

Midwest Sociological Society, Omaha, Nebraska, April 2006

**Killing Zombies, Terrorists, and Aliens:
The pleasures and anxieties of symbolic violence.**

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From *Night of the Living Dead* to *Half-Life 2*, the killing of reel or virtual zombies, aliens and terrorists have been a staple of Hollywood horror films and video games. The newest variation has the game player assuming the avatar role of a zombie hell bent on slaughtering the living in a tongue in cheek reversal of the classic role of the slow moving, groaning, un-dead who take a shot to the head to bring down. *Stubbs the Zombie: Rebel Without a Pulse* depends upon the player's familiarity with a popular culture 1950s America, fighting back against the humans who would do them in. Using attacks, from flatulence that stun their victims, to thrown entrails that explode on impact and detachable arms that one can use to beat up and possess their victims, Stubbs as a dead 1930s traveling salesman is resurrected in 1959 as a zombie joining that tradition of popular culture parodies featured in such other games as *Destroy All Humans!*, where one can play an alien who goes around blowing up houses, controlling hapless humans minds, making them dance and in general causing havoc. The killing of State defined terrorists, represented in Tom Clancy novels, films and inspired games such as *Rainbow Six*, *Ghost Recon* and *Splinter Cell*, alternates with the killing of alien monsters in such games as *Half-Life* and *Doom 3*. *Counter-Strike*, as a mod of the game engine from *Half-Life*, allows one to play either the counter-terrorist forces or as a terrorist. This is something not allowed in the U.S. Army sponsored game *America's Army* where one can only play as a U.S. soldier. Zombies, aliens and terrorists as representations of an absolute Other figure prominently in the subconscious of Americans; their treatment both in films, TV shows and in games reflect much broader cultural and social trends that mirror the politics and culture of the time. The use of such stock characters and the narratives that surround them exist within a commodified carnivalist fictional world of violent, grotesque, conflict, ruins, and constant movement that holds up a mirror to the frantic rationalized everyday world of consumers and producers who are expected to exhibit a high degree of rational self control and exemplary performance in the new globalized capitalist order.

It is no secret that the making of the film *Night of the Living Dead* was an allegory which fed off of the nascent Civil Rights movements of the time and that the later *Dawn of the Dead* emerged during the period of the 1970s when critiques of consumption, shopping malls, and religious cults were in full bloom. Public fears of disease, possession and disorder are reflected in the horror themes of both popular films and video games. Again, it is no accident that grade B horror movies featuring aliens invading earth, from *Invasion from Mars* to *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, were popular in 1950s America as the fear of invading communists was spread by America's ruling elite. Representations of possession, contamination and pollution multiply during times of perceived "moral" and practical social disorder. It is also during these periods of social history when outcries from claims makers against the decay of culture and the decline of morality are heard the loudest in opposition to those who would celebrate the carnival.

The carnival has historically been a bounded space in which rituals were enacted that

directly subverted the dominant social order. The ritual licence with symbolic condensation (Turner 1969, 1982) of performance activities and symbolic inversion of powerful characters practiced in these bounded spaces were necessary for the continuation of community while also calling into question dominant arrangements of power. Fears of possession or contamination were contained in both temporal and spatial settings - ritual enactments to reassert the boundaries of order. "What is erotic and what is obscene and deemed criminal are daily defined by dominant desires. Orderly and acceptable social behavior stands superior to the disorderly and antisocial. In life organized around the rationality of science, creativity and culture carry within them the challenge of the criminal." (Presdee 2001:18). As consumptive pleasure and leisure activity assume larger roles in a rationalized lifeworld so does the pleasure of the disorderly and the destructive become central to the consumptive habits of a population (Presdee 2001:19; Katz 1988). The world of performance art, as Presdee mentions (2001:19), and I would argue newer forms of computer games and video games, like *Stubbs the Zombie*, *Counter-Strike* or *Grand Theft Auto* blur the boundaries between art and order, abet within a contained virtual space, often playing with and challenging themes that attack dominant forms of social or cultural order while also reinforcing others forms of order (such as killing State defined terrorists or hapless humans). It is this blurring of boundaries which catches the attention of concerned parents and politicians.

Today it is conservative groups like *Focus on the Family* attacking Barbie dolls and TeleTubbies or the *Parents Television Council* (Ho 2006:A5) decrying acts of television violence and gore, while liberal groups attack the computer games *Manhunt* and *Grand Theft Auto* for its racial and gender stereotypes and simulated sex hidden codes. During the 1950s it was a moral campaign, organized by Dr. Fredric Wertham, a New York psychiatrist, attacking horror comic books as contributing to juvenile delinquency, adding to the typical cyclical pattern of media panics (Springhall 1998:124-125; Sternheimer 2003). These patterns of social dread reflect the anxiety and fears of an emerging middle class over a corruptible working class who ignored socially "uplifting" reading in favor of "dime novels" or "penny dreadfuls" (Schechter 2005).

The spectacle of watching films and playing games with violent imagery evokes questions concerning the pleasures and anxieties of symbolic violence. Virtual dismemberment, splattering brains, rag doll physics, blood spurting, head chomping, stomach spewing, explosive ridden, and dead looking bodies are the landscapes created and played through games and films that enjoin us to either watch or get involved in the virtual play of violent images.

To date discussions around violent imagery in media, TV, film and games have been framed in the academic world through reductionist psychological models, ie. the media effects debates, causation versus catharsis, or in the legal world between censorship versus freedom of expression. Neither venue has historically tried to understand the attractions of violent imagery or explain its persistence in anything other than a model based on personal perversions or corporate malfeasance.

Moral entrepreneurs from politicians, concerned parents, and academics to advocacy groups continue to assert the harmful effects such games, TV shows, or violent films supposedly have on children and adults seeking to ban them outright or to regulate their content at the very least. The foundation for this response rests on questionable studies from the "media effects" literature as well as moral and ethical qualms generated from both conservative religious and liberal advocacy organizations concerned about gender and racial stereotyping of particular social groups. In all cases the pleasures and anxieties of symbolic violence are seldom discussed except in the most literal or reductionist terms.

Therefore, first I would like to tackle the question: 1) What do we mean by symbolic

violence? And are media representations of violent acts, either in games, TV shows or movies, in fact symbolic violence? Second, 2) What are the ways in which TV, movies and game violence have been talked about in the public realm and what are the problems with such talk? This will include a brief discussion of the media effects debate, censorship, and subsequent moral panics over violence in media. Third, 3) if the public discussions and academic discussions over game violence are inadequate then what does virtual “killing” mean? How else should we understand the pleasures and anxieties of killing zombies, aliens and terrorists? Finally, 4) I wish to conclude with an examination of the meanings which participants in these games/simulations take away from their play, by looking at the responses of a group of players of the first person shooter video game Counter-Strike (See Appendix A for a discussion of research methods and game origins).

Symbolic Violence, Real Intimidation versus Reel Violence

Symbolic violence operates in the everyday world of common power relationships working invisibly to convey the subordinated status of particular groups while reaffirming another group’s superior social status. According to Bourdieu such symbolic violence occurs in face-to-face interactions on an everyday basis. We can see it in the discourse used to talk about homeless street people or immigrants. We can see it in the discourse men use to talk about women, or the manner in which the wealthy talk about the poor. According to Kraus, discussing Bourdieu’s concept: “Symbolic violence operates in face-to-face interactions, thus constructing and reproducing domination in direct interactions between people. Above all, however, this is a violence that is not recognized as such; it is a subtle, euphemized, invisible mode of dominating, a concealed form of violence--the realization of a world view or social order anchored in the habitus of the dominating as well as the dominated.” (Kraus 2003, pg. 58). As Bourdieu makes clear in his work on *Masculine Domination* (1998), such symbolic violence operates within the gender dimension by framing how women understand their everyday situation through the eyes of men. “The effect of symbolic domination (whether ethnic, gender, cultural or linguistic, etc.) is exerted not in the pure logic of knowing consciousness but through the schemes of perception, appreciation and action that are constitutive of habitus and which, below the level of the decisions of consciousness and the controls of the will, set up a cognitive relationship that is profoundly obscure to itself.” (1998:37). That this domination and its byproduct symbolic violence remains unacknowledged is testimony to the power of domination to render itself invisible. Seeing the world through the eyes of men (some men) renders men as the universal principle and women the exception that is marginalized. As Kraus (2003:59) comments: “An essential element of symbolic violence thus lies in the fact that the oppressed--in this case women--must identify themselves as inferior by incorporating the prevailing order. Domination also means that the dominated adopt the "prevailing opinion," the world-view developed by the dominant, and along with it, a self-image shaped by the dominant....Anyone who has seen women laugh along with men over sexist jokes knows what this incorporation of the dominant vision means: we always carry within us whatever attacks, disparages and even destroys us.” Simply put symbolic violence does not appear as violence as all but as the normal everyday understandings of the world.

It should be made clear that symbolic violence is not equivalent to violent images that one might consume in film or games. Representations of violence, beatings, shootings, explosions, etc. are not *symbolic* representations of violence but *sign* representations which stand for the act itself, but, without giving that act meaning. Sign representations depend completely upon the context of the narrative and the interpretive manner brought to that context by the audience/players. What violent images mean in one context can mean something entirely different within another context. The use

of irony, parody, imitation, and other rhetorical forms spell out the diversity of actions audiences can use to make sense of violent images. Violent media images are never neutral and their iconic representations are not fixed in their significance. They remain powerful emotional signs guaranteed to grab your attention. So how then should we locate media, TV, movies, video-games, in this understanding of symbolic violence/iconic violence? Does it even apply?

Clearly, video and computer games contain visual representations of women and men which incorporate stereotypical forms, from idealized female figures to macho strutting soldiers. Graphic bloodletting is also a standard feature of shooter games and horror films. Such iconic representational forms range from gender to racial/ethnic stereotypes to many types of fantasy images which reproduce particular fantasy images of desire and threat. It is also true that many games present these forms as ironic figures with a wink to the player who is expected to know the difference between a stereotype and a literal representation, as in the game *Serious Sam*. The sheer volume of graphic violence is, itself often a commentary on stylistic excess, such as in the *Kill Bill* film series or *Natural Born Killers*. Does this constitute a form of symbolic domination and symbolic violence? I would argue that it does not, because the encounter is between the player and a computer program or film image and the meaning of that representation resides in the player not in the iconic figures depicted. What the audience makes of such images is everything. While a story may be told from an “official” perspective, there is no guarantee it will be understood in that manner. This is not a radical subjectivist position, but, one which recognizes that audience interpretation of sign representations of violence is a complex relationship between the lived community of the watcher or player, and the various codes from which the film or game narrative draws. A structural or content analysis is insufficient in understanding this type of media.

To assume that symbolic violence is expressed in the literal understanding of images and their consumption or even in the trash talk between game players or in the sexist or racist imagery one encounters in single player games denies the many uses which players may make of both images and language and their multiple meanings. The assumption that the audience/players are simply passive actors reproducing a script of domination at the unconscious level ignores the way in which irony, parody, imitation, joking and a host of other behaviors reflect deeper levels of understanding, of iconic representations. Is the player merely reduced to an object who simply acts out their domination in the acceptance of stereotypes or mythical warfare? I believe that the social order of games, and indeed, of the reception of all forms of media is much more complex than this scheme allows.

While particular representations of overt violence in games, TV or film may be offensive, keeping in mind the distinction between harm and offense, to some groups of people, it is the subtle “commonsense” talk and knowledge of social groups - the “prevailing opinion” within which social groups and individuals operating within those groups make sense of themselves, that is problematic. It is not the sign representations of violence which is the problem but the behavior of those players reproducing forms of social domination brought in from the real world (Kendall 2002, 2000, 1998). Hence, symbolic violence is an issue in violent games, not in the overt graphic virtual bloodletting, but through such behaviors as “trash talking” made by on-line players - especially where the players do not know each other - where trust has not been established (even though even this is subject to interpretative difference). The problem is the real intimidation which occurs between on-line players in the playing of the game and, most important, how that intimidation is understood by game players. It is well known that female players are often harassed by other game players leading many to abandon on-line gaming. Male players are most often targeted. I have witnessed virtual

verbal/text fights between players that went on for as long as 20 minutes while playing Counter-Strike with real slurs and insults raised to a fever pitch, with usually one or more players leaving the server. And yet some women ban together, form game clans, and actively fight back against such male policing behavior as do many other men. Symbolic violence can assume a policing role within games by pushing people away that do not conform to a narrow image of what a player should say or do within the game. Given this, how should we understand the power, the attraction and repulsion of these virtually violent images if not via symbolic violence? What is the “violence” in computer games? What does virtual “killing” mean?

Before attempting to answer this question a brief foray into the “commonsense” talk about game/film violence is in order - or, in other words the media effects arguments. The assumption that representations of violence will cause real life violence is at the heart of the media effects debate. While this very crude relationship has been effectively marginalized it still rules as the foundation for all uncritical inquiries about media violence. Derived from studies in experimental psychology, combined with the assumptions of childhood development based in childhood psychology, such a perspective is suspect in so far as it assumes a too literal relationship between media consumption, media violence and real violence. Often confusing correlation with causation, effects studies has morphed into a variety of different versions all of which suffer from flawed methods, inadequate definitions and a host of other problems (Gauntlett 2001; Freedman 2002; Goldstein 2001; Sternheimer 2003). The most obvious is the “hypodermic” effect model, followed by the desensitization model (See critique by David Buckingham 1998) and the cultivation model or “mean world syndrome,” promoted by George Gerbner (Gerbner 1994). The assumption that audiences will be magically impregnated by violent images and forced to do unspeakable acts has its grounding in the very real fear which members of the Frankfurt School had about the rise of Nazism in Germany and the apparent zombie like takeover of “normal” Germans who were all too willing to look the other way while horrible things were done in their name. By extending this assumption to advertising and media representation in general early Left media studies suffered from a model which reduced the audience to simple passive acceptance of domination, until the advent of British Cultural Studies.

In response the catharsis model often employed by defenders of game players is just as reductive and dismissive of how media iconic violence actually operates by assuming that playing violent games reduces internal tension, by “getting it out of one’s system.” Again, the pleasures of violent images, of the carnival, are not acknowledged. In addition Left critiques such as those of Henri Giroux (Giroux 2006) and others attempt to differentiate the varieties of types of violence (situational violence, symbolic violence, hyper-real violence) as if this explains the attraction and anxiety over its representation. Both the Left’s moral critique of media violence as crass commercialism deflecting revolutionary consciousness or the Right’s moral critique of media violence leading to a collapse in “family” values and child abuse do little to explain the on-going attraction/ pleasure of media violence. The desire and repulsion of the grotesque, the transgressive and simultaneously status quo reinforcement of game, TV and movie violence is explained away as simple perversion or sin.

Critical of the media effects perspective is that of the moral panic literature (Cohen 1972; Sternheimer 2003; Glassner 1999). From this perspective the commonsense debates over media violence and its supposed effects are rather a marker of social or status anxiety exhibited by the middle class and most often directed against those of perceived lower class or lower status origin. The fact that such panics occur periodically, most often with a change in the technology of

representation (Jenkins 2006) and/ or the changes in social status brought about by social, cultural and political movements indicates that the causative factors exist not in the medium itself but in the social relationships between people struggling to come to grips with real life social changes occurring around them.

The Grotesque, The Transgressive and Violent Representation

What does virtual killing represent if not the literal taking of life? What are the anxieties and pleasures of killing virtual zombies, space aliens or terrorists? To answer this question means engaging with the issues of the grotesque and the transgressive, and their relationship to perceived childhood and emotional expression, as well as understanding how viewers/players make sense of what they consume. The *grotesque* as a term standing for ugliness, the strange and bizarre and those unreal behaviors and appearances which disturbed the social order emerged during the Romantic era (the 15th and 16th centuries) in Europe. Most often these traits were associated with those who were marginalized in society, confined to the lower classes and looked down upon with scorn by social elites. The grotesque hence became a badge of honor for the dispossessed who were able to make use of its conventions to disrupt established hierarchies and subvert the Kantian sublime. In fact, it is precisely the understanding of Kant's "dynamic sublime" which best mirrors the pleasure that accrues from playing violent games.

The symbolic inversion of the social order practiced by lower status social classes and employed in figures like the Joker or Trickster is developed most thoroughly in the carnivalesque discussed by Bakhtin in his comments on Rabelais (1968; 1981). The grotesque has often been accompanied by the Joker, the Trickster, the Fool with the ascent of comedy. Subverting the dominant moral order through joking, word play, parody, imitation and symbolic performances, is in fact, one of the standard forms of social resistance to hierarchies exerted by the powerful. All of these are present in actual gamer behavior. According to Bakhtin, commenting upon the serio-comic genres of Greek novels, "It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchal...distance....Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically." (1981:23) That this should also be a common characteristic of violent media (either horror films or violent computer games) consumed by teenagers, as well as adults, is no surprise, since teenagers in middle class American culture stand in an ambivalent relationship to adults, thought of as children not grown up, but also expected to act adult like and given few chances to do so (Currie 2005; Buckingham 2005).

This marginalized position of teenagers discussed by Nancy Lesko leads to both the idealization of childhood innocence by adults on the one hand and demonization of children on the other (Lesko 2001). While authority and elite status figures constantly pressure youth, working class persons, immigrants, women, and others perceived as outside the dominant prestige of social decision making, to behave, to conform to established conventions of morality, authority and power, the grotesque just as vividly strives to upset such authority inverting the powerless and comically re-acting the fall of the powerful. Such inversions are often the opposite of symbolic violence in the Bourdieu sense. While symbolic violence is used to keep low status individuals "in their place" through the acceptance of commonsense understandings of status and power relationships the grotesque is used to explode such restraints - to fight back. This is very clear when we examine the pleasures and anxieties employed in first person shooter computer games.

People who play on-line games enjoy a community of fellow gamers, this community may

be either local as in a LAN game or world wide using the internet. In either case the pleasures of the grotesque and of violent images and dramatic warfare generates its own emotions that are worth exploring for what they can tell us about the world of game players, as they have for those who watch horror films. The pleasures of watching horror films, analogous to playing violent games, is the power of abject horror (Kristeva 1982) and according to Creed (1993) heavily gendered with male fears of castration and the power of female reproduction (See also Grant 1996). Viewers of horror films, both males and females experience the pleasure of the “final girl” scene where the female finally triumphs over the monster, more a celebration of female power than of male fear (Clover 1992). The modern grotesque embodied in games like *Stubbs the Zombie*, *Half-Life* and *Doom 3* allows one the pleasures of playing within the grotesque and acting out transgressive behavior within the virtual realm. The fact that almost every character in these games are gendered male speaks less to the exclusion of the female and more to male anxiety over what it means to be male - what behaviors are expected to define one as the “right” male, the hero, for example. I would argue that this anxiety is reflected in the performative aspect of game playing and is clearly visible in the gendered nature of trash talking, and indeed of most on-line game chats when playing violent games.

It is true that playing violent shooter games produces emotions, both pleasures and anxieties, as do all media forms from reading to watching movies and television. While the media effects literature does not do this justice it is possible to explore these issues in more depth using qualitative methods that take seriously how video game players understand the feelings they experience and the play they engage in. To assume that emotional effects of violent game play are simply harmful or that they are manifestations of “blowing off steam,” the catharsis argument, ignores both the social complexity of virtual play, and indeed of the significance of play in general (Sutton-Smith 2001; Caillois 2001; Huizinga 1971), as well as the emotional complexity involved in playing with representations of violence. It is therefore helpful to explore the emotions as well as the perception of “realism,” and the social forms of trash talking that players engage in before addressing the question of media effects.

Game Player Understandings: Pleasures and Anxieties over Virtual Violence

Playing video games require a particular degree of performative skill, not just in hand-eye coordination, but in tactical thinking, patience and the ability to assess situations quickly while under stress. It also requires losing oneself temporarily in the relationship between one’s body and the screen, not unlike watching movies in a darkened theater which require one to suspend self-consciousness in favor of the movie narrative unfolding on the screen. The emotions produced by enacting these performative skills range from nervousness, frustration, pride, and pleasure to anxiety and laughter. Rather than releasing tension or frustration as the Catharsis argument asserts, virtual play generates its own emotions through the performance of the player within the game. And it is this generation of tension, of emotions which many parents are anxious about. Will this generation of emotion through game immersion produce harmful consequences for the player and those that surround him or her? What is strange is why we do not seem to ask similar questions for sports like football, soccer or tennis. The conflation of violent imagery with the “new” aspect of virtual technology and performative immersion makes game playing appear overtly threatening to those who are not familiar with either the game community or with the technology of game play. In the rest of this essay we shall explore many aspects of game play from the perspective of those game players who play *Counter-Strike*, the virtual killing of terrorists and counter-terrorists.

Performative Skill, Frustration and Nervousness:

The perceived lack of performing while playing Counter-Strike can lead to frustration and nervousness as expressed by Mick, especially when one is not playing at their best. Being able to hit a target and down an opponent with as few shots as possible is a mark of pleasure, the economy of virtual killing which is a marker of skill. According to Mick:

Simply frustration if I'm not performing the way I want. I find myself, actually getting, quite nervous, when I'm supposedly sneaking through a virtual hall and trying to quite quiet or crouching or whatever. There's some anxiety with the game. And shock to.I don't know if I can draw a comparison, I was playing paint ball before in open fields. Same deal. It almost duplicates those same feelings.....Obviously there's a great satisfaction in getting the target. And getting it right the first time. You know, without having to like put a whole clip into somebody. Just a couple of shots and move on. And then if I don't take any damage, I've out fought them, then I'm very pleased with it. ...To have it move where I thought it out and they kind of fall for it, and I'm able to get them. I enjoy that aspect.Trying to outflank the guy instead of being a better shot sometimes.

Bryson gets both nervous and excited within the game since it is difficult to know when an opponent will sneak up behind you while you are doing something else, like chatting with team members. In addition, he discusses the pleasure of an economy kill that allows one to take down an opponent at a distance with one shot as opposed to getting up close and personal:

I get nervous. Yeah, that's why I don't really write anything (chat function), because I am afraid the minute I start writing something somebody will come up behind me and kill me. Umh, so yeah. There's nervousness. There's excitement. Sort of revealing in a good kill.head shot. I mean, one shot there down. There's no sort of, ...you know, you face each other and squat down and start firing madly, you know, just a nice head shot. The longer the distance the better.

Combating a moving target, whether it is a computer generated figure or a human avatar presents its own set of challenges, most often associated with anticipating the "next move" of an enemy. When one predicts successfully, a great deal of satisfaction can be obtained. When not, a great deal of frustration. Therefore, playing shooter games like *Counter-Strike*, *Rainbow Six*, *Ghost Recon*, *America's Army* and other military shooters where opposing teams battle it out in virtual combat settings always requires thinking three steps ahead if one wishes to excel at the game, not unlike an elaborate moving chess game. But, the better analogy is to hunting. According to Tim:

And that's sort of the excitement of it - is more something like having to do with hunting, not that I've ever hunted. But, you know, as much as I hate the prevalence of guns in this society, I know the feeling of aiming and shooting a target is a satisfying sort of thing. And, I mean for me it doesn't make a difference if its, you know, a mechanical rabbit running across something. But, there is that skill of aiming and shooting at something....And, I guess that's the whole psychological thing with why...yeah, there's something very satisfying about hitting a target from a distance.But, the excitement of... the game is very much, for most of the game in any particular setting is sneaking around and trying not to get hit. Certain players play differently. But, you know, especially if you're a sniper or something like that, that there's this high level of anxiety that - someone's coming up behind you, that you know,

your going to walk into a room and, you know, your going to get shot or something like that. So, ...you get into that prevailing emotion of anxiety while playing the game. And then when you are, I guess, able to succeed either in knocking off somebody else or, - well, let me say that if you are able to succeed like that it's sort of a high point amidst this very - yeah, your such in this constant anxiety that you get these peaks of, of, um, I don't know what you call it - affirmation or peak sense.....So, I mean the emotions are anxiety and then some sort of sense, and I keep getting back to this, skill. But, like to be able to have that ability to aim and hit the target...

Jose, one of the players who had gone hunting with friends discussed the analogy by raising the issue of anticipating where the hunted would come from, where would the deer emerge in the woods, for example:

You know, when you go hunting, I went with dogs and I did get to hold a gun but I never got to shoot, and you can hear the ducks coming, so as you can hear in the game the people coming and the footsteps, and all of a sudden they start getting on you and then you start getting excited and you see where is he coming, same thing. You are in the woods and you, you're starting to wonder where is he, where is the deer coming from and so it is, it is very similar, I think, I think that the game does a really good job of putting us in that situation that is very similar to hunting, um.

Outsmarting One's Opponent

The anxiety of anticipation is accompanied by the pleasures of outsmarting one's opponent and the frustration that comes when such tactical thinking is not successful. One of the highest pleasures in shooter games is, in fact, anticipating the moves of your enemy and being in the right place at the right time. To accomplish this requires more than just practice. It also requires learning an opponent's psychology, their moves, and their understanding of how to handle a particular game map. Again, according to Jose:

I think the fact of trying to not get killed is exciting (laughing) um, I think the sound effects are awesome too, because you feel like you're being chased or you have to chase someone and um it's exciting also because you feel like you can outsmart someone also. So, I always see the game as a challenge. As a challenge of me to, for me to try to outsmart the other person and so in that sense you know I found the game very fulfilling also because I get a chance to try to trap the other person or you know get around where he's not looking or where he thought I was going to be, but I'm actually in another place and there I am HA, and I got you!

For Jose, the failure of not anticipating an opponent, while it may be frustrating, is for him a learning opportunity. He views it as more of a challenge, "and I keep going until I find a way of outsmarting this person and so it's, it's for me it's just not boring to keep losing and keep losing and keep losing all the time. I do see the game as a challenge and for that reason it is exciting." The other factor in outsmarting an opponent is the perceived emotional support one gains from fellow team members. This is especially true when other members observe that you have come to their defense or killed the person who killed them. Jose continues, "When you can outsmart,the other person....Especially

when you get the person that got your friend cause then your friend is like, thanks man, thanks for getting him. So that makes me feel good, like I was backing up people, like I was there for that person, that makes me feel, those are three things that make me feel good.” The issue of outsmarting a human opponent came up repeatedly in the interviews with game players. It was pretty clear that simply playing against computer generated opponents lacked the kind of skillful play that characterized playing against human opponents. Hence, the attractiveness for on-line multi-player games is in large part an attraction to test one’s self against opponents which do not act in as predictable fashion as computer generated characters do. As Clint puts it, “Fun is when a few people play and following the maps and second guessing your opponent That’s what I like about human play. Its harder against humans.”

Since *Counter-Strike* is a team based game where players once they are killed must wait until the next round, the pressure can be intense when one is the sole survivor of his or her team and is faced by the opposing team - to win, to pull off a successful rally not only is very difficult, but, also accompanied by increased anxiety and stress. When your team is watching you, as it can through the game camera, the pressure is on you to at least pull off a credible defense or assault. As Chan, a game player who has played the game extensively in Taiwan cybercafes, says about his feelings:

Anxiety when all my teammates are dead and, like, I’m, like, the only guy running around with, like, five guys after me and, like, I kind of don’t know what else is going on with my health and, like, you know, limited ammo. I’m, like, okay, and, so, I think at those times I tend to hide and, like, camp and stuff. Um. But, and, that’s understandable, um, but I think, I mean, I think also in terms of sometimes I feel, like, that rush of courageousness, like, I know I have five health and I know there’s like four guys out there but they’re attacking this teammate over there and they’re all, you know, are running after him. I would, you know, I would jump out and, like, sacrifice my life so that he could, like, sort of, so it would distract their attention and, they could, you know.

Since most shooter games require a high degree performative skill to be successful a great deal of emotional energy can be invested in perfecting one’s skills in order to gain status and approval from one’s peers. This can lead to a particular type of pride in game performance which, without other outlets for emotional expression and activity may lead to brittle feelings. Tina comments on some *Counter-Strike* players, especially at the high school level, by noting how harsh they can be with each other:

I think it affects some people’s pride level a lot....If they’re good, and, they act it out later. Um, they seem to act out on pride later. I mean, just a couple players I know that weren’t very prideful about anything they could do before, because they weren’t, you know, very into athletics, you know, as the typical masculine role, or.... They weren’t, they didn’t have, like, a girlfriend that was a cheerleader or anything like that, that was very typically masculine. Um, they really found their pride at being good at video games, and, if they especially had a really good night, you know, they would be very prideful about it, you know....And sometimes they even, sort of, I don’t know, I don’t know, I wouldn’t say they were mean to the other players, but, they could be pretty harsh, I guess....Afterwards, usually. They’d be pretty harsh to other players.

Friendship bonding, Virtual violence and Intense Emotions

The intense feelings generated by playing against human opponents also acts to bond players to one another. This is true for both female and male players. Since quasi-military games like *Counter-Strike* involve war and virtual violence it is not surprising that male players would dominate the genre, even while some females do play the game. What was interesting about the intensity of the play was the war stories told by the players to each other after individual gaming sessions had concluded. A particular form of male bonding was established through the shared ritual of virtual killing in game combat. According to Jose:

...One thing is that during the game we are, you know, kind of like closer and um and then we kind of feel like were in the same team and so you do feel kind of, you're closer, your relationship becomes closer when you are playing the game, but outside of the game it is our friendships you know, they extend to what the game, to the game playing and to interactions about that. We talk about what happened in the game and all that stuff and so we do have a relationship that we have in common you know,... There is something interesting instead, different types of people come together you know to relate in this game and then they go on to their lives, it's sort of like that movie,... *Fight Club*...I feel like I was bonding with my friends in this game, were mainly males because you know we don't have any females that come to play with us, but um I actually one day said you know why don't we go to hunting or something like that and actually we do these things for real because I went hunting once and I thought it was pretty exciting, pretty fun and um, they said, one of them, one them actually has been hunting with his friend Mick, and he had really been into this environment of weapons and all that but all of the other ones, they're not, I don't think they saw it as fun, you know going and hunting um so, but they did see the area of male bonding and also just having fun and being able to you know, maybe have a couple of beers and just relating and talking about stuff so I think that yeah, our relationships were closer as a result of the game.

Laughter is the Most Common Emotion

Of all the emotions generated by *Counter-Strike* game play laughter seems to be the one most favored. All of the game players I talked with mentioned both feeling elated and laughing throughout the game, unless the game slowed down or became boring because of losing or unequal skill levels, a failure of game balance. Usually precipitated by player behavior that contradicted the expected responses, such as backing off a building and falling to one's virtual death or failing to anticipate an opponent's move leading to an embarrassing death usually by a knife, as opposed to a gun. As Mick states:

Usually when somebody is just completely unaware. Caught off guard.... Usually, I'm not laughing if I'm the one that does something funny, you know. But, um, if I see somebody who clearly walks backward into his demise. Usually the biggest laugh though is when one of the other guys types or writes or says something really funny. And its usually a Simpson's quote is what it is. And its appropriate to the situation.like one that was quote a lot of times was, um, Ralph the character in the Simpsons whose kind of an idiot kid or a mentally slow kid, he would look into the sun. And one of his famous lines is, "My cat's breath smells like cat food." So,...somebody on the net was playing our game, said something REALLY dumb. And so,...Daryl just types back, "My cat just...," just mocking him. And we just started cracking up, you know. Because, n one got it, of course, (but) us, but, that's the beauty of it.

Playing with cartoon like violence and finding oneself in an unanticipated position is often grounds for laughter. The specific game map one is playing will often lead to specific humorous situations. This is especially true given the sound effects in the game. On a game map called *Highrise*, an uncompleted skyscraper, one runs the risk of falling off the edge if not careful. In more than one game I witnessed players would deliberately throw themselves off the edge just to laugh at the screams on the way down. Daryl commented that when playing on this map he would hear the sound effects of someone falling off the level and would laugh at their mistake and how the player falling would sound like a Disney character:

He sounds like Goofy from those old Disney cartoons where he's like (makes a sound) you know and he falls off a building. And that's always funny because you know somebody messed up and somebody somewhere is pounding their forehead going, "I can't believe I screwed up so badly to just run off the edge of the building"Yeah, that's always funny. It always funny to fall off the building.

The players understand this form of humor as slapstick comedy. Situations that one would never find funny in everyday life but, which can be quite humorous within the context of the game. For the players this often comes in the form of "surprise kills." As Bryson points out:

Well, usually those sort of surprise kills, that's when you laugh the most often. Or when somebody is trying to diffuse a bomb and they blow and you see their body flying across. Those are all funny moments.But, I suppose I would explain it in terms of slapstick comedy. I mean, obviously, you see people get hurt and fall down in a comic situation all the time, and you laugh, like Kramer and *Seinfeld*. Or Homer and *The Simpsons*. And you don't think, oh, my gosh, is he okay, its horrible, right. But, its just sort of the surprise of seeing a pratfall. It just so happens it's a pratfall of somebody getting killed. But, I think, the parallels are the same there.

Bruce comments that observing unusual situations within the game, usually as a consequence of the game engine and player behavior, is another source of humor. When combined with not being aware of one's opponent game maps can generate their own particular brand of humor. On a game map called *Dune*, Bruce used the setting to take advantage of an opponent who was not aware of where he was:

Probably laugh most often whenever something funny happens to another player, like, you know, they, something unexpected happens to them. It kind of looks funny. Because you can tell that they had no idea that was coming, or, yeah. Its usually laughing at other people...I laughed really hard last night because, when I was playing the Dune map, David, his character was down at the bottom of the dune next to a dune buggy. And I was up at the top of a dune quite a ways away. He was shooting at me. And I turned to look at him. And, he didn't know it, but he was actually hiding behind two gas canisters. And so I started shooting at them. And, they blew up and send him flying about the equivalent of 25 feet up in the air, just straight up. And I heard David kind of, he said "what the hell happened" or something like that. And that was funny. We kind of laughed about that later.

Slapstick comedy has historically directed its attention against the powerful and therefor like the

grotesque remains a subversive force within the culture at large. In so far as games like *Counter-Strike* and other shooter games provide the context for such comedic moments, they can also elucidate a particular anti-authoritarian moment which contravenes the dominant context of the game, i.e. fighting terrorists. While the game is set up with particular rules, such as defusing bombs, or planting them, rescuing hostages or keeping them from the counter-terrorists, to which one is accorded so many points for successful accomplishment, violating these rules is almost always a basis for humor. This is especially true when the game engine fails to fully function as it is supposed to. As Bruce says:

...The one thing that I think is funny, I think this is a good example of this, is its always funny, not always, but almost always funny whenever a counter-terrorist is supposed to be rescuing hostages. And the hostages, it seems like about a third of the time, they get hung up and they can't follow the person. Either because they get hung up behind a box or who knows. Sometimes they float in the air five feet up and you have no idea why they can't follow you. Its always funny whenever the Counter-terrorist shoot the people, the hostages they're supposed to rescue just out of frustration. Its not, their not playing their part, So, the answer to that is usually, you know, screw you I'll just shoot you. That's what is funny.

Player behavior is an endless source of humor. Players, especially new players, will often do things that to a seasoned game player seem foolish, leading to quite funny situations. Often such players, criticized as “newbies” are met with refrains from other players about their lack of skill. As Lewis comments:

Some stupid things people do it just cracks me up.....What happens, for example, uh, the whole team sitting there and somebody comes from behind and just slaughters all of them. I think that's pretty amusing. I mean, have you heard this expression called, “they were gimped?”....A gimp, a gimp is somebody, I don't know how to explain it....GIMP, yeah, gimp. My friends would laugh at trying to explain this, if they knew I was explaining this to you...its somebody awkward, that does stupid things, uh, who embarrasses himself, a klutz, uh, he doesn't know anything, like a newbie. But, yeah, a gimp is another word for a loser, I guess.....So when you say, “he got gimped, she got gimped, or they were gimped,” they were completely slaughtered or embarrassed, or they don't know what they're doing, or stuff like that....Basically, you know, idiotic...that kind of thing

One's own game behavior as well as observing the futile attempts of others to throw virtual grenades, that reflect back and kill oneself are also grounds for laughter. When this lack of play performative skill is present in many members of a team other players will often chime in with a note of derision. Tony says he laughs all the time while playing *Counter-Strike*:

When grenades explode in your hand or you toss it against a wall and it comes back to you and you die. And, you know, when I see people kill themselves with grenades or even shooting, I think that's the unrealistic part about video games is when the bullets hit the wall but they kill you because they bounce back sometimes....I guess that could happen in real life but the chances of that are just so slim and killing you no less, that's funny I think. And, then sometimes when one guy beats seven guys and you think the seven guys should win but they

all suck equally bad. So, its like, the lambs running to their slaughter house and just like, boom boom boom. And then you're just like, "wow, stupid."...when you get a double kill and two guys die, that's funny. I mean, there's too many to recount I guess. But those are some of the major ones, the multiple kills.

Realism versus Realistic - the Grotesque Character of Virtual Violence

Given the graphic character of *Counter-Strike* violence, complete with spurts of virtual blood in the case of head shots and death groans for dying players, the grotesque character of violence raises the question of realism. The question of realism and violence, however, is seldom addressed in games like *America's Army*, developed and promoted by the US Army (Galloway 2004, pg. 8) while others like *Counter-Strike*, *Manhunt*, or *Grand Theft Auto* are targeted for regulation or censorship by moral entrepreneurs. The very public panics over media violence and game violence especially produced some ambivalent reactions on the part of the game players I worked with as well. Some of the players interviewed expressed a concern over the graphic character of representational violence. For those most concerned about the effects of media violence, however, pointing to the graphic nature of grotesque imagery is another way to restate the media effects perspective. It illustrates more of the anxiety parents have over the exposure of their children to graphic depictions of violence. Exploring this issue, therefore, is useful in looking at how "realistic" representations are met by those who actually play these games. Daryl, is concerned about too much realism, too much detail in graphic representation. Especially those realistic representations of the human face which allow you to feel some empathy with the character. And yet he also recognizes the humor in grotesque forms of violent representations:

Daryl: I wouldn't want too much, too much detail in certain things.

Interviewer: You wouldn't want like, legs, limbs flying all over? You know because they do that in the real *Half-Life* version when you axe a person they explode into body parts and organs.

Daryl: Actually, I can see that as funny too, to a certain extent. I guess, because I could imagine like, "well I was there, you know, and Mick's arm flew off and hit me in the head or something. No, I can see that as being funny. There's something, there's something I don't know, special about human facial expression that just might just bother me a little.

Interviewer: Too personal?

Daryl: Yeah, it somehow, you know, but I think that is why everybody looks fairly generic, most of them, a lot of them you know, like the guy has the beard, sunglasses, masks, you know, there's nobody that got a perfectly open face and I imagine they did that on purpose..... So yeah, I wouldn't wanna see a, you know, the trickle of blood coming out of, you know.....I think that would remind, that would remind me that this actually happens for real.....You want a certain level of reality but you know, don't want to actually, I guess I'd wanna, I'd wanna draw a distinction between like something that's real, something that's fake and something that's kind of virtual and this, this is clearly partakes of some thing of reality but there's no way to get confused with that.

On the other hand Frank, a younger player, enjoyed the graphic character of grotesque violence, because in his eyes it is so "unreal" as to be funny. It is the very unreal character of the action and graphics in games like *Quake* and *Quake II* which strike this player as more funny than *Counter-*

Strike. Discussing other games like Quake, where dismemberment is the norm Frank comments:

Okay, I laughed the most in Quake II, um, there's a certain mod for it called Weapons of Destruction, um, its like a mod, like Counterstrike's a mod of Half-life. But in this, like, you have rockets that when they hit someone they burst into flames, or you have a bazooka that when it hits it bursts into flames, the weapons are a little more destructive and I just laughed my ass off. Its just so funny. Because everything is so quick and you can do so many different, you just do some of the most, like, I guess, unreal things in it. Like, plus, you get, like, a grappling hook, where you can actually hook on to things and fly off and shoot down and hit someone in the head with a rocket and its just hilarious and its just so much funnier than playing Counterstrike....And then Quake, Quake II... its just so much, it more like dismemberment, its total gimps, like, in Half-life....Counterstrike, you don't see that.

Bruce likes the fact that the graphics in Counter-Strike are not that good. The crudeness of the representation allows him to maintain a safe distance from the sign representational violence. As he mentions:

And I think that if they were really photographically realistic, it would be disturbing to me. It would be a disgusting game. I don't want to see ...I mean, you know and in the game you shoot someone and you see blocks of red pixels. And that's supposed to be blood. But, it doesn't look, and it never, I never think, you know, Oh, my gosh, I just, his head exploded or anything like that.

This ambivalency over consuming graphic representations of violence speaks to a broader concern, and that is the need to maintain both the fantasy world created by the computer program and the real world separate. And, in fact, this separation, or "its only a game" talk, is most important because it defines the boundaries of what is considered both morally acceptable by the players as well as that which defines pathological from normal behavior. As graphics become more realistic the concern grows over when this line will be crossed if ever. Keeping a strict separation between the game world and the real world is enforced by drawing distinctions between the two as members of the game focus group discussed:

It's the involvement that you put into a text, I would say, you know... whereas, most everything is provided for you to that extent, you, I think you lose some of the realism, where, if you have a narrative text especially, where the word 'I' is there, very much, at least when I read a novel, I put myself into the story and pretty soon the book is gone, I mean, there are no pages in front of me, there is no text in front of me, I am there on the horse, beating the knight in shining armor, or, you know, whatever the story is about. So, I mean, yes, I agree that people would come up with that argument, and that would probably convince a person...but....Um, the, I mean... the image that's there is obviously not my hand, obviously, I mean, you know, when I'm actually thinking about, when I'm doing, or even when I hit a wrong key, its, it becomes obvious at those times that there's a keyboard here, I'm not running around, I'm not winded, I can't jump like this, I don't know what the hell to do with an M16, you know...I've never actually held one. There's a distance there that isn't present with text, I think... there's also a really dark, I mean its not, I think realism, the images are,

are really, there not really realistic, there, I think, if we froze frame, and...and all laughed at it...its very, very, oh, dramatic, um, obviously cause it's a computer program, but also, they're very simple, they're simplified so they can do all the operations....Its very, so they're not, they're not really, its not like a real counter-terrorist guy, or a real terrorist, you know, one guy's got sunglasses, a ridiculous sort of character, real simplified...And the video games are the same, the other one's like that, the ones that are based on Half-life and all that, are essentially the same thing, I mean, at first you look at it and say "wow that's really impressive, it looks realistic," but I mean, for a computer game it looks realistic, that, I mean, that's, you have to, realistic compared to what? I think, you know, understanding that its, realistic like an...Rousseau painting..

The ritual license to engage in transgressive behavior like the violence in most shooter games is carefully circumscribed within an appropriate place removed from everyday concerns of power and coercion. The distinction between, for example shooting a real gun and a virtual gun is made constantly by game players. Members of the game focus group commented:

So something we have all pointed to is this involvement regardless of the activity that takes place, chess or football or whatever. There is the same kind of immersion in whatever you are doing. And of course nobody makes the argument that this kind of involvement leads to any kind of violence, And so it's merely the structure of the play at work here that happens to be connected with violent images but I take it that you can also give an analysis of those images much like you would of a text right? It takes place within certain parameters, in this case a 16 or 17inch screen. There are certain rules that you play by and these are simply the rules of this game. You know that for the same reason that we don't throw yellow flags in the grocery store when someone cuts in front of us, those are not the rules of that place..... We understand that there is a context here and that there are rules within this context and we are going to play within this context and that entails a certain amount of emersion. And there is no reason to think that we would take the context of this act of play and juxtapose it or tie it into another situation. Or at least the onus would be on the person who argued this.

The point is, *Counter-Strike* is a game, just like any other computer game and should not be confused with any realistic portraits of violence, terrorism or war. It is not truly realistic, but, does borrow some of the characteristics of realism simply to increase game immersion and enable identification. The minimal back story for any of the battles is simply generic good/evil contests, antagonist/protagonist, not to be taken too seriously by the players. These are characteristics which in novels are carried by the language and narrative of the text, but, which in computer games are carried by the graphics, sound and the workings of the game engine. As Bruce points out:

Because Counter-Strike is a game. And the forces are not real. And, sure it can look realistic, but, it's a game. No one gets hurt. As a game, I mean it's a virtual game even. Its not even a game like football where there really is force occurring and people can get hurt. Yeah, if I thought even for a second that the characters I was playing against were really people or whatever, it just, it would no longer be a game. But, I know I can throw a grenade at them and that's just part of the game and there's nothing real about it. That's just the objective. But, I would never, that doesn't make me - because I don't associate virtual reality or virtual

games, the forces in virtual games, with real force, it doesn't effect me at all I don't think.

Even though players understand that they are playing a game and not practicing for real life violence, some gamers experience doubts about the appropriateness of playing particular games over others. This is not true for all. For example, the *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) games produced by RockStar games is one of the most popular series in all of the shooter game genre. Criticized for its apparent celebration of criminal life, sexism and racism it still retains a high degree of popularity among game players. In almost every case the popularity of the game has less to do with its representations and more to do with its "open" ended game play, not the linear game play of most shooter games. However, Tim has a problem with GTA that he does not have with Counter-Strike:

Actually there's a different game that my next door neighbor (has), he's got a Playstation. There's a game on that called Grand Theft Auto....and I played that a couple of times in the last month or so. ...Its not team oriented. Its just you. But, um, that's even - its different because basically you're a criminal. And, you know, at least when you're playing sort of this Terrorist versus counter-terrorist game, half the time you're trying - the idea is that you're doing some good or something like that. But, the theme of this other game, Grand Theft Auto, is just, you go out you steal cars. You knock people off, you know..... It's, I mean, you get these missions from the mafia or from different crooked people. And that was, like I tried it a couple of times. But, it was just too - there was sort of nothing - there was no part of it that was morally redeeming in anyway. You know. And, something about like, a war game or, which is sort of with the terrorist game. Just like we do in society, there's a justification of violence in war that for some reason the we feel more comfortable with than with, not necessarily that comfortable, but more comfortable with it than just random urban violence.....And its funny that, because I'm, you know, if anything, but this is intuitive. But if anything, I wouldn't say I'm a pacifist. But, certainly, I'm not, like with this recent conflict. Don't just send in the bombers right away, you know. I'm very slow to saying that as a national policy or what countries should do to resort to this kind of violence, you know. But, still there is, even for me, there is a difference for me between war violence and just random thug violence, or something like that, you know.

Thug violence is not okay but war violence is okay since it can be morally redeeming. And yet GTA remains at the top of the sales charts. Other players have no problem with the game and admire its open game structure, expressing less concern about its "moral" purpose. After all it is only a game in a virtual sandbox. While the grotesque may be allowed to exist in the play world of virtual gaming it is met with horror under the real conditions of war and street violence. This is just as true of those who play computer games as it is for the general public. Markus perhaps says it the best in the following quote drawing careful distinctions between fictional, graphic iconic violence and the real violence within the Middle East:

Like, the stuff in the news, um people die, people suffer, people are maimed and like ah, there was a pizza shop in Israel that was blown just recently, and when I was there um, I went there. I mean they showed the picture, and I've been there, I've eaten there, my friends were there and a letter was sent to me by my Rabbi there and said so this is you know, the daughter, well so he sent me a letter and said you know, this is, this is what happened and that

sort of thing. I don't know how much more different you can get between real life, towers falling down or bombs going off and a bunch of people sitting around basically in the dark hitting keys on keyboards, you know hooting and hollering and having fun. That's, they're more than worlds apart I would say.

The criticism that some moral entrepreneurs make is that violent media will make consumers less aware, less sensitive to the needs of others, to the less fortunate, to the weak for example. In responding to this criticism Omar attempts to make a distinction between himself and other gamers who might not have the same level of discernment that he claims to have:

...if anything I think we feel desensitized. But that could also be from the excess violence already present in media like television, movies, books. We don't really care to use force. None of us seek fights or try to really cause them and generally avoid them....I think the correlation is very small. Most people in life do not go about seeking violence, and it is the same with gamers. The gamers tend to avoid violence, but those like in the rest of society the gamers who have no control of themselves allow the games to excite them to the point of violence. These people may already have family or social problems that are triggers for their violent behaviors. From my experience, most people use these games to get rid of stress, take a break or enjoy themselves. Some people take it to the point of excess where they spend their waking hours playing the game. Which from my observance affects the social lives of these people in that they don't associate with people often, or may not deal well with people. But most of the people I have observed play a good deal without affecting their everyday lives. The society we live in has itself become more violent, besides the shooting in schools, now there is violence at work, on roads, etc. It is too simplistic to blame video games for violence, especially considering there are greater sources of violence available in movies, television shows, and real life.

What is interesting about this quote is how closely it parallels the attitudes of those when asked about media violence and its effect on behavior. It is always the impact it has on someone else's behavior and not their own. The need for regulation is always projected outward to a less powerful group, young children, women, etc. When one understands that a topic is controversial the ploy is to talk about someone else's lack of control, usually a lower status social group, and not admit freely the pleasures one has by consuming such an activity. Of course for some players being less sensitive is a virtue because it allows one to handle stressful situations more conscientiously and with greater control. This is especially true for conflict and violent situations, at least in the game world. How well that translates to real life has yet to be proven. As Jose says:

For example, when I started playing Counter-Strike ...my heart started beating as if I was actually doing the things that I was doing, that I was in the computer and then you know after playing so much, you don't get the same feeling that you did the first time. You're always trying to get to that feeling of, of when you did it for the first but you don't approach it after that and when you go out you feel like you know, it's, I actually encounter this thing in Counter-Strike, I can keep my cool. I am being chased down, I'm chasing someone down and, and um, so you, you, if someone is going to come up and you are going to have a conflict with them I think that you feel more relaxed because you were in this situation before

and you know it is not reality, I know it is not reality but you know it puts you in this stress situation that is very similar to reality so you know you feel more relaxed so in that sense it makes you less sensitive to, to, to this type of situations of violence but I don't want to say that it makes people violent, it doesn't, um I'm, I'm a really nice guy and everyone says that and ah I'm not a violent person so it doesn't make you less violent but it gives you more the ability of coping of with these stressful situations.

Slippages between real and fantasy violence

The slippage between real and virtual violence appears as more of a product of widespread social inequalities than of any effect which media could produce. Real criminal gangs, real crimes, and real violence exist side by side with the fantasy world, often separated by the narratives we tell ourselves about how the world is supposed to work. In Chan's account of his experience in playing Counter-Strike in Taiwan, this separation breaks down:

..subconsciously you know that Americans are always the counter-terrorists, and you know, like, Arabs and, like, Irish radicals are the terrorists. But that almost, you know, that almost, like, entices me to be terrorists more often.....play the underdog.....I have read the descriptions though, when, you know, you pick teams and they're descriptions. Um, and, like, you know, they are named,...after specific terrorist situations and stuff like that.....like, I've had friends download, like, pig and alligator skins that were just running around, like, alligators were terrorist and.....In Taiwan, uh, many people who come, I mean, we have a huge, uh, like, Mafia, gang problem, sort of like in Chicago, but it's kind of a different kind of thing. Whereas, where a lot of people you would know would be in these kind of gangs or something, maybe its just cause, I'm not, like, I didn't grow up in the city.....Like, real, yeah, real gangs. They sell drugs and, like, and, you know, you know, like the Triads in Asia and stuff like that, a lot of people I know are in these too, but uh, a lot of them come and play. And so, actually a lot of the gangster guys would play as terrorists, they would only play if they could play as terrorists.....these guys would only play if they were terrorists.....the way I found this out was cause we were sitting in a row and one guy was really good and I wanted him to, like, join our team so we could, like, coordinate stuff with him, and you know. And it was obvious he was in a gang, like, you could kind of tell who was in a gang, and who's not. And then, he was just like, "I don't play counter-terrorist."he kind of knew, he like wanted to kill, like, cops basically.....in his virtual fight.

This slippage between real life and the iconic representational violence in Counter-Strike was revealed when just after 9/11 all of the players I worked with decided to call it quits for a few weeks. In their eyes it did not seem appropriate to play a violent video game after experiencing the largest attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor.

Tony believes that one's degree of education will influence whether or not you take virtual violence seriously or not and worries about the relationship between playing Counter-Strike and practicing for real terror acts.:

I don't think there's a real relationship if you look at it like that. I guess it depends on your education. If you're not, if you're very naive and easily influenced by friends, which a lot of high school kids can be, you know, then they'll look at them and "oh, Counterstrike will give

them ideas,” I guess, but, you know, it’s the same as a movie could give them easily. I think movies could easily give them a lot better ideas...For sure, because Counterstrike is just a video game and (its) not really plausible to run through something and plant a bomb....and set it off within x number of times, but, I don’t know...up until September 11 I didn’t think there was a connection but...Now, after September 11th, now its like, its going to be weird playing Counterstrike, now because, good thing there’s no blowing up buildings and stuff like that because it would seem even more weird....Because its like, “what the hell.” ... I did think about the fact that Counterstrike is terrorist versus counter terrorist...I was like, wow, what are the chances of that, and people did talk about it, some people started changing their names to Osama Bin Laden and...and then they made fun of him, Shit on Osama. ...I don’t think there’s really any connection to that or this, but...You know, I wonder if, you know, hopefully not, but if the real terrorists played this to get practice, and the sick thought of that enters your mind, because they don’t really have the funds to, you know, the US runs real war games out in...Puerto Rico, and its like...is this their war games?...You sit there and think about the possibilities because you hear how they communicate online through web sites....And you just wonder, this is the easiest place you could get away with it, because the government doesn’t really, I doubt they monitor online games....And chat,...its anonymous and cause its very static, its not a website that’s there, you can’t really, I’m sure you could trace a person...Yeah, I hope no one thought about it, you know, its sick, but, you know, its, like, you can’t really trace a person, I’m sure you can if he’s online long enough, like a phone call, but, its got to be damn near impossible...I doubt anyone in the government even, I’m sure there are people who play but...

Of course, since 9/11 it is clear that some of the hijackers did practice, in fact, using computer games. However, they were not violent games like Counter-Strike but flight simulator games produced by Microsoft for flying 757 airplanes. This anxiety was expressed to me frequently after 9/11 and only faded slowly over the several months after the incident. The game sessions I attended were interrupted for about two weeks and then resumed their normal schedule. Osama Your Mama was a favorite on-line name to adopt at the time, and later Osama Bin Forgotten, when the war failed to locate Osama Bin Laden.

And yet, even with the above slippage between real and fictional violence there is the strong determination to maintain the boundaries between what is real and what is fantasy, even as major institutions like advertising and marketing firms work hard to break down these distinctions that gamers themselves make. Like the previous quote by Mick, Bryson emphasizes the importance of difference between real and virtual violence and the impact virtual violence may have on any real life desire to harm another:

It just doesn’t seem to me to have an impact. Maybe its just the people that I play with. But, it seems like everybody has a pretty good grip on the difference between what happens on a computer screen and what happens in everyday life., there is just such a disjunct. I mean. It would never occur to me in a million years to actually pick up a Ster Aug and, you know, shoot somebody between the eyes with it. It wouldn’t even occur to me to even buy a gun. I’m generally opposed to gun ownership in home. I just think its just dangerous and more trouble than its worth. But, I recognize that this is a fantasy. This is role playing, you know. This is just a way of demonstrating strategy on a computer, and, ah, you know. I just can’t

imagine that somebody would take, well, take, I guess. I can't imagine that I would ever lose that distance of judgement or any of the people who played here.

This last quote points to the fact that play and directed or instrumental actions are quite different in both intent and result. Simulators designed for military or commercial training may have some of the graphic features which games have, but, their purposes are far different. While the military employs extensive computer simulators in tank training as well as small group tactics, the goal is to instill a particular type of reaction, a particular type of thinking which can perfect those skills necessary to control a real battlefield. Playing Counter-Strike or any other military style game designed for play is but a very, very thin shadow of real military simulators. To equate the two is to confuse reality with fantasy. Members of the focus group responded:

One of the disparities (in the media effects argument) is that if soldiers are approaching video games as training, the training context that they have as trainers is a much different thing than the kind of experience one has when one says "lets play a game."....So all the things, attitude, comportment, would vary between the two situations. So it is a process of desensitization and they understand that.. .that there is a better chance of them becoming desensitized. Whereas if this "a game" it doesn't have as many ties to life and combat or what have you. on the other hand I think can talk about the problem of how to acquire targets just visually speaking. Kids playing video games probably do a better job at that of course, Quarterbacks probably do a better job at that...

The pleasure of disembodied immersion, flow and violent imagery

By now it is a truism that game flow is important in creating a sense of immersion in a fictional world. That immersion depends upon dis-attending to one's body and focusing only on the screen images and the actions within the game. This has its own pleasures. One can forget one's body for a brief period. Of course, some might understand this as a problem. However, as I pointed out game players are still very much aware that they are playing a game and not acting out violence in real life, not killing with real life consequences. And, of course, this disembodied state is just as true for book readers as it is for game players with the exception that readers are still and players are moving small parts of their bodies in responses to computer programs. A member of the focus group commented:

When I am engaged with the book I am not conscious of anything. I turn the pages of my book, I mean my conscious attention is immersed in ... the book. My experience of the game is very analogous to that. It is a kind of a mental lapse to realize that I am sitting in a chair per se. If I do have to lean, I am really not consciously aware unless I do it so much that you know it hinges on that in some way. For me it is more of an experience of, like you were saying of a disembodied state... Yeah, not in a physical sense, just in a sense of how it might be, you know? I may be conscious of the fact that I am hitting the wrong key.... I am out of the game. I am not engaged with it anymore. But when I am doing better, even if my shots are not hitting, if at least I am operating the right keys I am just conscious of the screen for the most part.

It is within this concept of the disembodied pleasure initiated by the game flow of computer playing

that cheating in the game by on-line players becomes problematic. Essentially cheating, or players mismatched due to differences in skill level, produces an imbalance in game teams and ends up drawing attention less to the game than to the game mechanics, which, in turn, increases self-consciousness and destroys the game flow - itself depending upon a forgetting of the fact that one is "in the game." From the focus group:

Well, I can think of a couple of times, one was the person came in and played and was just completely out of our league so which ever team he was on (laughing) so which ever team he was on he would just go and destroy the other side and then if you were on that team you didn't have anything to do and if you were destroyed you didn't have anything to do so you know that wasn't any fun We've also had times when it was tough to get rid of people that cheated um like one of the cheats is you can move really, really, really, really, fast....Um so that's not fun. Um Even when things aren't going well for my team you know there's always an anticipation of it getting better and working through the downturn and even then weird stuff happens and that's fun too so pretty much the game breakers are the about the only time it's not fun.

Perhaps it is precisely the pleasure of the game flow and violent images combined which causes much anxiety among media watchers. Much of the media effects literature as previously pointed out already believes in a casual connection between the consumption of violent images and aberrant behavior. This initial prejudice colors the state of media research while demonizing those game players who enjoy the pleasure of the modern grotesque. The game players I talked with had strong words about the media effects perspective, other than the issue of real and fantasy violence difference. Lewis comments with a rather interesting logic:

Well, there are terrorists in every country, I think there's terrorists in every country, and uh, so, not all of them play counterstrike, obviously, so, uh, they don't even have a computer, some of them don't even have a computer, so, there can't be a link. The data proves that there's no link, because if there's a link then all those people who are terrorists would have to play Counterstrike. So, I think the data, I mean, uh, yeah, some kids here have done things, the high school, I forget the name...Yeah, Columbine, they used Doom, media blamed Doom for it. But I don't think Doom had to blame....There's something wrong with them already and that's what caused them to do the action that they did....Doom was just entertainment for them. Doom was, uh, I don't know, I'm going to use an example. When ice cream sales go up murder rates go up as well, and so, it doesn't mean that ice cream sales are causing murders, it means that the weather got warmer and more criminals are out, it's a third factor...Yeah, correlation without causation, so, that's what I think.....Yeah, but, I guess they like those kind of games because of their, yeah I think they get attracted to games like that. That doesn't mean that the game causes them to do that, that means they like the game.

Chan comments on the attempt to prove a relationship between aggression and the playing of violent games. His analysis is more subtle than is generally found in the media literature:

I think people who say that kind of look at the past and say well, the good old past...But we didn't, we didn't have these games so, like, you know, there was no, like, crime, like, teen

gangs or whatever, I mean, which is really kind of a dumb argument, but, I mean, I would have to say that its very easy for me to believe something like that. Not with, you know, if I don't really reflect on it a lot. To believe that games effect, the sort of, development in such a way that it makes them more aggressive. Um, I think for me, not really, but I would have to say that all the violence on TV, movies, games, all inclusive, I would say that, that does desensitize us to, um, like, violence. Like when 9/11 happened, not to sound callus, or whatever, but watching the planes fly into that thing was kind of not that bad. You know, like...You are watching from a distance and the TV frames it in the sort of way that a movie frames it, uh, a movie is framed....Yeah, I can understand that, but I can also understand the point of which, like, I want to be sensitive to other people's suffering and to be, you know, more than I, more so than what I am, you know, sensitive to people's suffering all over the world. You know, I want to really have it be a strong impetus for me to do what I'm doing, or to act out in some sort of constructive way....all I'm saying is that there's something about it, that, kind of, you know, um, makes me kind of think, oh this kind of stuff is just common place, you know, or that, uh, um, people get shot everywhere, you know, like, why should I care about gangs. You know....you can be a sensitive person and play all these video games, I'm not saying those things are sort of mutually exclusive. But that there's something about, you know, watching something on TV, you know, something really horrible like 9/11 and then playing the video games that kind of makes me, like, uncomfortable....and I don't know if that is just because I've been taught the sort of morality where its like, you know, and then sort of willing doing it when there's nothing bad going on, quote unquote....Its, its really, uh, its still a big question for me, um, like, I know my brother who's been gaming for a long time is not a violent person. He would, you know, I'm much more violent than he is, and you know, he's played at least fifty times more games than I have. His game collection is getting quite extensive.

On the other hand it is also true that the players are concerned about the impact such games might have on the young. But, their understanding of frustration and aggression with gaming is quite a bit different than blaming the content of the game, the violent graphics for children's behavior. A member of the focus group mentioned that his wife works at a local library where she observed aggressive behavior among children when they play violent games:

Focus Group: On the other hand my wife, who works at the public library where they have public video terminals says that these video games lead to the rowdy behavior of the kids.... Well in general she sees these kids. You know they come in and log on to these computer games. And she sees the games are quite violent.. In fact there are some sites that the are explained to the children that they won't be able to visit those sites in the library... and then she just sees these kids punching each other and getting excited and ah... well I guess that's enough.. well, she sees....I guess I would respond as you would but she sees, you know, that connection Just because she observes this behavior.

Interviewer: well, this is the common denominator in most medical studies. They claim that after you play video games at least for 15 minutes you are more aggressive, that you have more aggression in you.

Focus Group: Sure your screwin up all the time. Ha, ha, hah.

Tim, mentioned the conflicts he often had with his wife over playing Counter-Strike. In part the conflict was over how he spent his time. Balancing out game time with family time is difficult with the added responsibilities of children and work. However, apart from these practical considerations of time usage is another element which has to do with communicating why one wants to spend their time in this fashion. Tim's wife had a difficult time understanding why he would want to play a violent video game, especially since he hates horror movies. Tim described it this way:

I mean that's where I talked about it most in the discussions with my wife, but, I think that was sort of the a little bit of the fear. That is this, you know, it was going to have an effect or it could have an effect in a way that it would - well, let me just say this. The way that you put it, it sounds like there is a dark side there anyways. And a game like this or games like this expose that or encourage that to manifest itself in a more prevalent way.... Or to play with it, yeah. To flirt with it or something like that. And that's dangerous to. I mean its another thing to say that actually playing a game like this gives you a dark side, you know. I guess that's more like a psychological question, if its there. But, yeah, I think that sort of, the question for me, in the same way that I would say why would I want to put violent movie images into my head that sometimes are difficult to get out? Why would I even flirt, you know, if I do have a dark side, or however you put it, why would I want to flirt with that?....Like sort of rationally, why would I want to do that?

In the end the game was just fun to play with one's friends as evidence by the length of time all of the players played both during the week and over several years. The social power of playing, the bonding of friends, provided the necessary context in which the violent graphics were tempered by the positive benefits which came from play as a social occasion.

One of the most important elements which came through in studying how game players made sense of what they did was the tremendous importance placed on trust and solidarity among friends. Game playing worked to increase this solidarity and was very important in establishing a sense of trust between game members. This fact emerged over and over throughout the course of this study. In a Durkheimian fashion of collective consciousness, game players established weekly rituals of play which bound its members together in solidarity allowing for trust to grow between them, and as a result a sense of friendship. The fact that these were all men makes no difference. The same could be said about those women who start their own Counter-Strike clans and play together as well. It is the importance of the social aspect of play which moves us from the instrumental rationality of modern capitalist society to playing with the grotesque as a collective social and art form. It is therefore not the graphics, not the sound, not even the narrative of the game which remains significant. These social process can be observed in non-violent games, bingo players and the players of such board games as Dungeons and Dragons (Fine 1983). It is the communication between game members and how that communication both reproduces dominant social hierarchies (sexism, racism, etc), but, which can also serve to undermine those dominant hierarchies, as we discussed with the celebration of the grotesque and the carnival quality of play, that remains the site of symbolic violence and its contestation.

For the last two sections of this paper I want to discuss the significant of "trash talking," the role of gender, and how trust effects the understanding of trash talk meanings. Other than the physical layout of game play, with players in the same room, the only means of communication was through the chat function of the key board. Now players can use microphones and headsets to communicate via voice directly to game players. It is this chat function which comprises an extensive repertoire of

communicative forms (Wright, Breidenbach, Boria 2002).

Trust, Solidarity and Trash talking: Social Power and the Transgressive

Different players respond to trash talking in a variety of ways. These types of ritual insults can be quite unnerving if one is not used to them. As I mentioned at the start of this paper it is the area of trash talking which, unlike the graphics, narrative, and game content really comprises the site of what Bourdieu would call symbolic violence since it can involve real intimidation and power tactics over another, especially the misunderstandings that may develop between strangers playing over the Internet. But, also for many game players it distracts from the game and leads them to seek out friends to play with where there is not a constant guessing as to the motives of another's comments. Bruce said:

Its most fun for me when ever I know everyone that's playing. And, I know, whenever I played last week I didn't know the other people's names, their character names. And, that's detract from it. I mean, I want to know that, you know, that Mick is now Mr. Sparkles. Or that Markus is Happy Fun Ball. So knowing who I'm playing with. Keep the game small. I don't like it when they get above; I think five people a team is about the max for me.Being able to be close enough to my teammates, by being in the same room, to be able to talk to them a little bit. I think not being able to do that really takes away from it. Whenever I played last week I was by myself outside of the main room and I left I think after an hour just because I felt, I felt like that I couldn't talk to anyone and the fact that I didn't know their names.What character was whom. Those two things together made me feel like I was playing off site with strangers and that was just, I couldn't stand it. It was boring. It takes so much out of the game. So I left after an hour.

For Bruce having his game play buddies nearby increased the degree of his pleasure and solidarity with the group. For the same reason knowing who you play with makes it easier to understand the comments thrown out by other team members during a game. One learns not to take insults personally from those you know and trust. Mick makes the point of knowing people he plays with to make it easier to understand insults, but, also because his players are less likely to engage in such talk:

You know I'm asking that question all the time still (meaning of trash talk?). And I know that my understanding of trash talk kind of developed in the whole basketball situation, right. I guess, I don't know. It wasn't a real big thing when I grew up in sports necessarily. I find communicating, whether it's by email or on-line during a game, always exasperating, because the nuances of what your saying, and your trying to say something quickly, are easily missed. And so I'm not sure that I'm receiving them correctly either. So, I had a difficulty with trash talking period. Just in trying to understand what the intent of the.. So when it gets really, really kind of nasty. When it gets really nasty, and I say nasty in the sense that when they start using racial or even, I guess, crude, for lack of a better word at the moment, terms, like sexual terms or homophobic terms or whatever, I just - it just seems abrasive to me. It doesn't seem like, hey, this is part of the game everyone's cool. If I know the people in the room that I'm doing with, I don't mind joking around that way. But, I know them. And I can kind of control the intent. But, sometimes, somebody says to me, and it just sounds offensive. And I think the things that offended me more, if somebody accuses me of bad strategy and if they use a derogatory term, you know. My strategy, they question my rationality - that really bothers me, you know. That's where I have lost it before with people. And I got really upset. I don't like

the trash talking.

On the other hand other players like Jose are not bothered by trash talking. For them they simply laugh it off as a way of “getting to you” to lower your game performance:

To me, it doesn't mean anything and um, it just a way of getting to your nerves and making you not play your game. You cannot let that talk get to you. Um, for example, when people say, um, oh I played bad and they say you're gay and I say um, I do you know that I was a man? And then they're wondering, oh shit, you know, or oh okay, I actually am gay and then they're thinking, oh okay, so it's just, the talk is just a way to get to you and you shouldn't think anything of that but um, it is kind of sad that you do have some stereotypes that are being exposed in this and that they are being, and that they are still alive, they're kept alive by the game because you know you are using them, and you try to get to the person and people react to them, I mean you say, oh they work I can use these on someone at a different time and so you have different, you have almost, stereotypes, you have racial stereotypes um and sexual stereotype. You know, if you are a girl in the game you're gonna start, yeah, they start getting a lot of, they get some, some sexist, sexist comments, you know so but if you, you have to look at in a way that, they are not, I, at least I think they are not that type of people they're just trying to get to you and they don't actually, the talk doesn't mean much to me you know, I just say, they're trying to get to me, to people.

Tony, who is East Asian in background comments on the importance of trust and trash talking. He makes the point that knowing who is doing the talking is significant for understanding their intent. Not knowing them allows you to “blow off” their comments that much easier, even when those comments may be racist:

Pretty much basic talk in there, its just like, its like the language is obscene, you know, its just like any other video game, or..or basketball game, or...Gay, fag. Its like anything and everything that is politically incorrect to use is used, you know. (What do they mean?)...Nothing at all to me, I'm very thick skinned now, you know, especially since I'm a minority, I'm used to, when I was younger, I'm used to the trash talk or racist comments or, you know, back then, and now I know that these people don't really mean it. Well, some might, you know...You can't judge, but if its your friends, you know they're really not, especially if he's the same race as you...Its like, he's calling you a racist name but its like, how black people call themselves the N word, but you know that they're not really being racist, but other people don't really see that, they're like, “but how come they use it” but it really isn't negative. Throughout history it has been but they use it, but when someone else uses it...

Interviewer: So its seems like the issue is if you know the person saying it, right?

Tony: Yeah.

Interviewer: So, what if its someone online that you don't know?

Tony: You just take it as, you know, I don't take it too seriously because its online and its anonymous and you don't really, you know, just talk back....Sometimes, especially after September 11th, its like, somebody would say, like, “kill all the Muslims,” and you're like, stupid, ignorant. You just, I just assume, give them the benefit of the doubt and, that may be naive now and maybe when I get older, so, but I think its just ignorance, I think a lot of

Americans, I mean, I hate to say this but I think the majority of Americans are pretty ignorant to anything outside the borders of the USA. Its like, "what are you talking about, 'kill all the Muslims,' you dumb asses." Its like, Muslims are everywhere in the US, there are even black Muslims, like, what the hell are you talking about. (responding to insults?)...No, its pointless. And they're not, but, see, if I start defending Muslims or x cultures, then I give away myself as, then they'll be like, "oh look, he's..." Yeah, then they'll start dumping on you on top of the trash talking going on, plus, its not worth my, I'm not going to waste my time trying to educate someone online. You know, its like, they're not going to remember it.

Jose, understands that often game players will throw out terms which are not meant in their literal sense, but, rather as markers of strength or weakness, not to be confused with a literal understanding. For example, he says:

Yes, like gay probably because it's more feminine it's more negative in society, more looked as not belonging to society um, (long pause) and that is probably why it is used. They probably think of gay as feminine type and feminine is some type of weakness, more passive so these are, you know, passiveness and weakness and, these are not characteristics that are good in Counter-Strike because you have to be strong and you have to be courageous and you have to be, you have to be aggressive in order to play in the game so and in order to be good in the game, I don't know, to have fun in the game. And um so if you're gay and they call you a gay guy (laughing) then in that sense they are appealing to a feminine or a weakness characteristics or a weak character but you know in reality we all know that is not true....

Interviewer: So you feel it is more of playing with the stereotype then?

Jose: Yeah, yeah, with the feminine stereotype, some how being feminism, being a woman is weak.

Interviewer: So what you're saying is that this is not true. In real life but in the game there is kind of an illusion about playing with that stereotype, right?

Jose: Right, yeah, yeah. I mean that would be my interpretation

Bryson, on the other hand makes the point that such trash-talking is used to put down players who are playing with less skill than themselves. The very language itself becomes an assault:

Oh, it indicates immaturity to me.Yeah. I take it that, you know, games like that could be a way for some people to demonstrate or defend their masculinity. I mean, I assume its overwhelming male doing this. So, if one of the purposes of the game is to defend your masculinity then you degrade the masculinity of others, from their point of view by using words like gay or fag.Well, I mean, I guess, ah, I guess Counter-Strike would be a hyper-masculine world. I mean, there are no female characters in the game, whatsoever. And its kill or be killed, you know. Its me against you and my team against your team. We have guns and if you die your out for that whole map. So this is virile, manly sort of stuff. At least on one interpretation of manliness. So, um, if you want to put that much into the game then it becomes very troublesome if you get killed, right? Its sort of a slight on you. And if somebody is doing something like camping, that gets you killed. Then obviously then they're not real men. So, they're fags.

Clint understands the use of trash-talking as a form of power and tends to dismiss what others say as “not serious.” However, he also acknowledges that he does less of this with people he does not know, playing with strangers:

...for me I sit there and if I’m blown away I may use a word like “you motherfucker” for me that’s a very emotional word. But by the same token it doesn’t mean anything in that setting. Its just kind of an exclamation. Its not serious you are not really trying to delegate. Its just a kind of slang name. You could just as well call them fool.If I were playing with strangers I would do this less. I wouldn’t feel I had permission to say that kind of thing. I have not really thought about this. I know they get said. But I don’t classify the word “fag” as “oh that’s a slur on gays.” I haven’t heard slurs on race like “nigger” or “wop” It doesn’t carry the load of meaning in the game.....There certainly is a sense of maleness to me about the game. All the guys that play are guys. I don’t know if its just guys hanging out....Its just trash talk. You don’t take it seriously. Its just a throw away.

Omar, on the other hand, likes to engage in trash-talking for the fun of it, when someone he observes is either “camping” in the game, (hiding out), or is doing things that he finds irritating. For him trash-talking is simply a way to get somebody’s attention in a fast paced game:

If I see someone is losing to me, then I might taunt him or her and gloat for the fun of it. Also, if the other person is extremely irritating or maybe camps too long, I might taunt him. I would use terms like "camping skank", "bitch", and other derogatory phrases. These phrases are usually get people's attention, but they do not insult the person itself but the way they are playing.....I do not find "trash" talking offensive. It tends to make the game interesting and people get more involved with the game. If people start "trash" talking, I may engage in it also or if I don't feel like it I ignore the people and just play.

Lewis takes a more philosophical approach and understands that trash-talking seems to be a function of age and maturity. He contrasts the times when he used to trash-talk while learning the game when he was younger to his position now as being less reactive to others in the game, to practicing more patience:

But, now that I’m 22, they say something bad at me and I just laugh it off, and it doesn’t even, I’m so, I don’t know, I don’t know what happened, I lost the urge to fight.....I mean, the way I think, is that most of these guys are trash talkers, kids, and kids are kids, they’re going to talk the way they talk. I mean, I was like that. I think, okay, that’s mean, a few years ago to trash talk right there, so, ...right now I don’t trash talk at all, I mean, maybe a little, but not even a little, but, um, in my teenage years I used to a lot.....Its amusing to me really, but no I don’t, I don’t get offended. No.....Like, you know about the stick and stones right? Sticks and stones can break my bones but words will never hurt me, so, that’s basically my attitude right now. Um, I do feel like, sort of nervous when people start talking to me directly, cause I always play on these servers where I don’t know anyone, and all of a sudden they start talking about me, or refer to me.....Like, uh, for example, like, I went on a server and I died horribly and I think they started making fun of me, like, “you suck” or something. And, uh, I didn’t say anything, I just felt a little nervous, like, uh, a strange feeling in my stomach, like butterflies. I’m like,

“ah, an FPS game and I sucked, they said I suck, they know I suck,” a dirty feeling, a bad feeling in the stomach. So, yeah, that was, I’d say that was a bad game play. ...I just kept playing, uh, I think I signed off the server. That was when I was learning how to play Counterstrike and stuff.....So, I went on a different server I think, it didn’t bother me. I mean, it did bother me, but not to the extent that I started swearing back at them.....Yeah, um, as a kid I just saw them as the enemy. I had to bring them down no matter what. But, right now, as I grew older I was like, okay, they don’t really mean what they say, they’re just doing what I used to do when I was younger. They’re just saying whatever comes to their mind, they’re bursts of anger and then just lash out, and then, uh, so yeah, and you look at them differently....Yeah, it helps me understand the way to think, for example....

The use of such language as “gay” and “fag” occurs across the board in sports as a means to police masculinity (Messner 1992; Messner and Sabo 1994; Eder, Evans and Parker 2001) as well as used in on-line game trash talk. Bruce offers his reflections on why the terms carry the meaning that they do for some game players:

Its interesting that homophobic slurs seem to come out in kind of male dominated quote unquote aggressive activities. Like sports, or fights. I can’t imagine getting into some sort of intellectual debate with someone and having by retort be, “Your so gay” or something like that. I don’t know. I’ve never really understood that. Yeah, I guess when people say that. I mean, there’s a real hostility, I don’t think it’s a hostility to gay people necessarily, but, that they use those words like gay or fag or whatever to sort of, you know, denote something inferior about the other person. Maybe its...I know that in ancient Greece they used to consider, where homosexuality was sort of, it was okay in some populations, but, if you were a male who received homosexual sex you were looked down upon and they would call you a word. I can’t remember the exact word. But, basically it meant soft. And the connotation was your not a real man, right. Because your soft. You submit to the manliness, literally the hardness of this other male. So, I mean, I really haven’t thought about this that much. But, it wouldn’t surprise me if something like that is going on. Where one player calls another player a fag. And by that they mean something like, trying to call into question - that’s too strong - but, in some sense, call into question that other person’s masculinity. Or... that’s how, that’s the form the insult takes. You know. You don’t call the person stupid. You don’t call them a jerk. You know. If somebody has kicked your ass or whatever in this game. You don’t say your stupid. You say, you know, “you fag knock it off” or something.

Tina, as a female player of Counter-Strike talks about her experiences with trash-talking, only in a foreign context of playing in Taiwan. There the slurs are different because of language and cultural differences, but, the attempt to police gender boundaries and in this case national boundaries remains very much consistent with data collected from US players:

I’ve heard gay a lot, gay and fagot, like, I’ve heard those so many times, its just sort of like, why bother saying that stuff anymore, I mean, its ridiculous....Um, um, lesbo, I’ve heard that a lot, if it’s a woman playing, they’ll call you a lesbo....Yeah, say you’re a lesbo, yeah....feminist was kind of an insult for a while at me....its mostly, in Taiwan they say something, called, um, its like, basically the equivalent of say like, white boy, like that....Which means, like, and (as)

they use it, it means foreign devil...Its like, its Hwai Chiou.....Yeah, Hwai Chiou. It means, like, foreign devil, basically, or like, white boy, or...any of those, and like, they use that sometimes in Asian countries, um, mostly in Taiwan, I think it's a Taiwanese phrase, um, because it means, like, you don't know...Yeah, each other, cause in the culture when you say Hwai Chiou to somebody its like a derogatory terms for saying 'oh foreigner,' like, 'he doesn't know what he's doing' you know....So, they'll use it in Taiwan to describe somebody who doesn't know what they're doing. You know, inside the game....Its sort of like a weird racial term that goes in there....Yeah, I've heard that one a few times and...

T: So, do you ever get offended by the trash talking that goes on in there, you've mentioned a couple times that you get offended?

A: Um, it depends on what they're trash talking about. Um, I get offended if they're like, 'oh, fagot or lesbo' and they're targeting a group of people and using it as an insult....When, like, they're just supposing that there's nobody that's actually gay on the server or actually a lesbian, or something, they're just kind of using it as an insult, um, yeah, I get offended when its just really uneducated people insulting other people using really derogatory things, you know, um, although I've never heard anyone say, like, nigger, or anything like that.Yeah, I've seen that, I actually, I saw one name that was Nigger Beater, I was like, okay, that's not cool. It was like, yeah, it was a clan of people; one was Wife Beater, one was Nigger Beater, one was Child Beater, like they had all these, like, Beaters you know....Yeah, it wasn't too cool, I was kind of like...If its really prevalent throughout the whole server I usually just leave and switch servers, you know, um, if its just one or two people, usually like I'll trash talk them, cause I'm usually already better than them.....So, I'll be like, what the hell's wrong with you, you know, and all this stuff....one thing that I always use to trash talk, cause I use, really uh, I'll use a lot of vocabulary that they don't understand....And so that they're always like, 'what does that mean?' I think that's great. I'm always like, "you should know." You know, I always think that's fun.

The diversity of language is illustrated by Chan's comment on the types of slur words used to trash-talk in Taiwan. Trash-talking appears as universal even if its form changes with a changed cultural context:

Yeah, like, kind of like, like, uh, Sula is a Taiwanese word for, like, somebody who is like a young garlic...People type SULA...If you know, if you ever play on the internet and you see somebody use that word, you know he's from Taiwan. You can ask him, and he'll probably be like, "yeah, I'm Taiwanese and live in California or something." I've met people who live in America like that, who use Sula. Um, 78 is Cheba in Mandarin but in Taiwanese its pussy.... Gan is just fuck, GAN, they type that in a lot, Gan Gan Gan, if they get killed or something, Gan Gan Gan....Uh, Sula is the most often used one, Sula is like what a coward is like, uh, you know, like, uh...78 is the sexualized one, uh, Cheba, and Sula is like you're a young garlic, like, you have no, like, you have no spice to you, like, you're just a completely bland object....People use Fuck too. I mean, people know what Fuck means. You know, uh, I'm thinking of like when, uh, what is it when you're taunting somebody to, like, come or something, like, bring it on, or something like that...Like in Taiwan, they would just, I think people would just say, bring it on.

Trash-talking raises a boundary question: who gets to play and who gets harassed? In this manner

Bourdieu's symbolic violence is reproduced through the trash-talking forms used to get a player's attention. However, we must also be cautious about understanding how these words are used and received. Player meaning, as I have illustrated demonstrates a large difference in understanding the meaning of such talk. But, it is true that women players, at least players who in some way are identified as female players (even if they are not), via tag names or statements, are subject to constant unwanted attention. This has prompted many promising female players to leave the game entirely, or at the very least to opt out for their own controlled servers. Jose, mentioned that when he encounters players with female sounding names they annoy him. This is because in his eyes the name is meant to convey some type of "cuteness" to which he feels he needs to respond. He mentioned one female player in particular:

...she had a particular name that just, told you right off that this, this, this was a girl, and you could tell, you try to interact with her and you can see that she's like, "oh I'm a girl, please take it easy on me," (in a high pitched voice) you know, its like, its just not fun, you know, you like rough people in there, you know, that they're going to take them out, or you take them out or they'll take you out. And that's, and just with that character of, you know, "oh, I'm cute," is not, is not part of the game, that's just, that's a characterization that probably takes away from the reality of the game. Because its war-like, its very simple, you've got to take the people out, and um, you just don't, there's no cuteness playing in this, in that game, its just takes out, it doesn't fit, you know.

Of course, the question of whether this was a male disguised as a female is an open question since he never found out. So the interaction is one completely based on the linguistic indicator of the name and the pattern of speech after he asked questions. One could just as easily have been male, affecting "female" speech forms. On the other hand Jose also makes the point that he is bothered by the stereotypical effects of "femaleness" and not the actual behavior within the game. In fact, he argues that given the nature of the game increased aggressiveness is possible for anyone who plays:

I don't think all women are like that, like the women that I just mentioned, that are just trying to be cute, but that is, that is, that, it is that character, its not the fact that they are female. Its just that you tend to, I mean, I give myself alright, you tend to stereotype this cuteness with females, and so, that's why. But, no, I mean, I don't think it would change as long as that character of bold strength, aggressiveness, is there. You know, regardless of whether its white, you know, um, female, any racial color, sexual preference, if the aggressiveness is there, the boldness, the courage, then you're going, the game is going to stay the same, but its not because of the sexual or any other difference.

Markus, another game player, has a girl friend who plays shooter games and comments on how she deals with playing on-line, and the trash-talking which goes on between players. This is typical for many girl gamers who establish their own clans and their own servers to allow them to play without being harassed by male players:

...So I have a girlfriend in Boston and she uh, accepted that I played video games. She informed me that if we have children they will not play until, you know such and such an age and this sort of thing. Um but then she started playing on *Unreal Tournament* and she's

actually, you know, one of the members of the group I played with in Boston over the summer and she really enjoys it. She had a great time, she plays well now um, when, when we started it was very good that I was practiced in CS (Counter-Strike) or, oh, she would have, she would have kicked my butt and as it stands now probably the next time I go back she will be mopping the floor with me. Um, they, they play again on a local server. They don't have anybody come in from the outside, but there is definitely trash talk going on but it's not so much in the form of name calling it's a "I'm gonna get you" and "oh, yeah did you see that shot, that was me!" you know, that sort of thing but they're also, I mean they're all working on Ph.Ds, they're scientists, they're educated uh, they're older than you know, the kids that play and so the dialog or the trash talk is...different because of that.

In Taiwan, Tina discussed the difference in both the physical layout of cyber-cafes in Taiwan compared to the United States and how that layout influenced how she was treated on-line. As a female game player she describes the typical responses female players receive from male players:

...the structure of the internet cafes, it was huge internet cafes, so you could be sitting anywhere and they would have no idea, you know, who you were playing whereas in the United States, most of the ones I've seen are like, ten game machines and that's about it...so you know who you're playing with, and which person they are on-screen just by looking at their face or hearing them actually talk or whatever. But there they don't actually know so they would just think I was a guy for a while, and then after a while I'd say some things that let them know I was a girl, you know. Like, if somebody sprayed internet pornography I would cuss them out, you know, or something like that...They were always just kind of like, "why do you have a problem with this?" you know. And I'd be like, cause I'm a girl, and they were like, "you're a girl?" And they would say they didn't believe me, you know, so I would stand up sometimes and be like, I'm the one over here. And everyone would see me and they'd be like, "and you're white too?" And so, for a while, a lot of people didn't quite know how to respond to me, you know, as, like, good CS player who was also female and white so it was kind of strange, and who also spoke the language. But then after a while, quite a few of the regulars kind of knew me pretty well and so we'd play together. And, you know, like different people kind of asked me to be on their, uh, little, like clans or teams or whatever, and you know, that was flattering, but..."

Tina went on to discuss her return to the United States and how finding a server dedicated to women used policing tactics to eliminate males who might disrupt the atmosphere of the game; She found a server called *Girl Power* and when I mentioned how they could tell she was female, she said, "They can't but they would have dialog with you and then if they thought you were a guy they'd kick you off. It was really strange, and so there was a very engendered, um, sort of conversation that was always going on. It was interesting."

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Appendix A

Research Methodology

Counter-Strike, is a team based first person shooter game in which players assume the roles of counter-terrorists or terrorists, and using an elaborate array of virtual weapons, seek to either plant/defuse bombs, keep/rescue hostages, or defend/attack important persons. Initially designed by Minh Le as a modification for the game Half-Life, designed by Valve Software, that could be downloaded for free, the success of the game prompted a retail release in 2000. It is still one of the most popular on-line, shooter games, with over 8,000 servers and often up to 25,000 players playing simultaneously around the world. During the course of our study we noted that at anyone time there were between 3,000 and 8,000 servers running the game world-wide with approximately 23-25,000 players on-line at the same time.

Between January of 2001 and June of 2002 we engaged in participant observation with a small group of Counter-Strike players at a medium size Midwestern university in the United States. Game play occurred on a weekly basis for one three hour sessions at a time and employed a LAN setup most of the time. Occasionally “outside” players would be allowed into the gaming sessions. Prior to this we had played *Counter-Strike* on 50 different servers for 70 hours, recording the text files of in-game chats from which we observed very specific patterns of social interaction (Wright, Breidenbach, Boria 2002). The data from that initial research was incorporated into an open ended questionnaire that we administered in extensive one to two hour interviews with 23 game players both on campus and off campus, including the ones we played with at the university. We also conducted a single focus group session with a small group of 5 game players who we had played with at the university and examined game publications and game WEB sites.

Four methods of gathering data were used in this study. The first, involved participant observation work with fellow game players between January and May 2001, and continued through the Fall of 2001. Game sessions occurred on Sundays between noon and 4pm and occurred in a set of unused offices with computer terminals closely spaced together and in another building’s computer lab, containing rows of computer terminals. Other sessions would be held after hours in the late evening during the week, beginning at 9pm and shutting down at 11pm. During these sessions a computer in one of the offices was run as a server for both the university community and those who might join in from outside. With the assistance of one graduate student and three undergraduate researchers I was able to cover both locations with detailed observations of player behavior. The number of players would vary. However, the majority of times approximately 8-12 players were observed at any one time.

The second method, involved playing the game with other on-line players and analyzing the log text files that were generated from each game on the client computer. The chats within the log files were coded for the types of actions and talk which happened within each game. We examined the types of social rules stated on each server’s menu page; of whether or not they had prohibitions on particular types of social interactions, and the types of “policing” which did or did not occurred within the game. Over a three month period data was collected from 49 servers at random intervals for sessions ranging from 30 minutes to two and a half hours, for a total playing time of more than 70 hours. One other server was added to the list, even though we were only on it for five minutes. We were able to evaluate the server menu text and names used within the game by players. Since our research was performed in the Midwestern United States the servers we were able to access with

sufficient ping rates and low lag times privileged those servers close to that area. However, ping rate does not necessarily depend upon geographical location as some servers were as far away as Australia and California, while some local servers were very difficult to access, depending upon the speed of the connection and the technical setup. Our criteria for sampling were ping rates lower than 100, low lag, and total number of players at 8 or more. Sampling occurred as late as 11:30pm and as early as 8:00 a.m Central Time. Both dedicated and non-dedicated servers were sampled. After going through all of the text files we came up with 5 categories of talk types, subdivided into thirty-nine distinct discourses common to the playing of the game (Wright, Breidenbach, Boria 2002). These were the categories that appeared to exhibit the greatest frequency of use among players.

The third method involved examining computer game literature, trade publications, gaming WEB sites, news sources, and scholarly references. Popular game magazines like *Computer Games*, *Computer Gaming World* and *PC Gamer* provide an inside look into the world of computer games and how they are evaluated and received by the “hardcore” gaming community. The rapid proliferation of game Web sites produced by fans and by developers speaks to the popularity of these games and of the creativity which they have stimulated. WEB sites like Planet Half-Life (www.planethalflife.com) offer daily updates on continuing modifications of the initial game engine by amateur game developers and links to many other sites with technical tools for creating new maps, characters, sounds, etc. In short, the expansion of these fan Web sites point to the development of on-line “shooter” games as a growing “hobby” engaged in both young and old. News sources, can be a source of information about game culture. However, they tend to be written from a very narrow perspective and influenced by the popular bias against violence in video games. Such articles are useful in tracking the “moral” debates over gaming, but have little analytical usefulness other than informing us of what new game has attracted the public eye.

The fourth method, interviews with 23 game players utilized open-ended questions that explored issues raised from the data collected earlier. Interviews lasted between 20 minutes to almost two hours per person, all of whom were over 18 years of age.