



# ENTER PLANET DUST

## COMING DOWN FROM THE STARS AND ON TO THE BATTLEFIELD: CAN CCP HIT THE GROUND RUNNING?

**L**ocals may tell you that one third of the world's construction cranes currently reside within Shanghai, piecing together an unlikely muddle of mega-structures and monuments, rewriting the complex clusters of streets and neighbourhoods on a seemingly annual basis. Regardless of whether you believe that or not, this is undeniably a city in which capitalism has turned seismic – where days and nights alike ring with the sound of drilling, where luxury brands compete for your attention with bundles

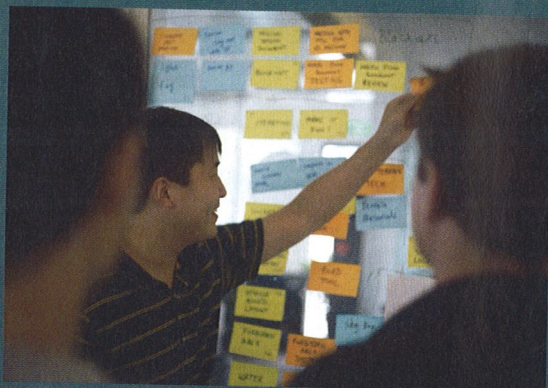
of knock-off Blu-ray DVDs, and where the glinting baubles of the provocative skyline are largely obscured by the yellow smoke from the factories that paid for them.

Shanghai frequently looks like science fiction – *Blade Runner* colliding with *Mad Max* on the outskirts of Milton Keynes, to be precise – the hard-nosed, ideas-heavy kind of science fiction that builds its spectacle from the economics and philosophies of the future rather than the operatics. It feels, in other words, a bit like something *Eve Online* might have created.

*Eve* is the MMO with the best stories – the MMO rife with tales of complex backstabbing and glittering amorality, where players form corporations rather than guilds and move about the terrain as spaceships rather than pixies. It's unashamedly grown-up in its depiction of a sharp-edged universe in which a very human kind of malevolence lurks in the next star cluster, and it's unashamedly different, too: a long-view game where the outcomes of a smart plan may unfold in months rather than minutes, and

TITLE: **DUST 514**  
FORMAT: **CONSOLE (TBA)**  
PUBLISHER: **CCP GAMES**  
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**  
ORIGIN: **CHINA**  
RELEASE: **TBC**





which, with its fanatical players and ever-shifting alliances, seems unbothered by the ticking clock which lures many of its competitors into constant talk of sequels.

CCP, the game's Icelandic developer, has provided a steady stream of expansions over the years, but now, from a satellite studio in Shanghai, the masters of *Eve's* universe are taking their biggest risk yet: building another – very different – game inside the landscape of the first, a game that will be as twitchy as *Eve* is thoughtful, as direct as *Eve* is mediated.

"For us, it's been a learning experience," muses **Kjartan Pierre Emilsson**, the managing director of CCP Asia. "We started *Eve* as a game, but now we only reluctantly call it that. It's a service. Because it's a sandbox title, it's more like a world for us: we create the basic rules and then offer the service of accessing this world. We flesh it out, make it look better and give you more to do in it, and then, as that perspective evolves, it becomes natural to think: 'Can we look at this world through different goggles? The PC brings you into *Eve's* universe as a pilot, but could I put on a different



costume and experience this space from a different angle?"

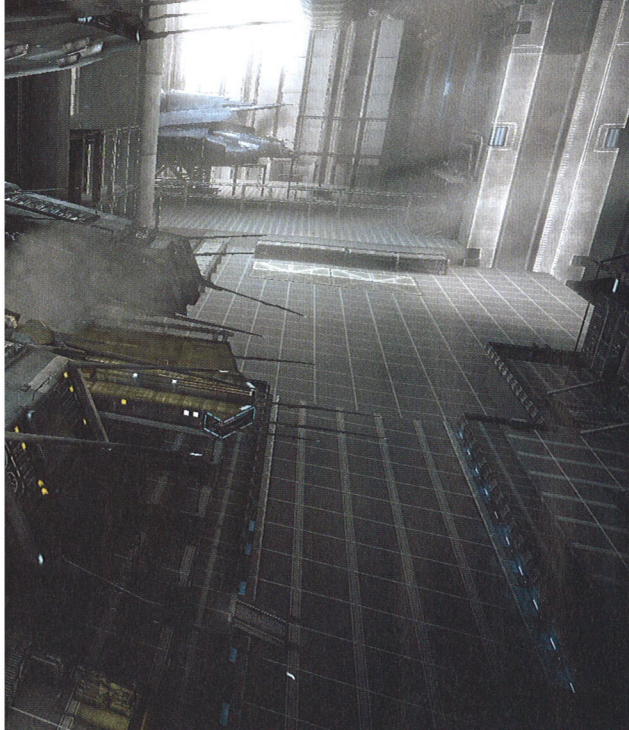
That different angle has turned out to be from the perspective of the living-room sofa, as CCP shifts its attentions towards consoles. "The objective for us was to explore the concept and explore the world, and obviously to get different people to play it," admits creative director **Atli Már Sveinsson**. "There's a lot of *Eve* fans who love the concept: they love the setting and the art style, but they're maybe not ready to spend this amount of time conquering the learning cliff. We felt that we had to at least explore the possibility of a product that would appeal to them more: a console product. We had talked about it considerably, and many different ideas were floating around. Should we port *Eve* to consoles? No, it just doesn't work. Should we do an RTS? One conclusion we came to is that we should not try to mimic the PC style of game on the console. We actually chose a genre that is as far away from *Eve* as possible."

**That's something of an** understatement, as it happens. *Dust 514*, the result of CCP's explorations, takes *Eve's* dreamy nebulae and solar systems and zooms in close. It's still an MMOG, of course, but it's also a firstperson shooter, a large-scale team-based affair playing out on expansive five-kilometre-square maps that blend gleaming marble-maze military installations with daringly open terrain.

The art style shines with *Eve's* austere brand of hard sci-fi – huge hangars, hulking lumps of heavily detailed battle cruisers and brutally efficient guns – but the concept paintings lurking in the darkened corners of CCP Asia hint at more elaborate worlds beyond that: landscapes



brothers (from left): Kjartan Pierre Emilsson, managing director of CCP Asia, Atli Már Sveinsson, creative director, and William Chen, art director. CCP is one of the western studios to kick off a Shanghai-based project with a local art director – a move that the company hopes will give *Dust 514* a distinct visual personality



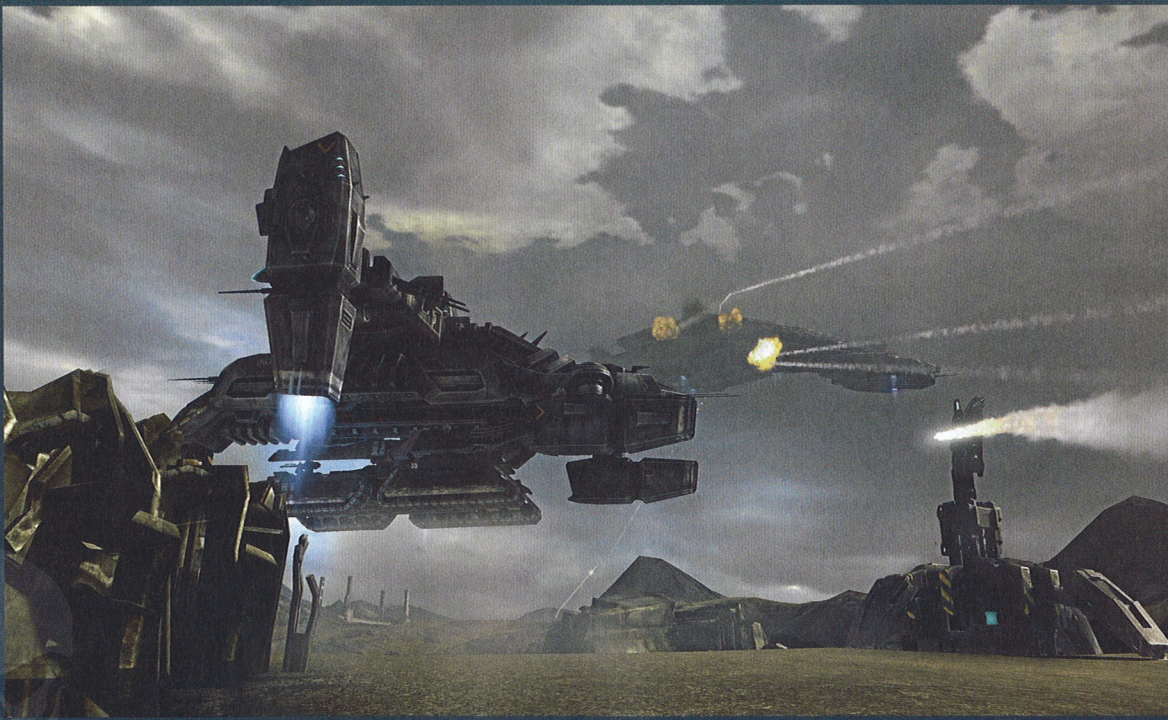
## MARKET FORCES UNLEASHED

With both skill- and currency-based progression, *Dust* is ensuring its players have options, and that's the same approach it's bringing to the economy, with a potentially controversial mixture of in-game purchases using both ISK, and real-money transactions (RMT). Yet, even here, CCP is willing to grant its audience freedom, encouraging the selling of gear on the black market in much the same way *Eve* allows players to be white-collar criminals and pirates as well as legitimate businessmen. "You don't have to play 70 hours a week just to get a little bit of an advantage," says Sveinsson. "That's where microtransactions come in. In terms of trading, players would find a way anyway, but we'll just facilitate it. And you still have to achieve; you won't be able to get the massive raygun on your tank unless you've worked for it. You could, potentially, buy it from another player, but then that's social interaction: it's meaningful. Even then it's still unlikely that you'll be able to use it in a meaningful manner if you haven't trained yourself. FPSes are about twitch skills: a crappy player with awesome hardware is probably going to get owned by a good player with relatively crappy stuff."



CCP isn't concerned that *Dust* will present too much content to handle: "We think roughly 20 per cent will be engaged, organising the others and creating content, you'll have those who are just happy to fight"

with massive tears of colour, rolling plains and spooky deserts, lit by the very glow of a half-dozen moons. And the art, *Dust* should move at a pace too, with a wide range of vehicle classes ensuring that combat ranges from street-level grunt warfare through dog-fights and mini-nukes, all the way up towards an end-game lodged high in the troposphere, as giant mobile Command Centres (MCCs) unleash on one another once ground forces have taken down their shields. The most



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its parallel is *Battlefield 2142*, but on a cursory glance – and CCP isn't offering much else at this point – it's a handful of thoughtful tweaks, the War Points you earn throughout the game, allowing you to call in vehicles on demand, zipping towards you slung from aircraft, to a suite of additions that make an already baffling cross-product branch out even further, areas traditionally occupied by RTSes.

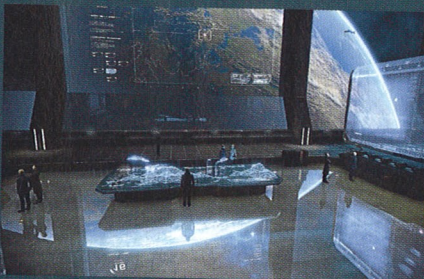
*Dust* matches are set in motion by a commander – a kind of deep-space dungeon master who is either a player who has earned the right to the role, or an AI stand-in if no one qualified is available. From the war barges – giant spaceships that double as 3D lobby environments and social areas for *Dust*'s mercenary corporations – commanders choose vehicle and installation loadouts prior to a match, placing preliminary

spawn points and structures on a wireframe map in full view of both teams as they set the stage for conflict. "You're given some interesting choices before the fighting's even started," enthuses Sveinsson. "There are ten vehicle classes, but the commander can only commit five for each battle. We have 15 installation types, and he can only choose five. It's simple, really, like Magic: The Gathering: you prepare your deck and then fight."

Once the battle is under way, standard mercenaries find themselves in a traditional team-based arena (CCP is still tinkering with numbers, but is unlikely to go anywhere near as high as 256 players

## NEW ADVENTURES

"There's a lot to explore," enthuses Sveinsson. There's also a lot to learn, which is why CCP's putting a great deal of effort into *Dust's* New Player Experience. "It would be a total failure if we ignored the NPE," Sveinsson suggests. "It's more important than in *Eve*, even. The risk of just saying, 'Let's train the player and put them through some crappy narrative thing', is that it just gets boring. So our NPE is similar to our achievement system in that it's in tiers – you graduate through it as you learn parts of the game: first you have to do the FPS part and so on. Instead, we give you incentives. If you want to become a commander, you can take that route, and take advanced courses within that: they repay you with unlocks, but they also allow you to play the game more effectively."



If you're unlucky enough to take too many bullets to the head, which is bound to happen at some point, you'll be able to select your respawn point from the game's overhead map

300,000 players even before the first shot's been fired. Look up into the night sky from one of New Eden's battlefields, and you're looking into territory that already belongs to someone, spaces where other stories are constantly unfolding.

"The most ambitious element is the *Eve* link," confirms Sveinsson. "The other stuff has been proven in other games. Running around with a gun is a proven concept: let's just make it really good. It's when *Eve* comes in that it becomes special. We're sharing the universe: your basic interface to the world in *Dust* is even through the same star-map as *Eve*."

But if the plan is to succeed, it will come down to shared goals as well as real estate, with the sky pilots and corporate

in motion or deciding where things should be, it's actual players in *Eve*, building up their districts and fortifying their areas. *Dust* will be a separate server system, but the outcomes of your battle will affect *Eve's* universe. You can chat to people in local channels, look at the same planets that *Eve* players are looking at and so on. Each battle is then an instanced area – it has its own game mode and time limit – and then you're back into the same single shard world. You can do a quick match, where you're put into a simple skirmish that suits you, or maybe you belong to a mercenary outfit and have more a long-term engagement with a corporation, forming bonds and making friends."

**But CCP doesn't** want to damage its crown jewel in the process of expanding upon it. "We understand *Eve* very well at this point," says Sveinsson. "The political system is so deep that I don't think something like *Dust* could actually harm it." And as for the perspectives of fiercely territorial *Eve* players themselves? "I think opinion is kind of split," he admits cheerfully. "There are naysayers. It's not that they don't like the concept, they're just concerned about putting the fate of a planet into the hands of console people."

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on account of the elaborate firepower teams will have at their disposal) while the commander controls the more tactical elements of the game. "He's above the action," explains Sveinsson, "but he still has the ability to go into a voyeur mode and zoom down to see his installations in full 3D. It may sound removed, but as commander you can affect the battlefield by creating incentives for your players to perform certain tasks: you're working towards objectives and moving the focus of the fighting about."

In motion, the whole thing is slickly observed and surprisingly easy to get to grips with, but it's difficult, in such early stages of production, to tell how *Dust* will compete against charismatic bruisers like *COD* and *Halo*. CCP is confident that the team it has assembled – a mixture of *Eve* veterans and shooter specialists who have worked on everything from *Battlefield* to *Splinter Cell* – can handle the lurch in genre, but on top of that the studio's betting on several unique factors that should help it stand out.

Factors like *Eve*. *Dust* will live within a pre-established universe – one that's dynamically reacting to the choices of its

megalomaniacs of *Eve* paying *Dust's* mercenary teams to literally fight their battles for them. "Essentially, the *Eve* players need to control planets," explains Sveinsson. "Planets give them resources and affect sovereignty. So they can issue contracts to win over territory on their behalf: either open-ended contracts for all to accept, or more direct contracts to specific mercenary corporations. You could almost liken it to the setting of a match: I want this kind of player, this kind of skill level. The difference is that it's being handled by players. It's not game designers or server admins setting games

But the use of that system is entirely up to them. If they want to use mercenaries to attack someone, they can. If they don't, they don't have to. And you have another, bigger part of the community which has already seen the value, and they've started recruiting *Dust* players and organising them. The more we tell people, the more the userbase accepts it."

"In terms of connecting the games, the word we've started to use is 'meaningful,'" agrees Emilsson. "Potentially, you can change the world, and others can see your changes. That's entirely new. If we manage to make a

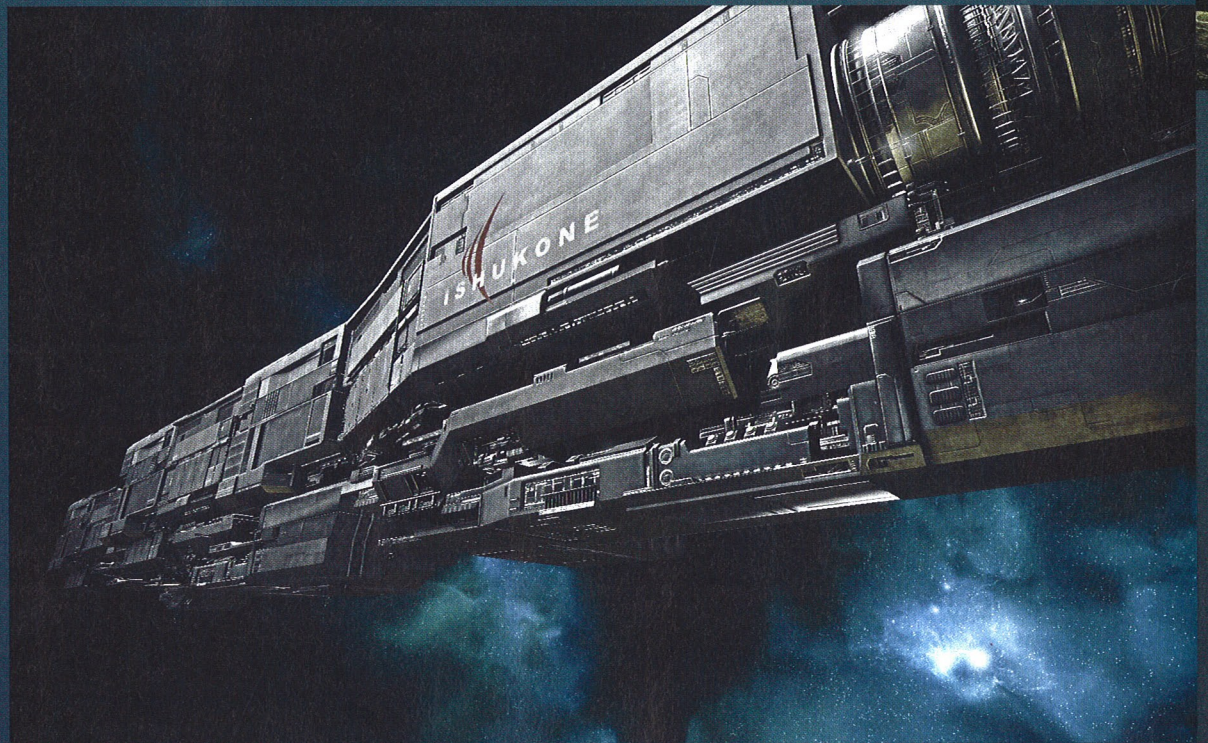
connection between *Eve* and the whole thing is going to have a single gameworld access through different different game logic is very different to us.”

Meaningful interaction is likely to come over time, as CCP will be easing things together cautiously, depending on what the players actually want from the game. We have aspirations to add on to *Eve* in a year – we have plans for *Eve* like we have with *Eve*, and we’ve already drafted out a wishlist of things for Sveinsson. “These will involve changes for *Eve* players with us being very careful. Take care: this needs to be regulated so the exchange rate of ISK [*Eve*’s currency] cannot be affected by the other too much at the heart of a player-driven economy, *Dust* is a hybrid model and then, as we go, we’ll deregulate in stages. Things of *Eve* have always been the source of awesomeness. We want to facilitate the things they invent, helping them to make things work. *Dust* will be that sort of thing over again.”

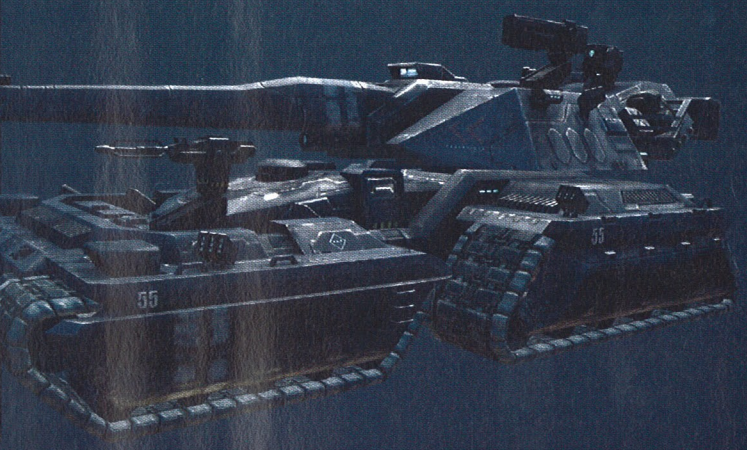
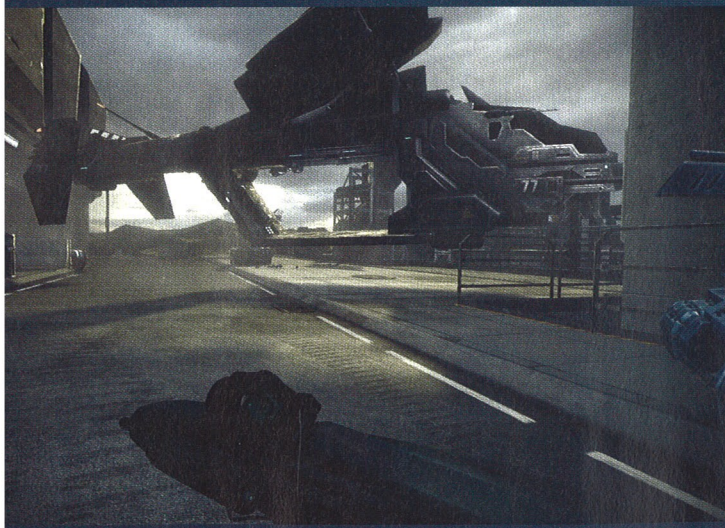
Support for the project is that the team isn’t entirely opposed to a quirky use of existing IP to help for its new game – especially in a console market where a product might have little cachet. The game in its own right and an addition in its own right,” Sveinsson insists. “The players will know about *Eve*, the majority of them. Others will

come to it as a shooter, and hopefully the deeper experience will just unravel. The trick for us is to not force players to understand it, but to guide players towards the good stuff.”

Beyond *Eve* itself, *Dust*’s other big idea is persistence, which Sveinsson hopes will allow the game to stand out in the most competitive of genres. “Think about the shooter landscape as a chart, with tactical and strategic on one axis, and arcade to simulation on the other. You might place *Gears Of War* in a certain spot, *Halo* and



*Dust*’s war barges will exist as physical spaceships within *Eve* – mercenary corporations will use them to move about the universe between battlefields. War Points can be spent calling in vehicles to get you out of a tight spot – and dropships remove the risk of someone getting to your new jet before you do



New Eden embraces the macro scale, with guns for ground troops rather than space hulks. *Eve's* art style is sufficiently robust to cope with such an evolution



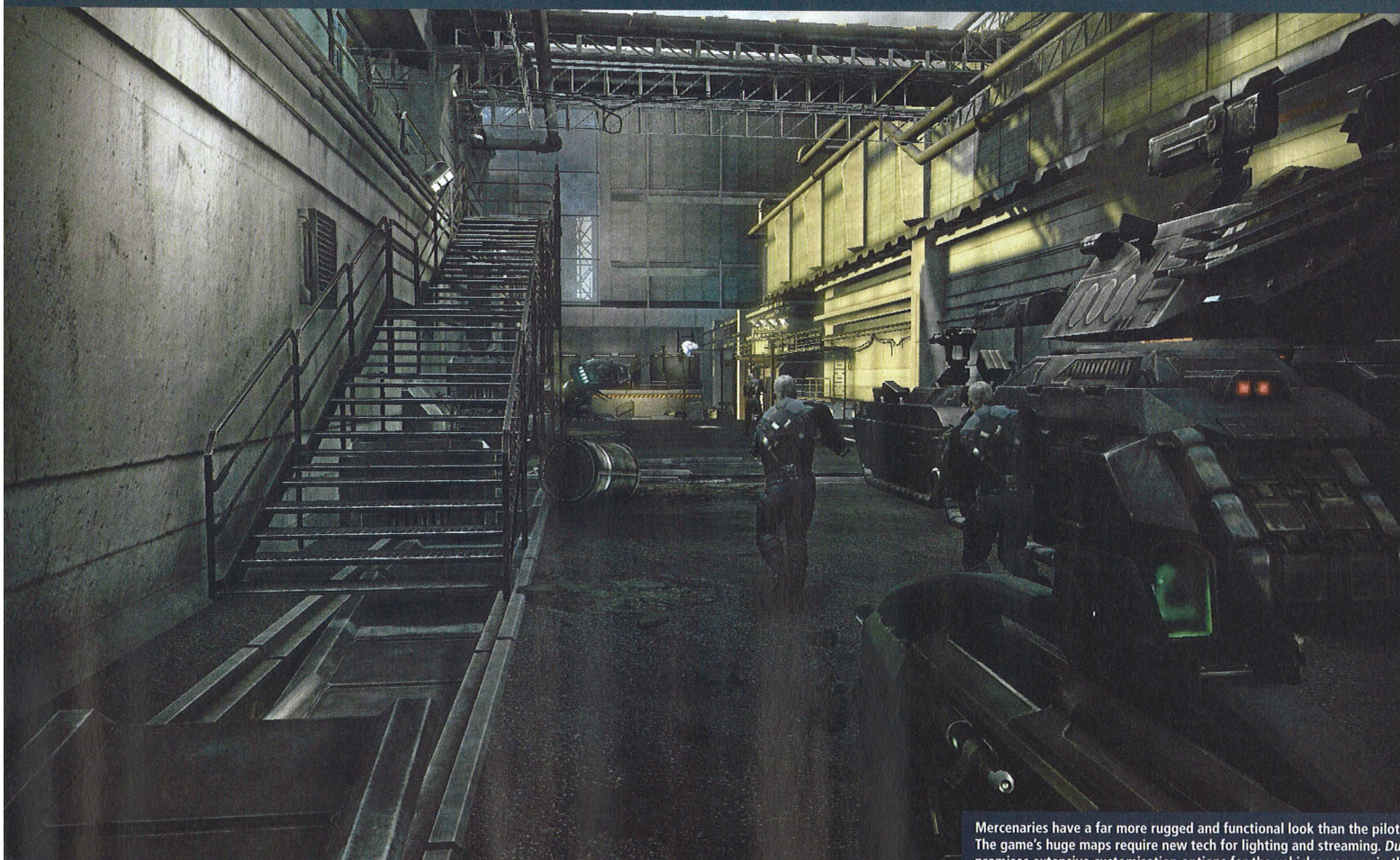
*Killzone* somewhere else. But then for us you have to add another axis entirely: persistency. There's not a lot of games that go as far as we do in this direction. If you think of it as a 3D chart, we're a long way away from most of our competitors. We do offer a similar minute-to-minute experience to the other games – it's an FPS, it's about shooting people in the face – but you're fighting for something long term. Your actions resonate."

The team has very strong ideas as to how to make persistency work on *Dust's* platform. "I think it's a mistake to verbatim adapt a PC MMO on to a console – it's a totally different play-style," argues Sveinsson. "There's also a trend for adding MMO complexity – complicated skill trees and that sort of thing – on to FPSes. We take a different approach. We do progression through achievements instead. You unlock access to better and better stuff, and we feel this is more in line with what console players want."

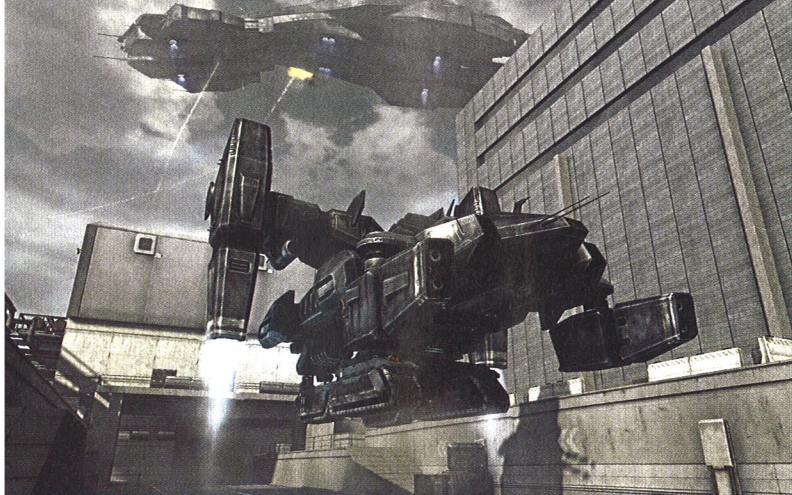
Player progression, then, depends

upon a system CCP refers to as the achievement matrix. "Levelling is based on the achievement matrix does to a certain extent replace it," suggests Sveinsson. "We don't want to have a linear kind of levelling: we want to promote usage of all kinds of weapons, playing for all races, accepting all kinds of contracts, so we need a very freeform approach. At the start, the matrix is basically ten tiers of multiple columns for the different NPC corporations that manufacture weapons and equipment. To advance a tier you need to accrue a certain percentage of achievements within that tier. This unlocks the ability to buy better stuff, but you also collect combo unlocks through playing that gives you persistent attribute enhancements for vehicles and weapons."

When it comes to the battlefields themselves, the landscape of *Dust* is as persistent, with dynamic arenas that change over time. "The planets where you're fighting already exist in the *Eve* universe," stresses Sveinsson. "That means



Mercenaries have a far more rugged and functional look than the pilots. The game's huge maps require new tech for lighting and streaming. *Dust* promises extensive customisation options for the vehicles you use in the



*Dust and Eve will add value to each other but aren't strictly co-dependent. Eve's audience can presumably be trusted not to nuke all of Dust's battlefields just for fun*

ct to that universe. The first time here, the battlefield looks green and friendly perhaps, but then someone from orbit, and the next time you it's totally different. You think 'Oh, I know this place, but it look as I remember it', and that's there's a player in a different who is affecting it. Variety's not just the minute-to-minute gameplay, commanders can deploy different ons: it's also about the ction of these battlefields. Not all are created equal: some are lush, e arid, some are deserts. We can ate so many battlefields in terms odels, but if you have a ming index, you can actually state its evolution a planet is: this hich textures are being used, ffects gameplay in terms of ere, sight-lines, water levels. In a veloped planet, maybe a route d to take is now filled with water. nges your tactics. We have the l to grow this system and, in the

*Dust* is a step towards that goal. "That's definitely something we've been thinking about from the start, to give the studio its own personality, and a little independence as well," says Emilsson. "But it's always a delicate mixture as to how you create those things. We still want to have the corporate culture from the main company, because this is something that we care about, and then you have to find how it translates here, and there's also the question of the mixture of western developers you need to bring in, because you can't always find the experienced talent for certain aspects of making games. Overall, I think we've been successful. Until now, the games industry here has never been a good career choice. If you're a graduate from a good engineering school, the last thing your parents want is for you to go into gaming: that's like going into gambling. That's changing now, but our first stage is to build a completely functional team, and we think *Dust* is the perfect task for that. Once that's done, we think we'll be able

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put it in the hands of *Eve* players: like enough from orbit, you'll likely kick the planet back in terms of development. Or you might cultivate it, it enough so you get the use effect."

**ambitious** agenda for CCP, e's a final, more Earth-bound, that makes *Dust* such an g prospect: the team that's it. Shanghai has long made a r itself as an outsourcing hotspot, mpanies like Ubisoft have had ed studios turning out games or some time. Yet CCP's model is, a little bit different: rather than apitalise on cut-price talent, it create a studio with its own Chinese identity.

to go for a completely local project – one aimed at the Chinese market." *Dust* is progressive, at least, with a Chinese art director, William Chen, currently leading a primarily Chinese team as he works towards creating a look for the game that blends the aesthetic of the *Eve* universe with something perhaps a little more local. "I already feel like *Dust's* an export out of China," says Sveinsson. "If you take Ubisoft or any of the western companies that have come here, it's usually for a sequel: the IP is quite defined, and the direction is there already. That's why in these cases, the creative director, the lead designers and the art directors have been western people. This kind of local team is a first for a triple-A production in Shanghai." It's yet another risk, perhaps, but risks

### EVE CHINA

*Eve Online* has been running in China since June 2006 on Serenity, its own server. "It's been an up and down story," admits Emilsson. "We started at a rather interesting peak for us, but it's been gradually levelling down to around 20,000 subscribers, which isn't anything to report about here, but we also learnt a little bit about some differences with the Chinese market and how it's been evolving towards free-to-play item-buying. That's what most of the really big games are. The funny thing about our Chinese subscribers is that we've filtered out the hardcore *Eve* fans – the 20,000 subscribers we have in China are exactly the same kind of people as in the rest of the world – and they're exactly as much against changing the *Eve* model towards real-money transactions as our other players are."

Emilsson admits that there are differences between Serenity and Tranquillity, the server that handles *Eve* for the rest of the world. "There are certain aspects about the economy that don't start to function until you have a critical mass of people – the same goes for alliance warfare: 20,000 people would result in maybe two big alliances on Tranquillity. There are elements of the emergent gameplay that can't emerge until you have more people."

seem to define CCP, and it's important to remember that *Dust* itself is only possible because of *Eve*, one such gamble that has already paid off. It's hard to see an external publisher allowing for such ambition, and such complexity, but the continued success of its first game has allowed CCP the room to expand and explore the potential of its own universe without compromise.

In the end, like the brutal nugget of pure capitalism that sits at the centre of New Eden, it all comes down to a question of freedom: how much freedom to hand over to the player, how much freedom to give to the design team as the game continues to evolve after release. In both cases, typically, CCP is willing to go further than most. "Players are ready for this," grins Sveinsson as he surveys his plans for game-spanning, inter-planetary, cross-genre warfare. "They've been ready for it for a long time. It's not their fault that there hasn't been this sort of thing before. It's the fault of developers."