

Evolution will punish the selfish? It's not as simple as that

When I see a headline explaining that “Evolution will punish you if you are selfish and mean” it looks at first sight completely meaningless. Has evolution punished the AIDS virus for being ruthless to its victims? Has evolution punished the ants for their behavior towards the competition?

The story is actually a report of a result in game theory which overthrew an earlier experiment in game theory suggesting that a completely “ruthless” strategy would succeed in a contest with other ones slightly less ruthless.

It may not tell us much about evolution, but it tells us a great deal about popular culture and the things that interest human beings.

Read the full, original story here: [Evolution will punish the selfish? It's not as simple as that](#)

Additional Resources:

- [“Evolution will punish you if you're selfish and mean,”](#) Michigan State University
It's easier to understand the coverage slant when you see the tantalizingly juicy quote from the study's lead researcher. He kicks off the university's press release with this:

“We found evolution will punish you if you're selfish and mean,” said lead author Christoph Adami, MSU professor of microbiology and molecular genetics. “For a short time and against a specific set of opponents, some selfish organisms may come out ahead. But selfishness isn't evolutionarily sustainable.”

You have to admit, it does make a better story if you disregard all those caveats that appear after the attribution break.
- [“Selfish traits no good: Nice guys finish first, evolution researchers say,”](#) Christian Science Monitor
This story jumps straight into rationalizing the results of the study and offering anecdotal evidence and “common sense” examples. In fact, this article doesn't even mention that the study was a simulation, and that the individuals in the mathematical model were iterated equations.
- [“Selfishness is Unsustainable and May Eventually Disappear as an Evolutionary Trait,”](#) Nature World News
This article offers more details and includes information about the simulation and the study's game theory framework.
- [“Selfish traits not favoured by evolution, study shows,”](#) BBC
The BBC story talks about the mathematical model used in the study and offers a thoughtful description of the experiment. But they did unnecessarily, and some might say, inaccurately, sneak the word “people” into the first sentence, like so:

Evolution does not favour selfish people, according to new research.