Beyond the Violence...

A look at the complex world of Counter-Strike

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"Death, Stabbing Blamed on Counter-Strike"

"Counter-Strike, Being Examined in DC Sniper Case"

"Counter-Strike implicated in Germany Killings"

Introduction

During this past year tragic events such as the Washington DC sniper shootings and the massacre in Erfurt, Germany have stunned and outraged the public. More than anything else people want to know who is to be held responsible for these horrible acts? While the answer is far more complex than any one factor, the media has been quick to point the finger at video games, particularly Counter-Strike, a popular modification of the first-person shooter Half-Life. On April 28th the German paper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* ran an article titled "Software for the Massacre" and bluntly accused Counter-Strike for the Erfurt slayings. Is the media justified in portraying Counter-Strike (CS) in this way? Is Counter-Strike a training ground for potential killers, equipping them with the skills necessary to carry out mass murders? There is a world beyond the public eye; despite the belief that Counter-Strike is simply a violence-encouraging haven for would-be killers, the game cultivates a culture that is based upon teamwork and community. Through careful analysis of gameplay and player interviews this paper will define and study this complex society in an effort to expose an aspect of the game that is counter to common misconceptions.

Description

Counter-Strike was originally developed as a modification (mod) of the popular first-person shooter Half-Life. Half-Life was released in November of 1998 by Valve Software. The story follows Gordon Freeman, a scientist who finds himself in the middle of a hell-bent situation fighting vicious aliens and his

own corrupt government.   Half-life captured over 50 "Game of the Year" Awards from various online and offline publications.   Part of Valve's success can be contributed to the release of the Half-Life SDK (Software Developer's Kit) that allowed developers and artists to create modifications for the game.   In quick time the game developed its own cult following, spawning thousands of websites, modifications, add-ons, and mission packs. Today it remains a popular first-person shooter and a benchmark in the First-Person Shooter genre.

One of the mods to come out of this was Counter-Strike. In Counter-Strike players are placed on either one of two opposing teams – Terrorists or Counter-Terrorists (CTs). Teams are pitted against one another on various maps each with its own mission.   There are four different mission/scenarios:
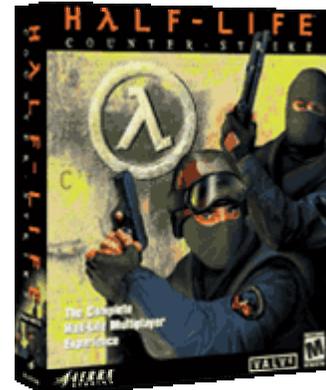
1) Defusion: Terrorists are required to locate the target site and plant a bomb; while the Counter-Terrorists must defuse it

2) Hostage Rescue Situation: The Terrorists are holding hostages and the CT must infiltrate the terrorist base and rescue the hostages

3) Assassination: Counter-terrorists must protect and deliver the VIP to a predetermined location, while Terrorists seek to assassinate the VIP

4) Death Match: The only objective is to destroy the other team

Teams win by either completing the mission or eliminating the opposing force and are rewarded with cash.   Players can use this cash to purchase weapons and equipment.   Weapons include real live arsenals such as the Desert Eagle (left) and the AK-47 assault rifle.

What differentiates Counter-Strike from previous first-person shooters is that the game is extensively team-oriented.   The creators of Counter-Strike wanted to expand on

the multiplayer aspect of Half-Life to create a mod that was truly team-focused. Real counter-terrorist groups must rely heavily on teamwork to complete their missions and the creators felt it was important to inject this element in the game. Radio commands, team communication lines, as well as headsets were a few of the features added to encourage team play.

Over time, groups of players formed teams known as clans. Clans were composed of either a group of friends who played Counter-Strike together or players who met online and decided to team up. Each clan has its own unique style of play and strategy. On any given server there are a number of clan members, who can be identified by a '[', a clan name, and ']', and their call sign (name).

Development

The Players

Minh Le, a.k.a. Gooseman, had previously worked on mods for the classic first-person shooter Quake. Le was a freshman at Simon Fraser University when Quake I was released. Similar to Valve, id had the foresight of releasing an SDK alongside the game to help increase its popularity. Like many Le picked up the SDK and over the course of a year he developed his own Navy Seals mod. It was nothing spectacular, but would set the foreground for his later work. "It was great because that was when I got really interested in making games and I knew that I wanted to do this for a living." From there Le joined the Action Quake 2 team, but eventually left citing creative differences. He went on to pursue his true passion and began work on a military/terrorism themed modification.

During Le's tenure at AQ2, he met Jess Cliffe, a.k.a. Cliffe, a web developer and ardent gamer who would later become the second member of the Counter-Strike team. When Cliffe heard of Le's plans to create a military-based modification he immediately became interested in the project. "It was exactly the theme that excited me. So I casually

mentioned doing the web site for him [Le]." Le agreed and work on the project began in the winter of 1999.

Initial Development and Release

On March 24, 1999 the Counter-Strike.net website opened at Planet Half-Life, months before the release of the actual mod. The site featured weapon images, video clips, and whatever else Cliffe thought would attract attention. Even before the release, hype surrounding Counter-Strike grew to unanticipated levels. A few weeks after the site opened, Counter-Strike.net was able to boast hitting the 10,000 visitor mark.

Three months later, the highly-anticipated mod would make its debut to an extremely eager audience. Initially, Counter-Strike only included 9 realistic weapons and a handful of maps; nonetheless the game got off to a solid start. However, the game did have its flaws – gameplay was unbalanced, losing teams would get $0 creating a huge disadvantage that allowed winning teams to keep winning; it was difficult to distinguish CT's from T's and at the time disabling friendly-fire was not an option; and servers were unstable. Over time, updates would eventually resolve these issues.

Player models for the two teams

Refinement

After the initial release, the game would release an update every three to five months with the word BETA tagged to it. Gooseman was quoted saying that BETAs were just excuses for bugs. Regardless, Counter-Strike was continually refined and improved. New weapons, player models, and maps were being constantly added to the delight of gamers. In addition, new scenarios such as defusion were created to give players a variety of missions. Counter-Strike was a continual work-in-progress allowing the team to experiment with whatever they wanted.

CS goes public!

Counter-Strike's rapid success drew attention from the heads of Valve. On April 12th, 2000 Valve announced that it would team up with the Counter-Strike team to release a retail version of the game, Counter-Strike 1.0. In the short span of a year, Counter-Strike went from being Gooseman's pet project to a full-blown commercial product. The responsibility of programming and modeling where shifted over to Valve, while Le and Cliffe focused on gameplay development.

Success

In the Spring of 2000, Counter-Strike became the number-one online action game, surpassing mega-titles such as Quake 3: Arena, Unreal Tournament, and even Half-Life's own multiplayer Team Fortress. The game went on to receive numerous "Game of the Year" awards from publications such as Gamespot, Gamers.com, and Gamespy.com. At the Game Developers Choice Awards (one of the most prestigious awards show in the game developing community) Counter-Strike took home the Rookie Studio Award for outstanding achievement by a rookie team and one of the Game Spotlight Awards for "demonstrating true innovation, advancing the state of the art, and pushing the boundaries of games as an expressive medium." The consensus of the gaming community was echoed by an editor at Computer Games Online, "Counter-Strike is a heart-pounding, visceral experience that gets under your skin. The game offers a sense of accomplishment and camaraderie that is simply amazing." Despite these numerous awards and accolades what is most impressive about Counter-Strike is that even after 4 years with minimal change, tens of thousands of players can still be found online at any given moment fragging away. Amazingly, that number continues to grow daily.

Frags spill into the real world

Lately, the news about Counter-Strike hasn't been positive. Counter-Strike has come under attack by numerous critics for its possible promotion of violence and influence in such tragic events as the Erfurt massacre. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* condemned Counter-Strike and placed the burden of blame entirely on the game.

During the Washington DC shootings NBC's today show ran a segment titled, "Getting into the snipers' mind." In this bit, clips of Counter-Strike were shown with the following report, "investigators say they are examining violent video games and web sites, which glorify 'one shot, one kill' assassins and where players can switch to 'god mode' to become invincible." It is known that the American Sniper Association endorses "Silent Scope," a sniping based video game, as a training tool for its members and the show speculated that CStrike was a possible training ground for the snipers. The show referenced Counter-Strike's AWP sniper rifle (above), which allows a player to kill his opponent with a single shot.

Across the world at an entertainment center in Singapore a 16-year-old Ng Qiyoung was stabbed in the back after he killed another man's character. Qiyoung suffered a deep cut that required stitches. In a cyber café in Canada, a similar situation lead to a far more fatal outcome. After numerous winnings, Chistian Kwee started to gloat about his success, enraging members of the opposing force. Three m en started exchanging words with Kwee, but he failed to back down. The men left the café and minutes later returned with a firearm. They cornered Kwee, shot him and fled the scene. In many cyber cafes today, disputes in the Counter-Strike world sometimes spill into the real world. The result is often a few scrapes and bruises, but unfortunately it can also lead to deaths.

The Media's Standpoint

While these events are tragic it would be unfounded to place the blame entirely on the game. The media has a very narrow and skewed view of the game - the game encourages killing through its scoring system and therefore promotes violence and is the cause of these tragic events. It is simple logic really – isn't it? The answer is an emphatic no. To quote Dan Hammans, a 19-year-old who has won several major Quake tournaments, "Saying you like computer games for violence is like saying you like baseball for running," Hammon adds, "Violence is there to grab people, get them into it, and have them say, 'That looks cool.' But once you get into it, you don't even notice the violence. You don't go, 'Oh, cool, he blew up!'" Violence certainly existed long before Counter-Strike and the factors that contributed to these events are far more complex than the media would have people believe.

Furthermore, these accusations come from individuals who have never actually played a single round of Counter-Strike. How then can they make judgments about what Counter-Strike is and what it isn't? It's fairly obvious that do not have all of the necessary evidence to give an accurate analysis. In order to get a better understanding of Counter-Strike it is necessary to delve into the culture, past the "violent" exterior, and examine the underpinnings of the game.

The Process

While much research has been done concerning the video game culture at large, there has been limited attention given to understanding in-game culture and in particular Counter-Strike. To date there is only one other paper that addresses this subculture, a

paper by Professor Talmadge Wright and colleagues at Loyola University studied the creative portion of the Counter-Strike culture by taking part in games and interviewing players. This paper will take a similar approach by describing and analyzing the chat-log of the game and various other in-game cultural artifacts, such as id tags. Additionally, the paper will address clans, a very important aspect of the Counter-Strike culture.

The chat-log comprises over forty hours of CS play across forty different public servers. Sessions tended to last anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour and a half. In recording the chat-logs it was imperative to take into account the context in which these discussions occurred. Someone jokingly shouting, "You bastard!" could be easily taken out of context and give the wrong impression of the game.

After recording the chats they were analyzed and sorted into one of five categories: game strategy, banter/friendly, conflict/improper, technical, and external. Many of these categories overlapped with one another. For example one player joked about hiding all the hostages in an oil tank, making it impossible for the CTs to win, which would fall into both the game strategy and banter/friendly category. As a result, it was difficult to classify many of the chats into just one category and instead they were counted for each category in which they fell into.

Chat Categories

Game Strategy

The first category of chat is based on game strategy - discussion focused on tactics and preparation for upcoming rounds as well as during actual play. On team communication lines (each team has a chat line that members of the opposing force cannot view) members would generally discuss whether to storm certain routes or "camp" (playing defensively by sitting in an advantageous position waiting for an enemy). This talk primarily took place after members died and were waiting for the next round to begin. During game play most players don't have time to actually type full-length messages. Instead they rely on Counter-Strike provided pre-recorded radio commands such as "fall back," "go, go, go," and a host of other instructions that are useful for in-game tactical communication. Recently, headsets have been added allowing members to communicate vocally. The voice quality is sub par and as a result many people don't actually use this feature. However, there are those who use it to deliver quick tactical messages that radio commands don't provide.

Banter/Friendly

The second area includes online joking, irony, word play, and friendly conversations. Humor was generally present in most conversations. Players would make comments such as "Man, I couldn't even hit a parked car" in reference to an inability to shoot other players. One person remarked, "My head must be the size of a goodyear blimp!" after being shot numerous times in the head. Humor often serves as an outlet for players who are performing poorly and it can defuse many potentially hostile situations. In one session a player began gloating after killing half the opposing team. Members of the other team got angry and began swearing and cursing the player. Another player chimed in, "Can't we just kill in peace?" Everyone had a good laugh and order was returned to the game. Included in this category are friendly conversations. This category of chat was found to generally enhance the gaming experience for players.

Conflict/Improper

Conflicts generally arose because players would violate unspoken rules or practice inappropriate game etiquette. There are many rules that new members (affectionately called "newbies") are unaware of such as not camping when there are only a few players left on the map and not blocking teammates when they are trying to run away from gun fire. (If a player breaks a rule it is generally frowned upon. Newbies must learn these rules through play). However, the two largest sources of conflict are cheating and arrogance. Heated arguments often arose if it was believed that a player was cheating. When asked about cheating Stephen Lim, an avid Counter-Strike player, commented "Cheating ruins the game for everybody. It's unfair and it becomes almost impossible to kill those players. I usually get frustrated and leave the server for another one." Even members on a suspected cheater's team will ask him/her to leave. The second source of conflict is boasting. Some players after having a few successful runs will gloat about their success, usually agitating members of the opposing force. Some of the time it can be just a light-hearted quarrel, but occasionally words are exchanged and disputes will arise. Included in this category is improper chat, including vulgarity, racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Technical

Over 80% of technical talk was complaints about lag (some external network factor causing the game to "lag"). Players also discussed maps, characters, game technology, and weapons from a technical perspective. For example, one debate was based on whether or not a particular map gave either team an unfair advantage. In another instance, players discussed the video settings that would optimize game play.

External

This last category covers everything that either does not pertain to Counter-Strike or fall into one of the previous categories. This included such things as political, cultural, and academic discussions. The spectrum of conversations ran from talks about the way women

are treated in online games to a vote about which Spice Girl would win if there was an all-out brawl. Although, this is rather all-encompassing it was not a significant portion of the conversations and therefore a more elaborate breakdown was unnecessary.

Chat Summary

The breakdown by category is given in the graph on the right. It is interesting to note that the conflict/improper category was only a small percentage of all conversations, while the banter/friendly category was much more significant. Despite the conflicts that can

- Game Strategy
- Banter/Friendly
- Conflict/Improper
- Technical
- External
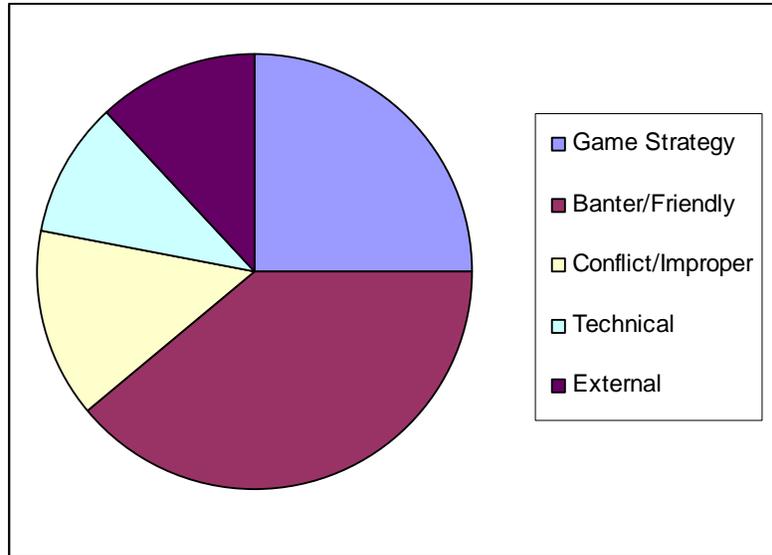
occasionally occur, a majority of the games played were peaceful and friendly.

Community

First-Name Basis

Every player has an online "name," referred to as an "id tag." The tag is generally representative of that person in some way. Additionally, players would prefix "[xxx]" where "xxx" denoted the particular clan the player was a member of. For instance here were some of the tags observed: "[OK]SktrBoy81," "[XtreMe]BooootieGrl," and "[GY]woogemooge." Interestingly enough people oftentimes referred to each other by their offline names. Conversations would be very casual; "Yo John, what are you doing later around 9?" It was clear that many of the people playing on these servers were friends outside of the game. In five of the rooms when asked, "Who is playing with at least one

friend they know outside of the game?" 45% replied positively, 35% were playing with people who they had met online previously and only 20% were playing with complete strangers. Although this is a very small sample to draw extensive conclusions from, it is fairly obvious that these findings challenge the common misconception that online gamers are antisocial geeks sitting hours on-end playing with random strangers. Rather it suggests that Counter-Strike is a past-time to be spent with friends, just like hanging out at a coffee shop or playing a game of basketball. However, instead of taking place in the real world people are hanging out together online.

LOL!

One of the most popular phrases in the study was "LOL" ("Laugh out loud") or "ROFL" ("Rolling on the Floor") both used to indicate that people were laughing or found the conversation to be humorous. In one game, players of both teams stacked themselves up one on top of another to make a human totem pole to which observers responded "LOL!" and "ROFL." Players will even use these phrases to laugh at themselves when they've been "owned" by another player. The prevalence of these phrases indicates that a large portion of the social interaction is based on humor and merriment. One of the draws of Counter-Strike is that it is a community

filled with members that can joke and laugh about different issues. Woojin Kim, a member of the Okada Killer clan (a Stanford dorm-based clan), stated, "What I love most about Counter-Strike is that every time I get on I have a good time. People love to joke around, which makes it really fun."

Teamwork

Teamwork is key

One obvious, but important finding was that teamwork was a central theme of the game; people were criticized if they weren't team players. Gooseman and Cliffe intended to provide a "team-oriented gameplay experience." As a result, the winners were generally the ones that worked best as a team. However, often times there were players that were only interested in serving themselves. They would do such things as steal kills or wait for their teammates to rush first in order to avoid being hit all in an effort to boost their kill-to-death ratio. This type of behavior was usually followed by criticism and disdain from fellow teammates. In an article describing teamplay, Gorktic of CSNation (the most popular CS news site) warned, "You're no good to your teammates if your sole goal is to get a 4 to 1 kill ratio or get a few more kills just to be that person on top of the scoreboard. If you're going to be one of those guys, then no on will want you!"

Public versus Private servers

As stated previously, all of the chat was based on observing public servers. While many people play on private servers it is impossible to gain access to these areas. It's also difficult to ascertain the magnitude of private server play as there does not exist a tracking/observation system. Regardless, it is commonly known that many clans practice and play on private servers. In addition, close friends will often do the same. Given the high likelihood that private servers host games played among friends and clan members (as opposed to strangers) it is safe to speculate that these are areas where the themes of teamwork, community, and humor are even more prevalent.

Bringing it together: clans

To date there are thousands of clans online. Jump on a public server and normally more than half the players have clan tags. As

The daggers

A Christian Counter-Strike Clan

noted, many clans stay away from public areas and instead play on private servers. Based on their numbers alone, clans are a vital part of the Counter-Strike culture.

More so than the percentage of players they represent, the importance of clans is defined by the fact that they encourage everything that is right about Counter-Strike – teamwork and community. A member of the clan JPS commented, "Clans add a dimension hard to find in public. True teamplay. Nothing can compare to the feeling of operating as a team, working together for a common goal." Clans will run scrimmages, host practice sessions and meetings, and develop strategies all in an effort to foster and encourage teamplay. Members will dedicate many hours a day to their clans. Ultimately teamwork leads to victory and a better gaming experience. Lim was quoted, "Pit a clan against a set of random players and even if individual members aren't as skilled, the clan will probably clean up. I've watched X3 [undisputedly the best CS clan] members play individually and I knew I could take em, but when I saw them as a team I was floored – it's incredible."

The second aspect of clans is community. Clans are generally composed of offline friends or a group of strangers who have met online they'll often develop friendships outside of the game. Clans like any other group give members a sense of belonging. When asked what players liked about clans they consistently replied, "the friendships." A couple of the replies to this question: "Clans also give u the feeling of belonging and some guys with like tastes to talk to. Its a very tight community;" and "My clan is a group of guys who all met mainly over the web. Alot of us turned out to be in Minneapolis/St. Paul. I have never called anyone I knew or met over the internet a true friend, but my clan has changed my perspective on this stance."

Conclusion

In observing Counter-Strike two general themes were consistently echoed – teamwork and community. The social relationships of this community are much like that of any other group in the non-virtual world. Friendships and bonds are forged upon commonalities and similar interests. The impact of friendship is no different in this virtual world than in the real one. Furthermore, teams and cooperation are a vital and cherished part of Counter-Strike. Sadly, the public and the media often miss these important aspects of the game and instead they see one side – the violence.

Counter-Strike and games like it, will undoubtedly live on and grow. People can continue to be wary, condemn and alienate this subculture, or they can stop, look, and discover what members of this community have already found – a game that enriches the lives of its member through its teamwork and sense of community. Beyond the frags, beyond the guns, beyond the violence – there is laughter, there is camaraderie, there is teamwork, there is Counter-Strike.

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