved in the galactic conflict at that time. You can see BoB over to the south-east, where they had consolidated their Empire before their massive attack into Paragon Soul and Feythabolis. Note that the core of the galaxy is not highlighted on our map because it is NPC territory, and therefore immune from player empire-building.

QUERIOUS

GREAT WILDLANDS

CACHE

SCALDING PASS

INSMOTHER

CURSE

WICKED CREEK

DETORID

IMMENSEA

TENERIFIS

IMPASS

ESOTERIA

OMIST

FEYTHABOLIS

PARAGON SOUL

CAIN AND ABEL

▶ joined the fight against RedSwarm immediately, there's a good chance they could have beaten them back. But it wasn't until RedSwarm began to actively encroach on the territories BoB had taken from Ascendant Frontier that BoB decided to counter-attack.

The war had begun.

EMPIRE BUILDING

To understand why BoB eventually lost, you have to understand how other *EVE* players felt about them. This alliance, supremely assured in its talents, had come to be seen as arrogant and worth fighting simply because it was in a position of power. What started as a small independent opposition, with GoonSwarm and Red Alliance mounting resistance, turned into a snowball of uprisings. At the height of the war, more than half of *EVE*'s PvP players were allied against Band of Brothers. It's estimated over *ten thousand* pilots were fighting BoB in skirmishes across the galaxy. Yet, vastly outnumbered, BoB *held*.

When the Northern Alliances opened a second front in the spring of 2007, led by the powerful D2 corporation, Band of Brothers shrugged. Their pilots decamped, moved homewards, and took them on. And won. D2 deployed their Titan and lost it. They fragmented and retreated back into the north. It took months, and the exhaustion of BoB's fighting troops, before they returned.

Nevertheless, soon RedSwarm were to see some success. They began to press their attack, and stations began to fall. The BoB blue began to disappear from maps.

How did it feel to be outnumbered and outgunned? Tristan Day is one of BoB's most senior commanders. He saw that there was a political gold rush going on: that all the major corporations had aligned against his alliance. "The most interesting thing has been watching groups of people taking the 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' mantra a bit too far," he said. "There are people aligned against us that are [allied] to each other that really do not like each other at all. It's quite amusing."

It's understandable. There is a third front to *EVE*'s vast conflict: the propaganda war fought on the forums. The arguments, trolling, and general lunacy has seen gamers put about as much effort into BoB-war threads on the forum as they have into the game itself. *EVE*'s players have become obsessed with the machinations of their PvP elite, and each announcement or battle-cry is seized upon by enemies and allies alike. Each Titan death or announcement by BoB's SirMolle caused threads dozens of pages long. Everyone wanted their say.

An Apocalypse Battleship opens up on its target.

It was propaganda and spin, in fact, that largely decided BoB's position. RedSwarm managed to pull alliances such as the Tau Ceti Federation, Interstellar Alcohol Conglomerate, and Against All Authorities onto their side. BoB managed to sign up some big corporations, but the overall forces on their side were never quite the same.

WHAT ENDGAME?

EVE's history has begun to repeat itself. Like Band of Brothers before them, RedSwarm have begun to install vassal corps in the wake of their victories. Momentum is everything: few will stand in their way. Meanwhile, the RedSwarm ply their message: Help out the Federation and you'll be rewarded.

Band of Brothers, as a territorial power, are massively reduced. They own a fraction of the territories they once did. Their pilots are exhausted. Their resources are stretched. And betrayal follows them everywhere. Their former allies are deserting them.

Just after Christmas 2007, BoB's strongest ally, the huge consortium of pilots-for-hire known as Mercenary Coalition, declared BoB's second home region of Period Basis (the other being Delve) to be their own independent state. Mercenary Coalition, along with megacorps KIA, Outbreak and Evoke, took the region for themselves. The territory tore a giant hole in what was left of BoB's central powerbase. As I write, BoB have been forced back into a single region. They've lost most of their territory to the zerg of Northern and Goon forces. The fighting, as intense as ever, could see Band of Brothers lose it all.

WHY THEY FIGHT

What's most fascinating about the continuing war is the stream of stories – ▶

> ## Betrayal follows Band of Brothers everywhere

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PARAGON SOUL

EVE-nly matched

Where the map divided

At the end of the ASCN war, BoB had taken a great swathe of the south under their control. RedSwarm meanwhile had beaten the larger part of the alliance against them and now held most of the regions north and west of Curse. It's at this point that the war of words brings the Northern alliances (marked red around Venal) into the war. The grey fragments on this map represent alliances in the new regions, which were not actively aligned in the war.
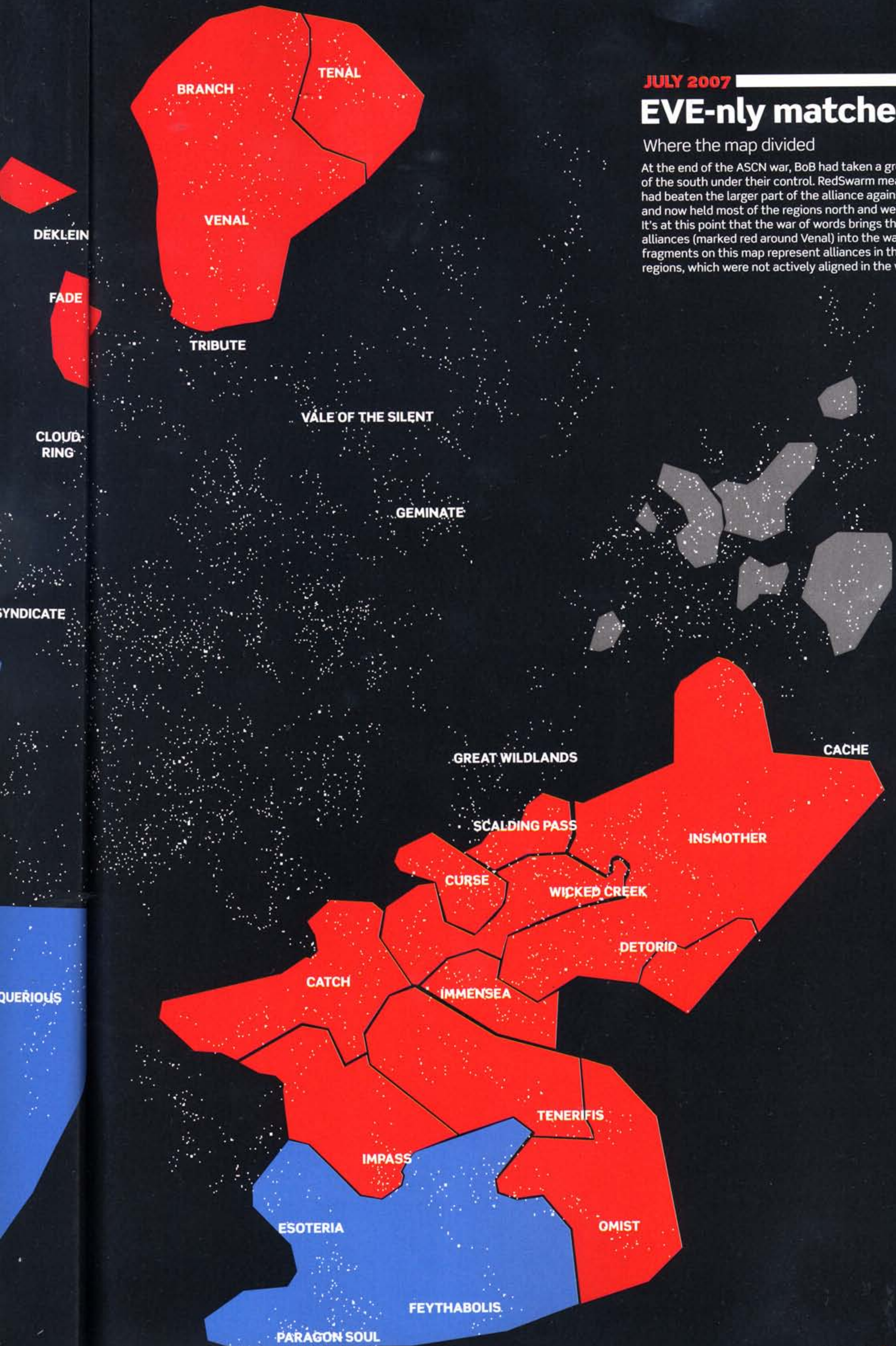
Do mention the war...

EVE players on their obsession

ALEKSANDR S, aka Nync
Faction: Red Alliance
Identifying the finest moment of the war from the perspective of the Russian alliance: "The Band of Brothers Titan kill in 46dp. I think that major battle in the south played a significant role both for strategic advances, as well as for morale."

TRISTAN DAY, aka Dianabolic
Faction: Band of Brothers
On enjoying the war: "We find fun and amusement in everything we do, whether it be a four-hour freighter op when we drink a lot and sing, doing hit and run against a vastly numerically superior foe, or laughing at 'because-you-were-reading-a-forum' capital ship losses'... (normally my own)."

ISAIAH HOUSTON, aka Sesfan Qu'Lah,
Faction: GoonSwarm
On the future mission of the Goons, and the philosophy behind the endless war they have found themselves fighting in *EVE Online*: "Empire building was never our goal, or intention. It happened as a by-product of our war. What I'd like to do now is continue to fulfil our original mission given to us by our now disgraced CEO Remedial, which is to create a place for Goons in *EVE*."

▶ the tales of commitment and tenacity from both sides. Whoever you talk to, on either side, will have a story of how their fleet mounted a 48-hour continuous defence of a single system. How they set their alarm clock for 4am so they could be up in time to finish off an enemy installation. Or how they tricked the enemy into losing some priceless piece of hardware.

EVE is about more than just combat tactics. It's about organisation, camaraderie and morale. How do the commanders leading these troops keep players coming back night after night? These aren't grizzled combat troops – they're gamers, subject to the same whims, commitments and emotions as all of us. It doesn't always feel like fun when you spend hours waiting for something to happen, or when your assets get blown up because your fleet had to go to bed.

BoB commander Tristan Day told me that much of what his alliance learned was focused on how to manage large groups of people and keep morale high, rather than simply mastering the game itself. "Primarily you need to keep participation up, which is critical for space holding and conquest. You need to keep *EVE* fun. Whilst we run a very militaristic chain of command in BoB we make sure that we remember that *EVE* is, after all, 'just' a game. The best game I've ever had the honour of playing, but a game nonetheless. If anything you must learn not to get attached to your virtual assets – you can't take them out of *EVE*, after all."

STRATEGIC MISTAKES

How did RedSwarm rally quite so many players to their cause? The Goon commander Isaiah Houston is fairly forthright in his opinions about this. "BoB's sense of arrogance and superiority ended up killing their more worthwhile and useful allies," says Houston. "At the same time we were able to unite with Northern friends and work for a common goal."

Houston is pleased with the way his once-wild horde of Something Awful forumites handled itself in the war. "There have been some minor strategic mistakes along the way, but nothing absolutely critical. I really feel as though we've done an exemplary job throughout this war. You have to understand, at the beginning things were very much not in our favour; BoB was the oldest, richest, and had the most experience at this sort of thing."

So: was the war simply about GoonSwarm getting revenge for those initial lost conflicts in the early days of *EVE*? Perhaps, but Houston says the Goon motivation was more about carrying out their general mandate as the gaming world's griefers. "It was about griefing the oldest and most established players in the game. Making them eat their own words just happened to be the best way of doing that. We've had some scores to settle along the way, it's true, but really the impetus has just been us staying true to our roots as Goons."

Nevertheless, despite their current dire straits after a year of war, Tristan Day is philosophical about Band of Brothers' position. "At the end of the day the end result is the same: we're getting a lot of combat without having to do any travel. We're having more fun now than at any time ever before... so we're not complaining."

And would our BoB commander do it all again, given the chance? "In a heartbeat," says Day. "Only better."

Was the war simply about getting revenge?

DEKLEIN

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QUTER RING

SYNDICATE

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PERIOD BASIS

The red galaxy

RedSwarm take on the world

Red, on this map, shows the territory that is friendly to, or owned by, RedSwarm. The blue fragment is what remains of BoB sovereignty. The green sections represent the northern alliances who once again rolled into action to take territory away from the weakened BoB empire. At this stage, it's clear that nothing in *EVE* will be the same again.

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