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# Creative Player Actions in FPS Online Video Games

## Playing Counter-Strike

by Talmadge Wright, Eric Boria and Paul Breidenbach

### Introduction

The global sale of computer and console games now exceeds \$10 billion dollars annually, inducing further integration of the entertainment, computer and military industries (Poole 2000). Cassell and Jenkins (1999), Bryce and Rutter (2000, 2001) and Manninen (2001) in the academic world and Herz and Pietsch (1997) and Poole (2000) in the trade-book market have begun to address the implications of this integration by examining the changes in social relationships resulting from the expansion of new 3D gaming technology employed in one genre of games, the multiplayer, first-person "shooter" (FPS) games. Yates and Littleton (1999) have argued for the need to examine the cultural context of player interactions. Our project is an attempt to understand the social character of online FPS games, best represented by the PC mod for the game *Half-Life*, *Counter-Strike*. However, this paper will only focus on a particular

student currently working on urban spaces and globalization.

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subcategory of creative player actions practiced by those that engage in this game.

We argue that the playing of FPS multiplayer games by participants can both reproduce and challenge everyday rules of social interaction while also generating interesting and creative innovations in verbal dialogue and non-verbal expressions. When you play a multiplayer FPS video game, like *Counter-Strike*, you enter a complex social world, a subculture, bringing together all of the problems and possibilities of power relationships dominant in the non-virtual world. Understanding these innovations requires examining player in-game behavior, specifically the types of *textual* (in-game chats) and *nonverbal* (logo design, avatar design and movement, map making, etc.) actions. To study these patterns of in-game talk and behavior among *Counter-Strike* players and the social significance of that talk, we examined and coded the log text files generated from playing 70 hours on 50 different servers, with durations ranging from 30 minutes to 2 1/2 hours. We also noted in-game logos and non-verbal interactions as we played with other online players. We have also collected interviews and gathered participant-observation data. These are incorporated into some of the observations in this article. Within the game console function, log files are easily generated and are most often used by players to check their kill/death ratios and to examine game action. We were interested in the files simply as a text for revealing spontaneous player talk in the game. Anyone can easily access this public talk simply by going into the "console" command of the game.

*Counter-Strike*, designed by Minh Le (alias Gooseman) as a modification of the video game, *Half-Life*, was initially released as free software. Building upon *Counter-Strike's* success, Sierra Studios and Valve Software released a retail version of the game

in 2000. As a semi-realistic game, *Counter-Strike* (Figure 1.1) allows one to play on a team as either a terrorist or counter-terrorist. Players are able to buy an assortment of weapons, rescue hostages, plant or defuse bombs, switch identities between games or in the middle of games, and to constantly vary tactics and strategies of cooperation and competition. Communication is usually through an in-game chat system or prescribed commands sent to other team members or one's opponents.



**Figure 1.1 Counter-Terrorists (CTs) Move-Out**

During the course of our study we noted that at anyone time there were between 3,000 and 8,000 Internet servers running *Counter-Strike*, world-wide, with approximately 23-25,000 players online at the same time.

Creative Player Actions: The Social Complexity of Game Talk

The complexity of textual chats and non-verbal expressions (ex. Logos, avatars and modified map designs) reveal the manner in

which a game, like *Counter-Strike*, allows players to go far beyond the standard rules of the original modification. Play is not just "playing the game," but "playing with the rules of the game" and is best shown in the diversity of talk, the creative uses of such talk and player behavior within the game, plus the modifications of game technical features. Of course, the playing of the game also produces changes in one's own subjectivity making it a pleasurable experience if one is accomplished (Myers 1992). In essence, the game is a platform for showing off human performances in a mock combat setting. But, all is not combat or simply shooting a virtual enemy. And, as in any human performance, creativity of execution is the norm. From our text files we identified 39 possible coded talk categories which fit into the following five general categories: 1) creative game talk, 2) game conflict talk, 3) insult/distancing talk, 4), performance talk and 5) game technical/external talk. These were the categories that appeared to exhibit the greatest frequency of use among players. They give a direct insight into the types of social interactions and the "policing" of such interactions in these types of action games. The list is presented below:

## **Typologies of Game Talk**

### Creative Game Talk

Names, naming and identity talk

Joking, irony and word play

Map creations, map judging, and logo comments and designs

Changing game rules and technical limits (reflexive awareness of game features, i.e. low gravity)

Popular culture references to in-game talk (for example, *South*

*Park, The Simpsons, Pulp Fiction, etc.)*

### Game Conflict Talk

Camping talk (camping usually refers to staying in one spot "too long" during the game)

Cheating accusations/disputes (with responses).

AWP Talk (or AWP disclaimer) "the AWP is a one-shot kill sniper rifle"

Kicking or banning, or fear there of, talk (admin/members)

Administrators "police"/rules talk

### Insult/Distancing Talk

Taunting talk/trash talk/ritual insults

Annoyance talk

Explicit gendered, racialized or homophobic talk (the status of game player, not just exclamations and responses)

Pissed off talk/exclamations/surprise

### Performance Talk

Re-locaters (blaming something else for a "failed" performance)

Could a, would a, should a talk

Competence boosts (statistics talk, personal boasts and responses)

Vulnerability/confusion/apologies for failure talk

Admonishment talk

Final scene talk ("showdowns" near end of game or between the last players in a game)

Game strategy/tactical talk (What to do? Where to go? Where are you in map?)

Team talk (which team to be on/ switching teams with responses; complaints about, fairness/loyalty issues)

Friendly fire talk (apologies for team kills)

Revenge/justice/sacrifice related to game action

Support talk - concern, praise and compliments.

Teaching talk

Game action talk (joking and humor about action)

Waiting for the game to be over talk (for example, Zzzzzzzzzzz)

Dead Talk (with responses)

Kill Talk (with responses, for example, "owning" another's avatar)

Greeting and exiting the game talk (with responses)

### Game Technical/External Talk

Ping rate/lag talk

Talk about technical matters and other game/computer related matters

Talk about other games

Talk related to scheduling, distractions or not gaming

Clan talk/ statistics (clan) talk (for example request to join, invitation to join or making fun of)

Technical talk about *Counter-Strike* game program (game console or game problem talk)

Map related talk (approve/disapprove, knowledge of)

Requests for information (with responses)

While the most frequent type of discourse was talk related to

*game performance* or *conflict*, such as accusations of game cheating, we wanted to focus on *creative game talk* since it reveals the complex manner in which game technology is used to mediate popular culture and social interactions. Within the category of creative game talk we identified the following general categories of talk (verbal and non-verbal): 1) names, naming and identity talk, 2) joking, irony and word play, 3) map creation, judging and logo design, 4) changing game rules and technical limits 5) popular culture uses and references.

While a more elaborate taxonomy of types of talk has been suggested we feel that the data does not warrant such elaborate hierarchies: hierarchy might give the false impression that talk was more organized than it actually was. Our simple categorization is purely for illustrative purposes. In fact, most of the types of talk often overlapped in the same game making them difficult to distinguish. However, the functions of particular types of talk can be useful for showing the ways in which players innovate and create new functions and meanings within the game. For example, creative game talk, related to "technical limits," can be used both in a *strategic* sense, assisting one team in locating their opponents when the established technical rules of the game do not allow such talk, or in an *expressive* sense, where players can use the technical features of the game, such as binding keys to specific statements to annoy other players or to reproduce popular culture references that other online players might share. The following examples illustrate the types of creative game actions we witnessed.

### **Conventional Language and Creative Online Naming**

Conventional game-specific language used by players of online games (for example, "afk" for away from keyboard) work to create

elements of egalitarian camaraderie and indeed comradeship. But, the use of "insider" language should be considered separate from what we are calling creative game talk. Of course, mastering this "insider" language is necessary if one wishes to graduate from a novice ("newbie") to an experienced player. Mastery of this language, along with strategic playing skill, is a passport to recognition as an adept insider. While the use of this insider language marks a player as adept, it still remains conventional, easily adapted to a hierarchy of skills in game performance. The creative use of names, jokes, language and other expressions, on the other hand, can work to generate a different sensibility among players, often one infused with humor.

All *Counter-Strike* players shed the use of their given names, taking an "online" name. The generic name, "Player," is given to every player when they begin. However, not changing or personalizing one's online name is frowned upon by experienced game players, because it marks one as either inexperienced or as unwilling to be identified and therefore suspect. Names are important symbolic markers, not just for what they communicate about a player's intent, but for what they also communicate about a player's perceived status, interests, age, gender or sexuality. In interviews with experienced game players it was made clear to us that players with names referring to sexual acts or body parts were considered as "immature" or pre-teens. Whether they were or not, is not the point. The fact is names communicate symbolically to all players how one prefers to be perceived by another. The symbolic quality of a name leads to its usage in word play. Creative word play was quite common with players making references to the novelty of different names used on their avatars. In one instance a player changed his/her name to "isucl" and received the response, "like on breasts." Another interchange went

on for a few minutes regarding names of players used in particular *Counter-Strike* clans. We recorded an entire discussion of different animal names used in one clan, in particular, wombats, chickens, ducks and cows, and what kind of farm keeps wombats.

Throughout the discussion various players would enter the conversation writing out the supposed sounds of their animals, "mooo!," "quack!" and "snarl/eeek!"

Player names, also, typically flaunt ordinary social conventions. Online names of this type include "Smoke Weed & Kill People," "Red Herring," and "Mark Killer." The use of science fiction and fantasy is typical in fashioning names such as "Zentopia," and "Fallion." The possibilities for naming are endless. Other names exaggerate individuality in the circumlocution of the expectations of conventional sociality (The Lone One), sexual potency (Goat Penis) and cunning (Trick Daddy). Popular media provides many sources for names and styles of discourse. In the group we have been playing with, the television show, *The Simpsons*, provided names for all the players. Most *Counter-Strike* online names challenge middle class conventions through hand picked labels of potent counter-identity. And, some online names are adopted as variations of in-the-news items. After the tragedy of 9/11, we witnessed two players in separate games, who had adopted the online names of "Osama yo mama" and "Osama bin laggin." Both refer to the hunt for Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan, but connected it to a popular American expression, "yo mama," and the inability to perform well – "been lagging" (referring to a "bad" server or server connection).

### **Joking, Irony and Word Play**

Creative game talk is also best viewed in the use of humor, word play and online joking while playing. Joking and humor about

game action is common and present in all of the talk categories examined. Word play and puns were used extensively in many of the game sessions we examined, along with naming talk and popular culture references. Performing in the game is, therefore, not merely about kills and deaths, but also about the ability to joke, release tension and to express a sense of humor.

Expressions such as, laughing out loud (LOL), and variations like, rolling on the floor laughing (ROFL), were some of the most common expressions resulting from game action. Humor served also to diffuse tensions that developed due to misunderstandings and mistakes. More than once we witnessed players typing "lol" after enduring a series of insults or taunts. Irony and creative word use also abounds in virtual combat. In the following exchange, the player Toast complains of doing poorly, of receiving a low score, ("I am doing pretty crappy"), meaning that he has a high death to kill ratio. Miller's response to Toast was, "you'll be ok once ya get a couple rounds in ya." This comment was used as a basis for joking and word play by Toast who said, "I have had a couple rounds in me, mostly from a certain person's AK 47." Since, each map cycle in the game lasts for 20 minutes, and each round, within that cycle, lasts for 5 minutes, two meanings of round can be used to make a joke. Rounds in a map cycle are played off against rounds fired from a weapon.

Joking can also involve performing actions that take advantage of the special qualities of specific game maps. These actions may have little to do with the supposed rules of the game "of counter-terrorists pursuing terrorists" and relate more to "playing" with the specifics of the map design. For example, on one game map of an incomplete high-rise building (named Vertigo), players would take turns jumping off the edge of building committing virtual suicide, just so that they could hear the scream

and resultant thud of their virtual character. One player, Miller, for example, jumped off the building in this map, prompting a comment from another player, Scanner, "That's a great noise," and then Miller's response, "i love that fargin scream." The novelty of the action and its association with cartoon violence forms the basis of this humor. In addition, the thought of professional counter-terrorists or terrorists jumping off tall buildings to a virtual death contradicts the mission of catching the "bad" guys or killing the "good guys." This type of creative innovation of game action is one, which while possible in the game, is not intended by the producers. This type of virtual suicide can also work against the combat nature of the game by giving a player another way to die other than being "killed" by an opponent. For example, the player Mot jumped off the building killing himself as a way of exiting the game, attracting a joking response from, Gone and Toast. Gone says, "ha ha yaaa," followed by Mot's, "weee." This, in turn, prompted a joking reply from Toast, "Mot, even though you failed, suicide isn't the answer." As Mot exits the game he says, "okay cya later everyone." And is answered by Toast, "later Tom."

Mot's exit through virtual suicide was a novel way to leave the game, after a string of low performances in the game (high death to kill ratio). Toast's comments were an ironic commentary on the nature of suicide as a consequence of failed performance, recognition of a player leaving the game and a playing with the game map. Other types of joking behavior, of "playing with the map," occurred on other game maps.

### Map Creation, Judging and Logo Design

Extensive player discussions occur around the quality and character of new game maps. Some maps borrow from popular

culture imagery; others borrow from more generic settings (villages, desert compounds, high rises, 747 airliners, waterfront docks, factories, and offices). The virtue of a map is judged by its ability to generate "good" game play, where game play means that neither side has an unfair advantage and where tactics and strategy have to be employed in order to win. Using the *Half-Life* game engine, game hobbyists have generated hundreds of new game maps for *Counter-Strike*, as well as numerous modifications of the original game using themes of war (Day of Defeat), horror (They Hunger), science fiction and fantasy. While we have placed most map talk in the category of game technical talk, we believe that time spent in developing novel maps, using a game engine editor, assembling the development team, and using popular cultural themes qualifies map design and the judging of map design as an engagement in creative action, not unlike creating works of art. We are aware that some may view game map creation as simply commercial illustration. However, the aesthetics involved and the organization of the virtual space around play speak more to art and ritual than to simply commercial interest, although, of course, that may be present as well. Borrowing from the everyday popular culture artifacts of retailing, one custom map emulated the interior of a Wal-Mart retail store (Figure 1.2) as we see below:



**Figure 1.2 Combat in a Virtual Wal-Mart Store**

Aside from custom maps, custom logos can be an arena for creative and often controversial action. While *Counter-Strike* allows you to generate logos that you can spray on virtual walls, what has been interesting to us is the variety of custom-made logos. Logos may carry political slogans, popular culture references, porn images, erotic images, fantasy images and a host of other possible themes. Players can convey instant personal expressions to other players around the world by creating their own logos using a software program such as Adobe PhotoShop, and porting it into the game. Game forums frequently bring up the problem of players using "porn" or erotic pictures as logos and many servers now prohibit the use of such porn or erotic logos. Other logos, however, may speak to a variety of topics from popular culture icons and popular film images to political slogans or icons. In the following picture one player has used a photograph of the destroyed World Trade Center in New York City (Figure 1.3) as his in-game spray logo, while playing as a counter-terrorist – an interesting blurring of the real and virtual realm.



**Figure 1.3 In-Game Spray Logo of 9/11 WTC Destruction**

Spraying logos may attract either a humorous, critical or awe-inspired response depending upon the quality, complexity and topic of the logo. The very act of spraying logos in the game may be viewed as an opportunity to generate humor as this exchange illustrates. When Lone asks, "hey how do u spray your own spray paint??" he receives a response from Blanks who says, "u make it." To which Lone responds, "no shit." Money chimes in with a questioning response, "how"; to which CTang gives a humorous response of, "first you go buy a can of spray paint." Lone either playing along or not getting the joke says then, "but how do u link it to CS (*Counter-Strike*)," precipitating laughter from Blanks, "ahahahah\." Lone follows with his own laughter, "lol," and CTang responds further, "if you keep the receipt...you can prove it is yours" (jokingly referring to spraying logos in the game).

There is a distinct hierarchy between new players and experienced players that is often reflected in the assistance veteran players provide, either by showing how the game is played or by helping with the game's technical features. Most often such help is freely granted. Players are assisted to a point, after which they are

referred to an online FAQ (frequently asked questions) file. In the forming and recruiting of game clans such distinctions became very evident as players attempted to sell their skills to experienced clan members. Clearly, the hierarchy implied by "teaching" in the game is not confined to *Counter-Strike* players. Such teaching hierarchies occur in any sport or creative activity. The way in which such teaching is accomplished deserves further study.

### Changing game rules and technical limits

Playing with a game's technical features also marks the development of creative responses to the rules created by the developer. There are many examples of players and server administrators altering the features of the game to change the way the game is played (for example, altering gravity). Playing is not simply mindless movement through a virtual landscape, but rather movement with a reflexive awareness of the game's features and their possible modifications.

In *Counter-Strike*, "live" players can chat with each other through a general chat function that is available to all players, and a team chat function that is only available to your own team. However, when a player dies, he or she can only chat with other "dead" players of either team and not with those still in the game. The other feature is the ability to jump from one player's perspective to another, including that of the opposing team when one is "dead." This allows the "dead" player to follow the game play. Even if one can see an ambush of their own team member in the making they cannot chat with any "live" members to warn them. However, a technical feature, that of calling for votes on which maps to play, can be read by all players regardless of whether or not they are dead or alive. This feature was used creatively in the

following example to get around the limitations placed on normal chats.

Playing on one of *Counter-Strike's* favorite maps, "Dust," Digger, as terrorist, complained about the opposing team using their long-range sniper rifles (AWPs) to kill his/her team members. And both teams complained of both sides "camping out" and waiting for their opponents to show themselves. Digger complains to ALPHA, a teammate, that there is a "sniper in tunnels" after being killed. ALPHA who is also "dead" responded with a warning for next time, "don't go tunnel if there gonna do that." Their teammate, Legend, responds with, "try the other way around." Two games later on the same map the same pattern of sniping returns. VonTune, playing terrorist, warns his other team members not to "rush the bridge" and ALPHA chimes in with, "or the tunnel they are sittin and waiting." At this point the counter-terrorists (CTs) have an edge with sniping, but begin losing. Then, ALPHA kills three CTs in a row, while Chaotic kills two other CTs leaving Tom, the remaining CT, to take on three terrorists. At this point, a fellow CT member who is "dead," DeadEar, uses the vote command to place the following vote, "vote Tom Tunnel." The server issues an automatic response, "Sorry, DeadEar, Tom Tunnel was not found on this server." Even though DeadEar cannot talk directly to Tom because he is dead, he can communicate using the vote command to inform Tom where the remaining terrorists are located. DeadEar, again, issues a vote command, "vote UNDER TUNNEL TOM." The server responds automatically, "Sorry, DeadEar, UNDER TUNNEL TOM was not found on this server." Tom then thanks DeadEar with, "rgr, thanks." The dead have found a way of communicating with the living. This creative subversion of game rules occurs consistently in the many debates over "cheating" within the game. While using cheat codes, scripts or

hacks occurs on many servers, what constitutes cheating is more of a problem since players seem to differ as to what constitutes a cheat and what does not. What is consistent is the bending of conventional game rules, as we have seen in this example, which can easily be viewed as a creative innovation within the game.

### **Popular Culture Uses and References**

The last example of creative player action is the conscious incorporation of popular culture references and names into the game. Many of the examples used from Homer Simpson's "doh!" on the television show, *The Simpsons*, to the movie, *The Princess Bride*, where one player employed the statement, "My name is Chiquita Banana. You killed my father, prepare to die" reflect an ironic use of pop cultural forms, spinning them and giving them new meanings within the playing of *Counter-Strike*. Nothing is more impressive to the outside observer than the way *Counter-Strike* players creatively re-fashion the resources of popular culture for their own expressive discourse purposes.

One of the best examples we found of the use of popular culture references was the following interchange that drew from the animated comedy television show *South Park*. In *South Park* one of the characters Kenny is almost always killed off within the show, prompting such statements as, "Oh, my god, they killed Kenny." In this case "Kenny," a player with a history of "weak" performance in the game, is one of the last remaining players on the terrorist team. In the "final" scene Kenny's dilemma of going it alone against most of the opposing team members elicits the following interchange from his "dead" team members. Staying in one spot, or "camping" secures a kill for Kenny, prompting a response from the opposing counter-terrorist team by Big D, "r Kenny is a bitch." And a defensive reply from Face, on the terrorist

team, "they're supposed to camp." (Camping is considered legitimate if one is guarding the bomb that has been planted by teammates). Even though all the other terrorists are "dead" Petrol, congratulates Kenny, with "good work Kenny," followed by "dead" Clover's, "ya Kenny." Then a counter-terrorist, The\_Master, kills Kenny. Lane, one of Kenny's "dead" team member responds, "brave Kenny," followed by Clover's, "good Kenny." And finally Face says, "OMG they killed Kenny." Petrol, responds, "valient Kenny" followed by Lane's, "dead Kenny." Clover, issues a supportive comment, "taken on the hole team like that," and then finally calls out, "keeennnnny." What is interesting about this example, aside from the obvious pop culture reference is the way it is used to support a weak player in the game. We saw many examples, not only of talk designed to degrade an opponent ("trash talking"), but also many supportive comments from fellow team members.

## Conclusions

What can we conclude from this incredible variety of talk forms and creative game actions? The complexity of the talk and action mirrors the social complexity of many online game types from MUDDS to FPS shooter games. This diversity of game talk reveals a complex social world that participants enter willfully. It is a world of rules and social conventions that often appear invisible to outsiders and may well remain invisible to new insiders until conflicts arise between players. Through the playing of the game and negotiating conflicts one learns the meaning of the game, the meaning of "having fun." And that "having fun," is bound up with creative actions taken to enhance the pleasure of the game.

The meaning of playing *Counter-Strike* is not merely embodied in

the graphics or even the violent game play, but in the social mediations that go on between players through their talk with each other and by their performance within the game.

Participants, then, actively create the meaning of the game through their virtual talk and behavior borrowing heavily from popular and youth culture representations. Players learn rules of social comportment that reproduce codes of behavior and established standards of conduct, while also safely experimenting with the violation of these codes. This "learning," which comes through a creative restructuring of "social heritage" appropriated from the world outside the game, is evidence of the profound "ambiguity of play" (Sutton-Smith 1997).

Finally, *Counter-Strike* players resemble a youth subculture (Hebdige 1979, 1988; Thornton 1996) that can enter "liminoid" or liminal-like genre that promotes a temporary "limbo" of statuslessness, flow and movement (Turner 1982), a refashioning of time and community (Bruckman 1996; Bryce and Rutter 2000). This creative re-shaping of everyday life through play is an example of what Brian Sutton-Smith describes when he speaks of play and games as "anti-structural" occasions for "experimentation with variable repertoires" and "making free with a given social heritage." Sutton-Smith notes that "we may be disorderly in games either because we have an overdose of order, and want to let off steam, or because we have something to learn through being disorderly (1972)." The acceptance of both disorder and creative player actions within a bounded universe like *Counter-Strike* offers the game player a context in which to exercise safe ritual license with behaviors that would not be tolerated in the "real" world of everyday life (for example, "trash" talking). Liminoid cultural forms like *Counter-Strike* stand "betwixt and between" the external and less temporary structural and

normative social constraints which apply outside both rituals and games. Even though game players may work hard to reproduce conventions of social behavior in their chats they also offer an opportunity to explore new creative uses of such games, beyond the intention of the game designer.

We hope that our brief exploration into creative player actions will assist in keeping the debate concerning the social forces that make such game playing attractive open by pointing beyond the standard explanations of the media effects literature (Barker and Patley 1997; Griffiths 1996; Gillmore and Crissman 1997) and militarism (Toles 1985; Gibson 1994). Ultimately, the player's perspective (Jenkins 1999) and understanding of play must be included in any meaningful discussion of FPS games and, indeed, of all video games.

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