



Headshot!

An In-Depth Analysis of the Success of *Counter-Strike* as a Team-oriented First Person Shooter and its Effects on Video Game Culture Around the World

"A winning blend of strategy, tactics, patience, guile and an itchy trigger finger, Counter-Strike has not only captured, but has held to ransom, the hearts and minds of dedicated online fragsters everywhere."

■ Gamespot UK, gamespot.co.uk

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“Oh no!!! Another head shot!!! This guy must be hacking!! Kick him off!!”

“Rush the Bomb Site!!”

“Watch out for the sniper on the top of the tunnel!”

At 4 a.m. in the morning, the Internet café, *Aztec*, was still echoing with the woes and delights of the mesmerized players of *Counter-Strike*. As though cursed by the flashing graphics of the first-person shooter, many of these gamers had been locked in the same positions for more than 10 hours—their left hands tapping away on the keyboards and their right hands avidly moving the mice up and down. Of course, I was one of these game players who were unable to pull themselves away from the hypnotic grasp of the game. As I sat there in impatience after my “terrorist” character had been blasted into oblivion by a “counter-terrorist,” I looked around me, at the people who were so indulged in the game that they were completely oblivious to anything else that was going on around them, and I began to wonder—what magic do these network-based first-person shooter games have that can cause numerous game players, including myself, to become so incredibly fascinated by them? Have the enhancement of games like *Counter-strike* created a new culture for video game players? And how does this game-culture affect the communities in different parts of the world?

Aztec is one of the most popular Internet cafes in Hong Kong. In fact, these Internet cafes have become so popular that they extend beyond the basic definition of “internet cafes”—in that they are simply places where people check their email—and have become the ultimate hangout place in Hong Kong today. As noted by a frequenter of these cafes, John Chue, who is currently a student at Cambridge University in England, “I

would much rather spend my time at *Aztec* than anywhere else—first of all, because it is much cheaper for me to play an hour of *Counter-Strike* here than to watch a movie or to go sing karaoke or do anything else; second of all, they provide me with food here for free, and also, I get the pleasure of playing my favorite games.”¹

Picture of some of the computer booths at *Aztec* in Hong Kong²



This is perhaps the common mentality of the youth in Hong Kong today—in a survey performed by the Hong Kong Focus, a local television show, more than 50% of high school and college students would rather go to an internet café than to attend parties or clubs, as compared to a measly 20 % a couple years ago when the internet cafes were not at all popular³. So what has led to the sudden increase in the popularity of these Internet cafes? People would go to these cafes in the evening after school or work and there would always be a long wait to get in, even though there are hundreds of terminals in these cafes. In an Apple Daily newspaper (Hong Kong) article in July 2001, it was

¹ Interview with John Chue, 5th March, 2002

² Introduction, Aztec online, <http://www.oia.com.hk/aztec/>

³ Internet Cafes in Hong Kong, Hong Kong Focus, 20th December 2001.

noted that the wave of popularity for these cafes was brought about by the emergence of first-person shooters such as *Counter-Strike* and *Rogue Spear*⁴. Recently *Counter-Strike* has become the single most played game at all the Internet cafes in Hong Kong.⁵ Sure enough if you walk into *Aztec* or any of the cyber cafes, nine out of ten computers are running *Counter-Strike*. Has *Counter-Strike* really brought about such a big change in the popularity of network gaming, and if so, what has made it so popular?

ScreenShots From *Half-Life*⁶



The Creation of *Counter-Strike*

Counter-Strike is a modification (MOD) to the game, *Half-Life*. *Half-life* was originally created by *Valve*, an entertainment software company founded by Gabe Newell and Mike Harrington and based in Kirkland Washington. Released in November 1998 in the United States, *Half-life* was published by Sierra and was created mainly for a windows platform.⁷ The original *Half-life* is a story-based first-person shooter game, in which the player takes the role of a scientist, Gordon Freeman, who finds out that the lab that he works at has turned into an alien infested world, so he has to find out what went

⁴ Internet Café Frenzy, (Translated title), Ho Yu-ping, Apple Daily 17th July 2001. (www.appledaily.com)

⁵ Most Popular Games of Hong Kong 2001, South China Morning Post, 7th January 2002. (www.scmp.com)

⁶ Half-life Screen Shots, <http://www.halflifeworld.co.uk/halflife/screenshots.htm>

⁷ Introduction to Half-Life, HQH, www.planethalflife.com

wrong. The multiplayer version of *Half-life* involves a networked game with different players using the Gordon Freeman character at the same time and trying to kill each other with the weapons provided.⁸

Table 1.1: List of Some Half-life Mods⁹

Action Half-Life	Golden-Eye
Arcana Mysteria Magica	Half-Life Pro
Arg!	Heroes Half-Life
Boxwar	Hitlers Underbelly
Canned Tuna	Holy wars
Cold Ice	Hunters
Conflict in Nam	Infinite Justice
Counter-Life	Laser Mod -
Counter-Strike	Mission Impossible Half-Life
Day of Defeat	Mists of Evil
Deathmatch Plus	Perfect Dark II
Explode-Athon	Pirates, Vikings, and Kings
Final Wipeout	Real Deathmatch
FireArms	Shadows of the Force
Front-Line Force	Strike-Force
Gangsta Wars	Surf Side
Gladiator	Water Wars

Since the release of the original *Half-life*, there have been more than 60 modifications produced, including both company-made and user-created MODS (modifications). *Valve* promoted this through the release of development packages so that users can customize the games to their hearts' desire. Similar to what *ID Software* did with *Quake*, *Valve* believed that giving players the freedom to build extensions to the game would increase their popularity within the gaming market.¹⁰ And they were right. *Counter-Strike*, with its very first version released on June 19th, 1999, is one of the most popular among the multitude of mods listed in Table 1.1 and also among other computer games. *Counter-Strike* modifies the multiplayer aspects of Half-Life to bring to it a more

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ MOD directory, <http://www.half-lifemods.com/>

¹⁰ Half-life Mods, Jon "Jeh" MacLellan, www.gamespy.com/articles/november00/hlmods/

team-oriented game play. In this game, two teams are pitted against each other: the terrorists and counter-terrorists. The terrorists are the bad guys and the counter-terrorists are the good guys, much like the SWAT team for lack of a better comparison. The counter-terrorists look to complete whatever objective the map holds within the given time frame or to completely exterminate the terrorist threat. The terrorists, in contrast, seek to completely destroy the counter-terrorist task force or hold them off long enough to prevent any sort of hostage rescue. Different maps present different challenges and strategies for each team. Map objectives include hostage rescue, bomb defusion, assassination and escape. In *Counter-Strike*, teamwork is greatly encouraged in order to complete the map's objectives. Players can buy weapons, ammo, and equipment (flash bombs, grenades, armor, etc.) that are realistically modeled after their real-world counterparts. After every round team members are allocated money based on individual and team performance for that round.¹¹

Counter-Strike was developed primarily by the two programmers Minh “Gooseman” Le and Jess “Cliffe,” in unison with Mindvision and *Valve* Software, the company that originally created *Half-life*. The *Counter-Strike* Team was first formed in March of 1999 by the two programmers, and later more graphic designers, map creators and programmers joined the team. Before the creation of *Counter-Strike*, Minh Le, the project leader for creating the mod, had already been involved in creating mods for *Quake*, another one of the most popular first-person shooters. Jess Cliffe, who helped create the game’s graphics, sound effects and design, developed mods with the Jedi Knight Multiplayer Add-On Group and the Terror QUAKE2 and Action QUAKE2 Depot

¹¹ Overview of Counter-Strike, <http://www.planethalflife.com/cs/guide/overview.shtml>

teams before he became involved with *Counter-Strike*.¹² Minh Le originally created *Counter-Strike* out of personal interest during his final semester in college, and eventually sold the rights to Valve when the game exploded with popularity.¹³ Neither of the creators of *Counter-Strike* predicted that the game would become so popular, as noted by Minh Le in his interview with **GamaSutra**, “Actually, at the time I didn't think that I could make a living doing that [creating mods like *Counter-Strike*] because it just seemed like a hobby.”¹⁴ He claimed, “When I first realized that *CS* was just huge, bigger than what I expected it to be—it felt just great... I'm not doing this because of the fame, I'm not doing this because I want to be the number one game on the internet, I'm doing this because at the end of the day I want to sit down, and put in my game, and say, "Yeah. This is awesome. I made this game and I like playing this game."” So why has *Counter-Strike* become so popular in the gaming world?

The popularity of first-person Shooters

Counter-Strike has emerged from a long line of first-person shooter predecessors, including titles such as *Wolfenstein*, *DOOM*, *Quake*, *Duke Nuke* and *Marathon*.¹⁵ First-person shooters have become one of the most popular genres today due to the fast paced, “realistic” game play, and also because of the opportunity for gamers to play against other people through the networking capabilities of these games. As noted by Dennis “Thresh” Fong, co-founder and Chief Gamer of **gamers.com**, “I personally dislike RPGs

¹² Interview with Counter-Strike's Jess Cliffe, David Laprad,
<http://www.avault.com/events/wce/index.asp?p=cliffe>

¹³ Interview with Minh Le, John McLean-Foreman,
http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20010530/foreman_01.htm

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Game Guru: Deja vu all over again, Nate Birkholz,
<http://maccentral.macworld.com/news/0006/02.gameguru.shtml>

[role-playing games] because they confine you to a story-line already made out for you, whereas in first-person shooters, it's more open-ended and you control what happens to your "character.""¹⁶ Minh "Gooseman" Le exhibited similar sentiments towards first-person shooters in his interview with **GamaSutra**, "For me, I find when I play a first person shooter versus any other game, I feel the most immersed into the environment. When I play an RPG, I don't feel like I'm part of the game, it just feels like I'm controlling people. When I play *Counter-Strike*, I feel like I'm actually playing with other people. It's a different sensation, and I think it's better that way."¹⁷ It seems that games in the first-person shooting genre has gained its popularity through providing players with a more exciting gaming environment through real-time movement and a first-person perspective. Multi-player versions of *Half-life* and *Quake*, give the opportunity for players to outmuscle each other over the network with their hard-earned skills.

Advancement of team-oriented first-person shooters

"At the heart of it, you put your mouse on someone, you shoot and he's dead, right?"¹⁸ Minh Le said. Development of games such as *Counter-Strike*, *Team-Fortress* and *Rainbow Six: Rogue Spear*, took this one step further and created first-person shooters that are based on a team-oriented game play. Players no longer run around on their own to find and annihilate enemies—they work together as a team in order to eliminate and defeat the opposition and to win the battle. Undoubtedly, personal skills are still very important in these types of first-person shooters, but teamwork cannot be neglected because no matter how good a player is, he/she cannot battle against ten

¹⁶ Dennis Fong, February 17th Lecture, STS 145

¹⁷ Op. Cit., Interview with Minh Le.

¹⁸ Ibid.

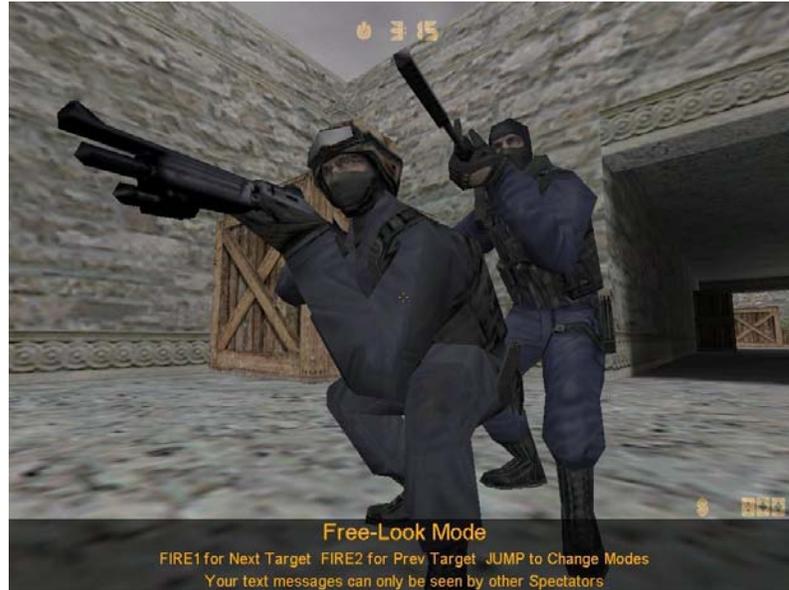
enemies at the same time. Players need to constantly communicate with each other and to develop strategies among themselves as a team—where to go, how to trap other players, when to charge, etc., in order to gain ultimate success in these games. As mentioned in an article at gameplay.com, “There is a reason why these games are the most popular online shooters; it combines the best of team based gaming with an authentic and therefore exciting approach to tactical ops.”¹⁹ Minh Le, the creator himself, gave a personal testimonial on these team-oriented games, “I feel like I'm part of a team, playing with other people. It's like a sport: you're fighting for the same goal, you're with teammates, and there's the whole camaraderie part of it. I don't know, it just drives me to play it more. That's the biggest thing for me, the whole team play aspect.”

Indeed, these team-oriented first-person shooters have proven to be successful, as demonstrated by the increasing numbers of players involved in these games. The “team” aspect makes the games friendly to both beginners and experienced players. It cannot be better put in words than Anthony Shek did, a student currently studying at King’s College in London, “When I first began playing this game, I had no clue what I was doing, but it was still fun because I was in the same team with other players who knew where to go and what to do, so I just followed them. Now, since I am better at the game, I can lead my team members and develop strategies to destroy the enemies.”²⁰ These team-oriented first-person shooters have the right to evolve into a genre of their own, because they cover areas of game play such as team cooperation and strategic planning that are non-existent in regular first-person shooters such as *Quake* and *Doom*. They have exceeded their predecessors in popularity.

¹⁹ Accolades, Jess Cliffe, www.counter-strike.net

²⁰ Interview with Anthony Shek, 1st March, 2002

Screenshot of Counter-Strike²¹



Counter-Strike hits the roof!

Among all these team-oriented first-person shooters, *Counter-Strike* is by far the most popular one. Since its first beta 1 release on June 18th, 1999 Counter-Strike has been the most popular user made mod for half-life, sporting more players than the even the most popular 10 commercial games combined.²² According to a review by Bill Hiles at *Computer Games Online* in 2000, no other multiplayer first-person shooter can match its popularity, not *Quake III Arena*, not *Unreal Tournament*, not even *Deer Hunter 4*. On any given day (or night) you can find over 10,000 people on over 2,000 dedicated servers trying to kill one another over the Internet.²³ These numbers have become exponentially larger over the past two years. *Counter-Strike* has received numerous awards, including the Rookie Studio Award and the Game Spotlight Award from the Game Developers

²¹ Screenshots, Jess Cliffe, www.counter-strike.net

²² About, Rizzuh, csnation.counter-strike.net/view.php/csinfo/about.csn

²³ Half Life: Counter-Strike, Tactical team combat for the masses, Bill Hiles, *Computer Games Online*, <http://www.cdmag.com/Home/home.html?article=/articles/031/069/halflife-co-r.html>

Choice Awards (GDC), named Multiplayer Game of the Year by Gamespot, Game of the Year by Gamers.com, Online Game of the Year by Gamespot UK, and many more.²⁴

Counter-Strike has truly capture the hearts of many game players around the world—“As we look back over the last 12 months, no multiplayer game engrossed us more²⁵”

(**GameSpy**), “Half-Life: Counter-Strike began its life as a total conversion available free on the web (and still is) that quickly became the most popular mod ever for any game, featuring tens of thousands of gamers at peak times.²⁶” (**GamePen**)

List of some of the Awards won by *Counter-Strike*²⁷

Rookie Studio Award -- Game Developers Choice Awards, GDC
Game Spotlight Award -- Game Developers Choice Awards, GDC
Multiplayer Game of the Year -- Gamespot
Game of the Year -- Gamers.com
Best Action Game of the Year -- Actiontrip.com
Online Game of the Year -- Gamespot UK, gamespot.co.uk
Expansion of the Year -- Gamespot UK, gamespot.co.uk
Special Award for Multiplayer Gaming -- Gamespy.com
Revolutionary PC Game of 2000 -- Gamerevolution.com
Best PC Game – Online -- Gamerevolution.com
BEST PC Action/Tactical Game Of 2000 -- Gamepen, gamepen.ugo.com

²⁴ Awards, Jess Cliffe, www.counter-strike.net/about.html

²⁵ Counter-Strike—Special Award for Multiplayer Gaming, Gamespy.com.

²⁶ Counter-Strike—Best PC Action/Tactical Game of 2000, Gamepen, gamepen.ugo.com

²⁷ Op. cit., Awards

What then, allows *Counter-Strike* to surpass even its other competitors of the same “sub-genre” of team-oriented first-person shooters, such as *Team Fortress* and *Rainbow Six* games? In fact, *Counter-Strike* and *Rainbow Six* titles such as *Rogue Spear* are based on the same idea—a counter-terrorist team battling it out with a terrorist team. However, *Counter-Strike* excels among its fellow team first-person shooters through its graphics capabilities and advanced technology, and most important of all, the ability to create large online communities.

Sample Screenshots of *Counter-Strike*²⁸



Advanced Technology and Graphics Capabilities

Counter-Strike is based on the *Half-life Engine*, which in turn is based on the Quake(tm) engine by ID Software, with Valve's own enhancements to the engine, such as 16-bit and 24-bit color and MMX support, as well as being developed to take full advantage of 3dfx's Voodoo2.²⁹ Although the game can be played without a 3D graphics card, the rendering is greatly enhanced by Open-GL, Direct 3D or MMX hardware. It

²⁸ Op. Cit., ScreenShots

²⁹ Half-life: The Planet Half-Life Guide, Planet Half Life, <http://www.planethalflife.com/half-life/guide/overview.shtm>

also uses a Skeletal Animation System, in which the skeletal system moves the "bones" within a monster and deforms a mesh and texture map around them, in comparison to traditional animation, in which a discrete set of polygonal meshes is stored for each key frame of animation, enabling much smoother animation. The texture of graphics is further enhanced by the Decal System, which consists of Dynamically Changing Surfaces that can change over time as the players interact with them.³⁰ Moreover, the Real-Time DSP calculates the direction of a sound and the size and material a room is made of to alter that sound accordingly to fit the area.³¹ All these technologies give *Counter-Strike* a technological edge over its competitors.

Images of some of the characters in *Counter-Strike*



The intricate designs of *Counter-Strike* also provide gamers with great aesthetic pleasure. The characters are created according to the likeness of the most prominent anti-terrorist units including the U.S. Navy Seals, as well as terrorist factions such as Guerillas, or Arabic terrorists. The weapons that are modeled in this game are also among the best, as noted by Jason Mang, a current student at Johns Hopkins University and a fan

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

of guns and the military theme, “The guns in this game, regardless of pistols, shotguns or rifles, are modeled incredibly well—they look very similar to the real-life versions of the weapons. Not only that, the firing capabilities of the guns also match closely with the mechanisms of the real ones. Impressive!”³²

Images of some of the weapons in *Counter-Strike*



Online Communities

Nevertheless, the factors that truly distinguish *Counter-Strike* from the other first-person shooters extend beyond its technological and graphical advances. Much like the vision of Will Wright, the creator of *The Sims*, that his product will help build online communities that involve more than simply playing the game, but also allow players to become creators themselves,³³ *Counter-Strike* has created online communities of its own. Hundreds and thousands of game players have become actively involved in the creation of new maps, skins for characters, weapons and game scenarios. Websites and forums hosted by fans of *Counter-Strike* give them opportunities to discuss strategies with each other, as well as share their newly created maps and skins. CS-Nation, one of the most

³² Interview, Jason Courtland Mang. 16th February 2002.

³³ Lecture by Will Wright, creator of *The Sims*, STS 145, February 14th 2002.

popular *Counter-Strike* community websites in which players visit for the latest news, releases and maps available, recorded a growth of daily visits from an average of 18,000–25,000 in October, 2000 to an average of 50,000 hits per day in January, 2002.³⁴ As the statistics have shown, *Counter-Strike* communities such as CS-Nation are growing at a very fast rate, much like what Wright talked about—a game in which people are becoming more and more involved with the community aspect over the game aspect.³⁵

In fact, *Counter-Strike* has created a culture of its own—the culture of clans. Due to the team-based platform of the game, players with the same skills began to group together to form their own clans. Existing clans go out and recruit good players to their own clans, and those who are not accepted in any clans create their own. These players may not have ever seen each other face-to-face before, but they join together to share the common goal of becoming part of the most dominating clan to exist among the *Counter-Strike* communities.³⁶ Some of these clan members even go out of their way to try to meet with each other, thus building more and more networks of friendship. All these online communities have helped the spread of the popularity of *Counter-Strike*.

In the end...

It is therefore easy to perceive how *Counter-Strike* has brought about the hype of online gaming at Internet Cafés in Hong Kong, not only because of the great game play, but also due to the culture that the game has created for the players. Players can become involved in the games through the actual playing of the game individually, or become

³⁴ Op. Cit., CS-Nation

³⁵ Op Cit. Lecture by Will Wright.

³⁶ Op Cit., CS-Nation

part of a clan and constantly discuss strategies with fellow members, or create maps and skins for other people belonging to the *Counter-Strike* community. Jess Cliffe, one of the original creators of *Counter-Strike*, commented on the ups and downs of the *Counter-Strike* community that he and Minh Le have inadvertently created, “The only real pains are abusive fans that want CS to be a certain way and are quite vocal with their demands for the next version. Yet it's a good thing CS players are so vehement about the game -- it means they're truly into it. That kind of enthusiasm and dedication is something for which a lot of developers wish.”³⁷ Will Wright would surely agree with Cliffe—in that developers would only be too glad to have the culture and communities that the games have created to shape and modify the new versions of the game itself, because it shows that the games have in fact led to the players getting very involved with more than just the playing of the game.

Not only has the culture of *Counter-Strike* penetrated American game communities and Asian communities such as Hong Kong and Korea, but has also become very prominent in European countries such as England, Germany and Sweden.³⁸ As a result, clans and communities all over the world often come together to challenge each other or to discuss their various strategies. Competitions, such as *Counter-Strike* tournaments at *Cyberathlete Professional League* (CPL), give players the opportunity to interact with each other and to demonstrate their skills. *Counter-Strike*, through the limitless span of the internet, has built communities that reach towards all corners of the world, and has evolved into one of the most popular first-person shooters and online games to be ever played.

³⁷ Op. Cit., Interview with Counter-Strike’s Jess Cliffe

³⁸ Op. Cit, [About](#), CS-Nation

Counter-strike is still under continual modifications, and a new single-player version of *Counter-Strike*, *Counter-Strike: Condition Zero*, is under development. Minh “Gooseman” Le, has confirmed that the production of *Counter-Strike 2* is underway.³⁹ *Counter-Strike* has perhaps laid the foundation and set a new standard for future creations of team-oriented first-person shooters. Nevertheless, as long as the online communities, which games like *Counter-Strike* have created, exist and continue expanding, eventually someone will come up with another MOD that will shake the gaming world as *Counter-Strike* did.

³⁹ Ibid.

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