The Chorus of the Dead: Roles, Identity Formation, and Ritual Processes Inside a FPS Multiplayer Online Game

Introduction

Ever since the creation of MUD (Multi-User Dungeon) in 1978[1,2] people have been meeting online to interact and play in worlds of make-believe. Quite often, these worlds were computerized version of the pen and paper fantasy role-playing games that were popular at the time[3]. But despite the fact that these systems were purposefully built to encourage social interactions, it took a long time for research to start investigating them as full-fledged social milieus – perhaps because games are often seen as "frivolous" and unworthy of attention compared to more "productive" activities[4]. For instance, after the creation of LambdaMOO at Xerox PARC, Curtis[5] was one of the first to examine these systems as a valid area of mainstream research[6] – almost 15 years after the creation of the first MUD.

Now online computer games have become a central part of the fabric of cyberspace. The most visible of them, both in terms of subscriber numbers and academic attention, belong to the Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) genre. These games are almost direct descendents of the early MUDs: they retain from their predecessors the notion of a vast, persistent fantasy world (based on popular themes ranging from sword and sorcery to space opera) inhabited by other players, with whom one can interact via text chat (and increasingly, using voice-over-IP), trade, form groups to undertake "quests", and eventually become member of longer-lasting "guilds" organizing complex group activities in the world[7]. MMOGs add richly detailed 3D graphics on top of this basic template, and a combination of the ever-increasing availability of both broadband Internet access and graphics rendering capabilities on commodity computers has enabled them to attract more and more subscribers, starting with a few hundreds of thousands players in Ultima Online and Everquest in the 1990s, and now up to the 11 million registered accounts in World of Warcraft, current leader of this genre[8]. Research has explored a

wide array of issues emerging in these virtual worlds: their unique culture[9], the psychological impacts they have on their players[10], their economic importance[11], the social life of guilds[12], and their role as learning environments[13], to name but a few examples.

It is important to note, however, that MMOGs are not the only form of online games supporting interaction and collaboration between players. In parallel to the meteoric rise of MMOGs, first-person shooters (FPS) also became increasingly popular, sometimes even reaching cult status with titles such as Doom[14] and Counter-Strike[15]. They have, however, received much less academic attention[16, 17].

These games look, at first sight, deceivingly simple: a heavily armed player roams buildings or open areas in search of enemies, trying to kill as many as possible before being killed. When they pit human players against one another, these games become tests of skill (particularly hand-eye coordination) and require the development of real expertise before becoming a proficient player[18]. The "action-oriented" nature of these games, however, may lead one to wonder how such games could possibly be social milieus, which could explain the corresponding dearth of sociological research on FPS. In this chapter however, I will argue that FPS have also become a culturally and socially significant form of online communication, a new social stage supporting thriving recreational communities. I will show that these particular types of online games, although not specifically built to foster a sense of community and rich player-to-player interactions, still end up being repurposed by their users as complex social worlds. This will allow me to examine the unique conventions and practices created and maintained by FPS players, to try and uncover the inner workings of these understudied social worlds.

In this, I extend Wright et al.'s[19] recent attempt at understanding the social character of online FPS games. For these authors, FPS are also complex social worlds. In essence, these games are a platform for showing off human performances in a mock combat setting. But the game is not all combat or simply shooting a virtual enemy. Participants actively create the meaning of the game through their virtual talk and behavior borrowing heavily from popular and

youth culture representations. As in MUDs, players interact through text chat using an idiom specific to this game's culture. Mastering this "insider" language is necessary if one wishes to graduate from a novice ("newbie") to an experienced player. Mastery of this language, along with strategic playing skill, is a passport to recognition as an adept insider.

Wright et al., however, only briefly touch on an important issue: how roles and status are created, negotiated and maintained in FPS. Indeed, it has been widely reported in studies of MMOGs that online games are stratified, hierarchical societies that new players need to be socialized into[20]. But the actual mechanics by which these roles and classes are defined and maintained have, however, not been explored fully, especially in the context of FPS. The mediation of this process through the game technology is especially not well understood.

To bridge this gap, I report on the findings of a four-month long "virtual ethnography"[21] conducted among the players of the XYZ clan, a group of Internet users playing Counter-Strike. It appears that two important aspects of the game affect social interactions in Counter-Strike. First, the game embeds in its technical architecture a clear-cut distinction between audience and player. This aspect of the game is central to socialization in a community of players. By reifying Goffman's dramaturgical view of social life[22], Counter-Strike provides a novel environment for roles to be negotiated and played within a game. There is a constant back and forth movement between performance and critique allowing the players to negotiate the appropriate norms of interaction. Second, Counter-Strike players do not form a homogenous group: they are stratified into classes, separated into in-groups and out-groups (for instance, "clan" members and non-clan members; "regulars" and "newbies". By looking at the interaction patterns between these players it is possible to learn more about how one is socialized into a gaming community, and then how one transitions from one class of players to the other. I will describe these phenomena in more details later in this paper, focusing on Turner's notion of liminality[23] as well as the important role humor and jokes play in bonding the members of a class of players.

I start below with a presentation of the methods I used to investigate social interaction among Counter-Strike players, followed by a short description of the main features of the game. I then discuss in more detail the issue of roles and status, focusing first on the mechanisms through which players negotiate their understanding of the game, then turning my attention to how the players define their social position among themselves, that is, the process of identity formation and the segregation of players into groups.

Research Methods and Setting

Virtual Ethnography

To observe interactions among FPS players I chose to adopt an ethnographic stance. Ethnographic field research involves the study of groups and people as they go about their everyday lives. The term "participant observation" is often used to characterize this approach, since researchers seek to immerse themselves in others' worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important. Ethnography therefore entails "some amount of genuinely social interaction in the field with the subjects of the study, some direct observation of relevant events […] and open-endedness in the direction the study takes"[24]. It is particularly well adapted to the analysis of the issues I am interested in (roles, status differentiation, and power), since it helps the researcher progressively build up a grounded understanding of how these social constructs emerge out of the local, contextual interactions between social actors.

However, virtual worlds such as the ones represented by online games pose a methodological challenge to the ethnographer. Indeed most of this approach is based on the ethnographer "being there" in the field to observe – but this "there" is nebulous at best in the case of online spaces[25]. Still, a great number of researchers believe in the virtues of "virtual ethnography"[26], that is, an adaptation of traditional ethnography to the study of cyberspace. As Mason puts it:

A virtual ethnography is one that fully immerses the ethnographer into the consensual reality experienced by groups of people who use computer-mediated communication as their primary, and often only, means of communication. As such, the online or virtual persona of the participants are the main focus of the ethnographer. Generally, researchers have wanted to focus on the person at the keyboard; a virtual ethnography reverses this and works instead with the persona that has been projected into cyberspace by the typist[27].

A virtual ethnography is then, simply, an ethnography that treats cyberspace as the ethnographic reality. This remains a controversial step, but it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss this controversy in great depth. The interested reader is referred instead to work by Lyman and Wakeford[28], Hine[29], Miller and Slater[30], and Rutter and Smith[31] to get an overview of the debate.

Following the tenets of virtual ethnography, my research therefore progressed as follows. As an initial step, I had to select the field in which I would conduct "virtual fieldwork". During the first week, I identified a Counter-Strike server with two characteristics important for my research. First, it had to host a "clan" if I wanted to observe the distinction between different classes of players. Clans are formal organizations of players who choose to play together, either as a team in tournaments or simply for the sake of playing with a semi-stable group of people instead of random adversaries (in this sense, they are similar to the guilds created in MMOGs[32]). Quite often a clan hosts games on its own server instead of the public machines available on the Internet. The demographics of the latter are much different from a clan's machine: the turnover among the players is much higher (there are no or few "regulars") and it is rare for players to belong to any kind of group. Second, the server had to have good network connectivity to my home, from where this research was conducted. Latency is a very important factor in this game. Selecting a server with a low "ping[33]" was therefore a primary concern.

The XYZ[34] clan and its server fit these two characteristics. My second step was then to achieve immersion. Once I found this server, I connected to it for a period of almost four months, at a frequency of three days a week on average, sometimes more. I consciously tried to vary the days and times at which I connected to the server to see how it affected participation. By connecting regularly I started to identify "regulars", composed of the clan's members and visitors like myself who keep coming back to this specific machine because the connection is fast and the gaming enjoyable. Once I was logged in I engaged in participant observation, focusing on recurrent and unusual events to try and uncover the rules and norms of interaction in this environment.

It is important to note here that clan servers remain publicly accessible most of the time and anyone can join games in progress. The administrators have the option of "locking" the server, which restricts access to users with a registered name and password. This allows the clan members to conduct private activities they do not want any outsider to observe. As such, it is legitimate to see activities conducted "in the open", that is, outside of locked sessions, as analogous to activities in any publicly observable realm such as a plaza or a mall. Previous research on FPS supports this view[35] and as such, I did not seek informed consent from the players being observed. As noted earlier however, I still replaced all user names with pseudonyms to preserve the players' privacy as much as possible.

At the end of the four months study I had two sources of data. First, I logged the conversations taking place during the game in their entirety. Counter-Strike has a "console" generating text files containing the players' utterances, and I saved these files at the end of each gaming session. Again, these interactions on game servers are public (anybody can log in and observe what is being said), and players and clans routinely save their text logs to check their kill/death ratios and to examine game action[36]. Second, I actively wrote down notes each time an event of interest happened. These gave me a pointer to the most interesting episodes, which I could later recover from the log files for further analysis. These episodes were analyzed in two

steps, first immediately after each gaming sessions while my memory of the interaction was still fresh, and finally after the study had ended in order to uncover repeated patterns and themes[37].

Before discussing the results of these analyses, it is important for the reader to get a feeling for how the game is actually played and how people interact within it. The next section describes the main features of Counter-Strike.

Counter-Strike

Counter-Strike is a "mod" for Half-Life, that is, an extension to this already popular game. It reuses Half-Life's 3D engine but changes the environment of the game. In Counter-Strike, players are divided into two teams: terrorists, and counter-terrorists. Each camp has objectives to accomplish (for instance, in one of the three scenarios available, the counter-terrorists have to rescue hostages and the terrorists have to prevent them from doing so). Each player controls one character in one team, and has to collaborate with others to accomplish his/her team's objectives. During my research there were in between 20,000 to 30,000 players online at any moment, connecting to 5,000 to 10,000 dedicated Counter-Strike servers.

Upon launching the game, the player is presented with a list of game servers currently available. Using the "sort" feature, it is easy to rearrange the list to find a specific server based on its name, or to list the servers based on the quality of one's connection to them. Servers can also be added to one's list of "favorites" for easy access. All of these are quite important in shaping who will be joining a particular server. Indeed, due to the fast-paced nature of the game, a low-latency connection to the server is almost mandatory (that is, a "ping" of 150ms or less). High latency translates into "lag", and therefore into a miserable gaming experience: you could be shooting at someone while this someone is, in fact, already gone. But low-latency is also highly correlated to geographical proximity to the server. Therefore, players connected to a given server tend to be clustered in the same geographical area.

This area can be quite large, however. For instance, the server that will be the focus of this study (XYZ) is located in the San Francisco Bay Area, California. Many players therefore come from California because of the latency issue mentioned above, but not necessarily from the Bay Area itself: there were players from San Diego, Sacramento, Los Angeles, etc. Another important point about the connection screen is the "favorites" function: once you have found servers with optimal connectivity, you can easily add them to a short list displayed instead of the full list of available servers. Consequently, players tend to visit the same servers repeatedly, rather than randomly select one from the full list.

Right after joining a server the player can choose which camp (terrorists or counter-terrorists) he or she wants to play, if there are enough free slots available (otherwise the player is simply assigned to the camp with the last available slot). The game is usually organized in 5-minutes rounds (although it can be more or less time, depending on the will of the system administrator). During each round, each player has a first-person view of the action. Movement, change of equipment and firing are usually controlled via a combination of keyboard and mouse.

One of the most interesting points about this game (and central to my investigation) is that it supports communication among the players via text chat. When playing a round, a player can send text messages to the other members of his team. However, the mechanism is quite different if you join and a round is already in progress, or if your player dies before the round is over. Indeed in both cases, you become a *spectator*. While a spectator you can watch the action, for instance by looking at a specific room, or also by following the moves of any of the remaining players. You cannot, however, take part in the round anymore: whatever you type is invisible to the remaining players. During this time you can therefore chat only with the other spectators, and this is when most of the social interaction occurs. Participants can discuss the previous round, organize their team's strategy, or chat about pretty much anything.

This technology-based distinction between spectator and player is central to the way people interact in this game. I will therefore start my discussion of how roles and status are

negotiated by explaining why this feature is particularly interesting, and then describe what it can teach us about how norms of social interaction are negotiated and defined in online games.

The Chorus of the Dead: Interplay Between Roles and Audience in FPS

As I mentioned above, you are not always a player in Counter-Strike: a significant portion of the time is spent watching others playing from a spectator's position, simply because your character died early in the round. Incidentally most of the interactions with other players happen during this time, since you are free to dedicate your attention to typing and chatting rather than playing the game (the latter being much too demanding for extensive typing). Below for instance, my character has just died and I witness a few comments exchanged by other dead players/spectators before the start of the next round (pseudonyms are used, but I attempted to preserve the "flavor" of each nickname whenever possible: for example, while "AznMastr" is a pseudonym, the actual nickname did contain "Azn", which is important since it strongly signifies the player's ethnicity as Asian):

DEAD[XYZ]Kit :   yuh huh

DEAD[XYZ]AznMastr :   i friggin died

DEAD[XYZ]AznMastr :   =[

DEAD[XYZ]Kit :   lol

DEAD[XYZ]Zed :   LOL

DEAD[XYZ]AznMastr :   terrorist team is full

mountaindew has left the game

DEAD[XYZ]Kit :   heya zed

DEAD[XYZ]AznMastr :   bleh

Snake dropped

DEAD[XYZ]Kit :   lol look at Chicken what a moron

DEAD[XYZ]AznMastr :   yeah he sure sucks

Many things are happening in the short example above. AznMastr expresses his disappointment at his recent death ("I friggin died" and "=[" – an inverted smiley face), while Kit and Zed who were watching AznMastr play laugh at the circumstances in which he was killed ("lol" meaning "laugh out loud", an abbreviation used very frequently). A few lines later Kit comments (unfavorably) on the actions of Chicken, one of the remaining players in this round, and AznMastr concurs with her observation.

A consequence of this separation between audience and player becomes quickly apparent to anyone playing the game: while playing, there is always a feeling of being watched by a "chorus of the dead", so to speak, commenting on the actions of the living players. Even though the comments of this chorus are not available to the living player while he plays, he knows they exist from the time he too spends as a spectator. To reuse Goffman's terminology[38], the boundary between the "front region" and "back region" of the game is porous: in the space of a few minutes, one can quickly transition between the two, something that cannot usually be done in everyday life.

For instance, Goffman uses the example of the waiters and waitresses in a restaurant, who often make derogatory comments about the customers they serve while they are in the kitchen. As soon as they re-enter the restaurant's dining room however, they immediately resume an attitude of respectful attention to the customer's needs. In everyday life, the separation between the team performing its show and the audience is clear-cut: as a customer, one should not (and usually does not) know what is going on in the kitchen of the restaurant where one is being served. In fact, we usually go to great length to maintain this separation: Goffman again describes how a shop owner takes great care in not recruiting girls from his neighborhood as salespersons, since they may soon quit their job and become customers again, but this time know more about the owner's commercial practices than he wants them to know. Consequently, becoming the member of a performing team and gaining access to the back region is usually granted after a long period, during which one is progressively transitioned from the audience to the team.

Such a segregation is, however, impossible in Counter-Strike: one can move back and forth between the front and back region several times within the space of a few minutes. Being acutely conscious of the backstage activities, one therefore quickly starts playing differently: not for oneself, but also for the enjoyment and satisfaction of the spectators. To understand this phenomenon, imagine yourself as a restaurant's customer knowing that the staff laughs backstage at clients tucking their napkin into their shirt collar: would you still do it, or consciously put your napkin on your lap instead? The same phenomenon applies to Counter-Strike. This game is, therefore, extremely interesting in that it reifies some of Goffman's concepts by materially embedding them in technology (the spectator and player roles), while at the same time bending many of the rules of interaction that are part of this social system (the front and back regions are not separated).

Just because there is a material distinction between audience and players in Counter-Strike does not necessarily imply that the meaning and duties of each role are fixed, however. Consider the example below:

[XYZ]AznMastr :   dont camp like that again

-=[Heat]=- Truckish :   not when im the last man

[XYZ]AznMastr :   no i dont care

[SM]DKL :   fagget truckish

Truckish was the last remaining member of the terrorist team during this round, and he has just been killed after a long hunt by the four remaining members of the counter-terrorist team. Rather than move around and probably to increase his chances of survival, Truckish chose a well-hidden spot and waited for his opponents, trying to kill them one by one as they went in front of his hiding place. This would seem like a sensible behavior, especially considering that Counter-Strike was designed as a realistic game by its creator, Ming Le[39]. Yet in the exchange above Truckish is accused of *camping*. Here is another example in which this term was brought up (somewhat humorously) by another player during a subsequent round:

DEAD[XYZ]Tempura :   BORING!

*DEAD*aK|King.wtf? :   look at the cts what a bunch of idiots

DEAD-]gI$[-*Puregaming* :   yeah it's campfest 2001!

*DEAD*Styx :   lol pass the marshmallows

"Camping" can be defined as not moving around, staying at a fixed position (generally hidden from view) and taking "easy" shots at the other players. On XYZ's server, this behavior is frowned upon as the example above illustrates, or it is even explicitly forbidden as in the first example. As we can see above, this is probably because it is a waste of time for everybody: spectators are bored watching little action, and if there is only a small number of players left it could take them a fair amount of time to find the "camper", thereby lengthening (unnecessarily) the time between rounds. Above, Styx and King.wtf make a direct analogy between the immobile players and campers sitting around a campfire, sharing marshmallows – something that could be enjoyable as participants in the physical world, but not as a virtual spectacle.

Interestingly, in the first exchange above, Truckish shows that this definition of camping is not necessarily shared by everybody. For Truckish, if you are the last man standing, it is perfectly admissible to camp: he implies it would be foolish to face a bigger group alone, and that stealth should be rewarded and authorized in those circumstances. AznMastr visibly doesn't agree, and neither does DKL (who insults Truckish). This debate about camping illustrates that, despite the fact that there is a clear, technologically enforced separation between audience and players, the responsibilities of the participants in each of these roles are not immutable and have to be actively defined and enforced.

Even though she was concerned with a much different environment, Orlikowski summarized this phenomenon quite well by saying that "technology is the product of, as well as the medium for, human actions."[40] De Sanctis and Poole[41], who have also adapted Giddens' structuration framework to the study of information technologies in organizations[42, 43], talked about the distinction between the "spirit" of a technology on the one hand, and "technology in

use" on the other hand. Counter-Strike can be perfectly analyzed in these terms: the spirit of the game (realism; two distinct roles – audience and player) is reinterpreted in use via the social interactions of its participants (camping, although realistic, is bad; the audience affects the players, and vice-versa).

Moreover, there is no fixed outcome to the process I have just described: it is possible that, in other contexts, the interaction between the spirit of the technology and the actions of the players would have had different results. During the first week of this study, when I tried different servers before settling on XYZ, I noticed different expectations, different definitions of what the game means. For instance on one server the players apparently wanted to play realistically no matter what the cost was, and camping was therefore accepted even if it lengthened the average waiting time between rounds. On another server there was very little exchange among the spectators and the feeling of an audience was, therefore, much less noticeable to the player. This, in turn, did not encourage one to play for others but rather for oneself.

During a session of Counter-Strike, the roles a gamer plays are therefore constantly mediated and renegotiated through technology and interactions with other players. I now move to another related dimension: status, that is, how social positions are defined over time and across sessions.

Clan Members, Newbies, and Regulars: Bonding and Segregation in Counter-Strike

In the section above, my focus has been mostly on roles embedded in technology and how the players renegotiate their meaning. I would now like to turn my attention to how the players define their social position among themselves, that is, the process of identity formation and the segregation of players into groups. Indeed, it becomes rapidly evident to the observer that all Counter-Strike players are not created equal: there are important asymmetries of power, manifest in who is allowed to say what and how. Nowhere is this more visible than in the way humor is used on this server.

Laughing At Vs. Laughing With

As Lyman describes in his study of the fraternal bond as a joking relationship, social norms governing the expression of anger or humor generally replicate the power order of a group. More importantly, "It is when jokes fail that the social conflicts that the joke was to reconstruct or negotiate are uncovered, and the tensions and emotions that underlie the conventional order of everyday social relations are revealed. […] the success or failure of a joke marks the boundary within which power and aggression may be used in a relationship."[44] And on the XYZ server, there is a clear distinction between "laughing at" versus "laughing with" someone. This distinction usually marks the boundary between dominant (who are allowed to laugh at people) and dominated players, or signifies equality among players (who laugh with each other). There are two valid bases for laughing at people: being a clan member (and thus being a direct or indirect owner of the server, which gives the member administrative rights such as kicking people out), and demonstrating a high level of skills in the game.

To illustrate this phenomenon, let us take the same exchange I used earlier as our starting point:

DEAD[XYZ]Kit :   yuh huh.

DEAD[XYZ]AznMastr :   i friggin died

DEAD[XYZ]AznMastr :   =[

DEAD[XYZ]Kit :   lol

DEAD[XYZ]Zed :   LOL

DEAD[XYZ]AznMastr :   terrorist team is full

mountaindew has left the game

DEAD[XYZ]Kit :   heya zed

DEAD[XYZ]AznMastr :   bleh

Notice the pattern of interaction above. As one of the players dies and joins the spectators, he first expresses his disappointment ("I friggin died, =["). Using the universals "lol" (laugh out loud), two other players laugh *with* him: their laughs are not derogatory, but instead feel much more like three people sharing a good joke. The fact that only XYZ members participate in this exchange is value-laden: no outsider laughs after AznMastr's mishap.

In the round immediately following this one however, the tone of the exchange changes dramatically:

DEAD[K.T.S]paRaNoid :   and you pussies, fire a whole clip at me 60 rounds and dont kill me

DEAD[XYZ]AWP_Whore :   lol

DEAD[C.R.O]Zax :   ya at you

DEAD[K.T.S]paRaNoid :   then you RUN AWAY to reload

DEAD[C.R.O]Zax :   right into you

DEAD[C.R.O]Zax :   and you dont die

DEAD[C.R.O]Zax :   kinda makes you wonder

DEAD[K.T.S]paRaNoid :   while im coming at you with a knife

DEAD[XYZ]Kit :   lol damn

DEAD[XYZ]AWP_Whore :   lol yup he has a god mode hack!

DEAD[K.T.S]paRaNoid :   i had 3 hps left

DEAD[K.T.S]paRaNoid :   you guys just suck cock

DEAD[XYZ]Kit :   shut up paranoid

DEAD[K.T.S]paRaNoid :   You ran from me and i had a KNIFE!

DEAD[XYZ]AznMastr :   omg

DEAD[XYZ]Kit :   you suck even more

DEAD[XYZ]AznMastr :   i cant do anything with this lag

DEAD[XYZ]AznMastr :   wtf is this lag so crazy?

DEAD[XYZ]AznMastr :   friggin pacbell

DEAD[K.T.S]paRaNoid :   kit, you will know when im talking to you cause i will

address you

paRaNoid survived a situation in which the odds were really against him (he had no

weapon except a knife, the most basic of all, and had to face three other players alone). He takes

this as an opportunity to express his contempt at the other players. The feeling one gets from the

exchange, however, is noticeably different from the previous one. Whereas the members of XYZ

laughed together at one of their members' mishap, including the unlucky dead player, paRaNoid

is very antagonistic and scornful. AWP_Whore tries to lighten the tone by joking ("he has a god

mode hack", that is, some software modification allowing him to be invincible – which is not

normally possible). Kit is more affected by the change of tone however, and replies in kind,

asking paRaNoid to shut up and criticizing him too ("you suck even more").

The kind of joking identified above is not unheard of in other contexts: it is a kind of

"signifying" or "dozens", a ritual exchange of insults that usually functions to create group

solidarity[45]. In the process of male group bonding ignoring a joke, even though it makes you feel

hurt or angry, is to show strength and coolness, two important masculine ideals. It is interesting to

note that, above, the player offended by paRaNoid's insulting joke is Kit, a female[46] player. But

the most important point is probably to note that, in the bonding process Lyman outlines,

aggression must be calculated, not angry. More precisely, it must be consistent with the power

hierarchy of the organization, serving authority and not challenging it. By asking paRaNoid to

shut up, Kit is essentially contesting his place in the group's hierarchy. In short, she denies him

the right to be aggressive because his aggression is challenging the hierarchy of the group, and

not reinforcing it. This becomes explicit as a new round starts and the exchange continues:

DiveMan :   CTS ARE FUCKING RETARDS!

AzNlIYoN :   omg

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[K.T.S]???OwnU??? :   sorry

(Terrorist) [SM]DKL :   thx

[XYZ]Kit :   i don't care who you're talking to, you just suck too

[K.T.S]paRaNoid :   please

[XYZ]Kit :   please what?

[K.T.S]paRaNoid :   you dont know, me, i know they fired 60 rounds with me 5 feet away

[K.T.S]paRaNoid :   and didnt kill me

[XYZ]Kit :   don't say other people suck when you yourself has a pretty bad score.

Here paRaNoid steps back a little, and tries to re-contextualize the situation, seemingly saying "you did not see what happened, so don't judge me." Indeed when you are a spectator you can choose which player to follow, and there is no guarantee that Kit really saw what happened. But Kit refuses to give paRaNoid the right to criticize others because paRaNoid himself has "a pretty bad score." Each player's score is publicly visible in a table everybody can superimpose over the screen with the "tab" key. This is an important part of one's online identity, and good players are given more rights than others. In arguments of authority, the number of kills one has is a powerful status symbol. Aggression coming from the top of the group's hierarchy (the skilled players) is tolerated as it reinforces the existing social order; outsiders and low-skill players, however, are denied this right.

In fact, to preserve one's status as a skilled player it is common for gamers to change their name when they are practicing or just "playing out of character." This change of identity is visible to everybody: system messages appear on each player's screen notifying them of the name change, as in:

[XYZ]AznMastr changed name to Deagle_practice

Everybody now knows that AznMastr and Deagle_practice[47] are the same, and yet any action done by AznMastr while he is under this new name won't be attributed to his main

identity. With this practice, skilled players are allowed to preserve their face and yet to keep on experimenting with new tactics and weapons.

Skill is, therefore, an important boundary between classes of player, and status is actively managed and preserved through temporary masking of one's "true" or "main" name. Aggressive group processes are governed by rules, and skills gives a player the right to calculated aggression, whereas other players in the same situation are seen simply as angry and rude. A second type of boundary is visible in the rest of the exchange below, which includes the same protagonists from the heated discussion that started earlier:

[XYZ]AznMastr :   its fine to dispute somethin

[K.T.S]paRaNoid :   how am i out of line?

[XYZ]AznMastr :   but dont abuse ur leeway

[XYZ]AznMastr :   aka dont insult kit

[K.T.S]paRaNoid :   i tell them they suck because im 5 feet away and they miss with 60bullets

[K.T.S]paRaNoid :   and she jumps in

Lateralus is joining the Counter-Terrorist force

[XYZ]AznMastr :   i dont care

[XYZ]AznMastr :   whos server is this?

[K.T.S]paRaNoid :   and talks about score and i suck for saying blah blah blah

[XYZ]AznMastr :   KTS or XYZ?

AznMastr now plays the role of a mediator, and spells out the rule of the place explicitly: criticism is tolerated, but should not be abused… especially if it is directed at one of the clan members. paRaNoid tries to contest, but it does not go very far: AznMastr ends the exchange abruptly with a hidden menace. By saying "who's server is this?" he makes it very clear that he and the other clan members define the rules, and that they have the power to exclude players who step out of line.

The example above is rather long, but extremely rich and informative. Indeed, it contains instances of successful and unsuccessful jokes and taunting; the latter represents a breakdown of the social order, and members of the community therefore have to spell out the rule of the place explicitly. Asymmetries of power are obvious during this exchange, and two classes of players can be identified. First the clan members, as owners of the machine on which the game takes place, have the right to define who is allowed to say what to whom and how. Their power stems principally from the technical ease with which they can exclude people: a simple command will "kick out" the offending player (this is reminiscent of the role of "wizards" in MUDs[48]). Second, skilled players are given more rights than others, even if they are not members of the clan. It is clear above that if paRaNoid had had a better score, he would have been given more bragging rights.

It is interesting to note that the social processes outlined above differ very little from those analyzed in settings different from online games. Lyman, for instance, was studying bonding within a fraternity at a large university but almost everything he describes applies well to the game environment. This could be interpreted in two ways: first, if the demographics of the XYZ players mirrors those of Lyman's fraternity, then we are witnessing mechanisms of bonding and social segregation that are dependent on the profile of the participants and hold across different environments. And, looking at the information provided on the clan's Web page, it is true that about half of the players on this server are young (between 15 and 20 years old) white males, similar to Lyman's fraternity men. Yet the other half (a significant number of players) does not fit this description: they are either older (some are in their thirties), of a different ethnicity (with a great number of Asian-americans, who put their ethnicity forward by adding the "Azn" tag to their nickame), or of a different gender (there are about five females listed on the clan's web page, among a total of about forty members). It seems, therefore, that demographics could be an explanation but is not enough to cover these processes fully. The second interpretation then would be to say that is the nature of the game (a paramilitary simulation) that

fosters the attitudes I have just described above. Only comparative studies of other games, either off-line (e.g. paintball) or on-line (e.g. Quake, Unreal), would allow us to see if this hypothesis is true.

Becoming a Member: The Clan's Ritual Process

I described above how clan members are invested with a higher status than other players. As such, becoming a clan member is the pinnacle of a gamer's on-line life: it is the recognition of one's skills and familiarity with the game, in that members are given law enforcement powers (they can kick people out) and are trusted to perform well during matches against other clans (there are several, worldwide Counter-Strike tournaments each year, some with fairly large amounts of money given to the winners – but the biggest prize remains the bragging rights associated with a title of champion).

A clan membership, therefore, is not given out lightly. There are rites of passage or transitions one has to go through before being allowed to attach the clan's tag (e.g. [XYZ]) to one's name. In fact, nothing is a more serious offense than pretending to be a clan member without really being one:

> *[XYZ]The_Machine is joining the Terrorist force*
>
> **DEAD*[XYZ]Robocat: machine who the fuck are u?*
>
> **DEAD*[XYZ]The_Machine: new recruit*
>
> **DEAD*[XYZ]Robocat: who recruited u?*
>
> **DEAD*[-CnA-]Konami: lol did us see that*
>
> **DEAD*[XYZ]Robocat: who recruited u????*
>
> **DEAD*[XYZ]WkWire : kick this bozo out*
>
> **DEAD*historymaker: yeah was funny as hell*
>
> *[XYZ]The_Machine has been kicked by console*

Above, The_Machine was identified as a potential usurper as soon as he entered the server. After he failed to answer two of the administrator's queries, another member of the clan asked for the offender to be kicked out. On top of illustrating the law enforcement powers I described above, this also shows how tightly connected clan members can be. Despite the fairly large number of people in a clan, and a certain turnover (new recruits are added, others leave to join other clans or stop playing the game), clan members have a fairly good idea of who is a member and who is not. And there are simple ways to test membership, if in doubt: only a few members in the clan (usually the most senior ones) are given the right to recruit. Being unable to provide the name of one's recruiter is a sure sign of usurpation.

Before being recruited, however, there are a certain number of steps a player has to go through. The first one is to become visible and known by at least some members of the clan. Indeed one could play very well, and yet not be known. As I mentioned earlier, the current[49] number of kills and deaths for each player is available by pressing the "tab" key. This information, however, is accessed only when there is a reason to look at it and is rarely aggregated over time. One could go to XYZ's server each day, get the best kills/deaths ratio of the week, and yet be completely unknown if one doesn't make explicit steps to interact with the clan members: when a player stays silent, nobody ever looks at his statistics.

Consequently, greetings usually form the first step through which one tries to be noticed. Very few people greet each other on XYZ's server. The only players who do are the clan members, and aspiring recruits:

DEAD[XYZ]Kit :   heya zed

DEAD[XYZ]AznMastr :   bleh

DEAD[XYZ]Zed :   hey

DEAD[XYZ]Zed :   I'm fucking around until I get an AK

DEAD[XYZ]Zed :   when I get my AK, everyone on the CT side is going to be fucked

DEAD[K.T.S]Cha0$:   hehe i need to start tryin..im fuckin with the cameras too much

tryin to h4x tha r00f

[A new round starts]

DiveMan :   lol

[XYZ]AznMastr :   ill

DiveMan :   hey kit

[XYZ]Kit :   heya

* alright, i really suck changed name to chillin

[XYZ]AznMastr :   i cant join terr team =[

Zed has just entered the game and he has been noticed by one of his fellow clan members, Kit. They both exchange greetings and, a few seconds later, DiveMan (not one of the clan members, but a player I have seen often on this server – he is a "regular") takes this opportunity to greet Kit also. Notice how DiveMan takes the initiative and inserts himself into an exchange of greetings already in progress. If done well, and if the player is not completely unknown to the clan members, this is a good way of gaining more visibility.

I talked earlier about how jokes and patterns of joking are powerful markers of social status on this server. Later the same day, DiveMan reuses the same tactic he used with his greetings to insert himself into a joking relationship:

DEAD[XYZ]Chromium :   that was shitty

DEAD[XYZ]Tempura :   lol dude you suck :-)

DEAD[XYZ]Chromium :   well I was reloading...

DEAD [XYZ]Kit :   yeah, reload kills more people a year than drug and alcohol combined

DEAD[XYZ]Tempura :   lol!

DEAD[XYZ]Chromium :   LOL

*DEAD*DiveMan: rofl!

Kit makes fun of Chromium's unlucky death (a player does not have an infinite stock of ammunition in this game, and needs to reload – this was fatal to Chromium). Other clan members laugh with Kit at her joke, and DiveMan inserts himself at the end (he is "rolling on the floor laughing" – rofl). By doing this and respecting the local norms of interaction (he is laughing with the clan members, not at them – timing and tone are both important), he increases his chances of being noticed later.

A third tactic frequently used to gain visibility is to congratulate the clan members. To avoid looking like a "nose-browner" however, the timing and tone of the congratulation again have to be right. Inserting oneself towards the end of an interaction among clan members is, as before, the safest way to do this:

DEAD[XYZ]Kit :   whoa

DEAD[XYZ]Kit :   bad move

[XYZ]JL is joining the Counter-Terrorist force

DEAD[K.T.S]???OwnU??? :   damn head shot

DEAD[XYZ]Zed :   oh god

DEAD[XYZ]Kit :   nice try zed

DEAD[XYZ]Zed :   thanks

*DEAD*DiveMan :   yeah gj

"Gj" means "good job", and it is an abbreviation used frequently to congratulate a player.

It would be possible to argue, however, that DiveMan's behavior was purely disinterested and that he was simply being polite and cheerful in all the examples above. However, I later learned from the clan's web page that DiveMan was applying for membership in the clan. By following the social conventions of the clan's members, DiveMan was apparently trying to get accepted by them and move from the shadows of anonymity to the status of a possible recruit. In doing so, he showed a great deal of social skills: he gained his visibility by learning and applying XYZ's rules of interaction rather than challenging them.

From a theoretical standpoint, it is interesting to remark that this process of gaining visibility as early as possible does not match what Turner describes as a typical rite of passage. Indeed, Turner proposes that individuals moving from one social condition to another have to go through a liminal stage, during which they are stripped of their earlier attributes. During this stage "their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. […] Among themselves, neophytes tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism." [50] This description definitely fits what happens to "newbies", people who are just starting to play the game. But these players are not the one interested in joining the clan however: they are transitioning from a non-player condition to a player condition. So in the end, if there are indeed liminal phases in this gaming environment, the process of gaining membership in a clan does not seem to include one.

The absence of a liminal phase does not mean that there are no ritual elements to this process, far to the contrary. Indeed if visibility allows a player to apply for membership, it does not guarantee it. After petitioning for membership and finding a clan member to sponsor him, the aspiring recruit is usually invited for a game against/with the clan members only. During this time the server is closed to outsiders, and short of applying for membership myself I can only guess at what happens behind these closed doors. Perhaps at this time the recruit is stripped of his attributes and has to go through a short, but intense liminal phase; perhaps only his skills as a player are evaluated. Most probably, the balance between these two elements and others will vary depending on the culture of the clan one is applying to. The fact that one's acceptance or refusal is determined behind closed doors, however, is very reminiscent of secret societies and religious movements: the opacity of the process allows the group to define and preserve its own notion of membership without much chance of challenge from the outside.

Conclusions

The convergence of computer networks and gaming has powerful effects: there is now

little doubt that online games are culturally and socially significant milieus, a social stage with unique conventions and investments by players. Among the various genres of games first-person shooters, despite their apparently simplistic premises (they mostly revolve around a basic "hunt and kill" scenario), have also become complex social worlds in their own right. With this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate that it is therefore worthwhile to analyze not only the recreational communities built around purposefully social environments (namely, MMOGs) but also other forms of networked games.

The particular game that was the focus of my attention, and the community of players I participated in, all exhibit interesting characteristics. In particular, interactions between the players follow norms inherited from earlier, text-based environments (i.e. MUDs) but also more innovative patterns. Regarding the earlier, it is clear that mastering the local idioms peculiar to the game and each clan is an essential ingredient of a player's socialization[51]. But the game's interface also offers new and as yet unexplored communication possibilities. In particular, it literally reifies Goffman's concepts of front and back regions into technology. It has been proposed that the design of computer interfaces should be inspired by theater performances[52] and that they should support a "spectator experience"[53]: interestingly, Counter-Strike takes this notion quite literally by making the interface a stage. The game therefore allows us to explore how such an interface affects social interactions among the players.

First, it seems this decoupling of the front and back region encourages conversation. There is a distinction between instrumental, in-game talk (the short messages exchanged during a round) and more sociable, around the game chat (interactions in the spectator mode). Interactions are encouraged since there is always something to talk about: the active players are providing a show that can be constantly commented upon. In this the game differs from other text-based computer-mediated environments like Internet Relay Chat (IRC), where conversations are frequently incoherent and drifting in unrelated directions[54]. But most importantly perhaps, the

constant feeling of being observed by a "chorus of the dead" for those who are "on stage" transforms the game into a performance, where each player must learn which role to play. Backstage talk is used as an opportunity to experiment with the boundaries of appropriate behavior and learn the social norms of the particular community of gamers one is playing with. These norms are then enacted during the next round, and feedback can be obtained during the next transition to the "spectator" mode. The porous boundaries between in-game and out-game talk, unlike social interaction in the physical world, allow for a quick assimilation of a gaming community's culture. This interface, therefore, encourages socialization – albeit in a different way than other game genres, such as MMOGs[55].

Moreover, this communication interface is flexible enough that roles can be locally defined – they are not constrained by technology, they emerge instead out of the interaction between the players and technology and the interactions of the players through the technology. The meaning of "player" and "spectator" are not fixed, despite the labels attached to each part of the interface: they are constantly renegotiated and differ across servers and players.

Roles are, however, only one piece of the complex interaction puzzle present in Counter-Strike. Indeed, the community of gamers I observed also developed a series of rich and complex processes by which social order is maintained. Far from being loose associations of individuals sharing a good game, players form a very stratified society in which evolution is strictly controlled. Jokes and insults play an extremely important role in the maintenance of social hierarchy, in the physical world as well as the virtual[56]: they codify who is able to say what to whom and how, and their breakdown is an opportunity for the group to explicitly articulate each player's position and rights. Players who have internalized these rules can then turn them to their advantage and gain visibility. This gives them the opportunity to apply for a membership in the clan, a prestigious marker of skills and an occasion to gain more power over others.

Overall, it is quite clear that computer games are not simply about playing. As they have

become social environments it is important to support player-to-player interaction in novel ways, and in particular to allow new players to assimilate each game's norms of interaction. Indeed, even in simple games like FPS, there is more to learn than the commands listed in the manual: players also need to be socialized into a game's community, to understand which role(s) to perform, and eventually how to evolve and change their status. And as Bryce and Rutter have it, this is "a serious practice"[57] that requires a good deal of communication abilities. It is my hope that, by documenting the interplay between the players' conversations and the game's communication infrastructure, we can learn how to support the social structures that gamers will inevitably create. As this chapter illustrates, we have much to learn from games constructed around new interaction metaphors like Counter-Strike: in the end, the purpose of the game has very little to do with the richness of the social activity it supports.

Notes

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[33] "Ping" is a measure of the time it takes for a data packet to travel from the sender's machine to a given destination and back. At 150 milliseconds and above, a noticeable "lag" makes playing any real-time game difficult.

[34] I will use XYZ as a placeholder to disguise the clan's identity and preserve its members' privacy. It is worth noting, however, than clans are frequently identified by a three-letter acronym attached to a player's nickname – as in [XYZ]nicolas, for instance. This identity marker is quite important, as we will see in section 3.2.2.

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[46] Identifying gender based on purely textual indicators is, of course, extremely difficult. By looking at the clan's web page, however, I was able to get a feel for the demographics of this group of players. Indeed a short bio is available for each player on the clan's web site, frequently mentioning age and gender among other things. Therefore, and unless specified otherwise, my use of he or she is intended to reflect the real gender of the player and is not random.

[47] The Desert Eagle ("deagle") is a powerful but hard to master handgun in Counter-Strike (it is accurate only at very short ranges).

[48] Cherny. *Conversation and Community*.

[49] That is, for this map – usually a 30-minutes/6-round long period during which a certain level is played. After this time a new map is loaded, the players' statistics are reset, and the same process repeats itself.

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