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From Counter-Strike to Counterterrorism: How the Cheater Reconfigures Our
Understanding of Asymmetric Warfare

by

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ABSTRACT

Around the turn of the century, as the United States increased its military presence in the Middle East in what was widely known as the War on Terror, computer games were also rising in popularity. Military inspired narratives and settings are very common in video games, especially in the genre known as the first person shooter – characterized by a single player, first person point of view. Alexander Galloway provides a vocabulary for understanding the video game, and the first person shooter in particular, derived from the framework of game studies. Scholarship around video games usually either seeks to affirm their utopian possibilities or critique their excessive depiction of violence. I argue that, while video games do present wider opportunities for user participation than other forms of media, there ultimately limited ideological possibilities as evidenced by popular first person shooter games. In particular, I look at *Counter-Strike*, an online first person shooter game widely popular in the 2000s. Through my exploration of the communities surrounding *Counter-Strike*, I argue that video games do provide opportunities for players to more actively engage with media, despite its politically charged narrative and aesthetics often being taken as apolitical by the community itself.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late March of 2022, world news was filled with reporting on the ongoing conflict. One such report, a BBC broadcast, discussed resistance in various Ukrainian cities, including the city of Tarkov. Reddit users and other online commentators pointed out that Tarkov is not a city in Ukraine but is, in fact, a fictional city from the first-person shooter video game *Escape from Tarkov* (CyberWayet). This instance shows the symbiotic relationship between the overt militaristic themes of first-person shooter video games and the actualities of war.

The relationship between video games and the military is nothing new. However, where most scholars focus on a narrative critique, I intend to focus on video games' formal qualities. In particular, I focus on *Counter-Strike*, an online multiplayer game that popularized the first-person shooter. The game takes place in what Anne-Marie Schleiner calls a "sanitized" version of war (Monsef), wherein two evenly matched groups of players representing terrorists and counter terrorists compete in an environment free of civilians and external politics altogether.

Where games traditionally operate on a set of socially accepted principles, in video games these principles take the form of the machine algorithm operating the game. The cheater disrupts both these social norms and computer algorithms. When considering the strong military themes of the first-person shooter, this rule obsession draws a parallel to the accepted rules of operation surrounding war. I argue that the cheater in *Counter-Strike* both reconfigures and reaffirms the rules of the game such that this new dynamic provides a framework by which to

critique the game's military themes by contextualizing the flexibility of rules in the material reality of war.

As J. C. Herz details in *Joystick Nation*, video games and the military have long been intertwined, from 1962's *Spacewar!* to the modern *Call of Duty* series. In particular, the United States's military exploits, both imagined and real, provide inspiration for countless games. In turn, the U.S. military has appropriated gaming software for its own training simulations. The video game genre known as the first-person shooter specifically embodies this military obsession. In both commercial video games and in military simulations used to train soldiers, the first-person point of view becomes a way of immersing the player into the environment. The uniquely alienating first-person perspective that defines this genre provides a formal basis for the us vs. them themes that permeate militaristic narratives.

Counter-Strike was originally developed as a modification of the existing game *Half-Life*. Its player base grew via word of mouth within the gaming community and the developers constantly evolved the game with feedback from players. Once the game's popularity began to grow immensely, Valve, the company that developed the game *Half-Life*, bought the rights to *Counter-Strike*. Since *Counter-Strike* was originally developed as a modification of an existing game, its patchwork code featured unique vulnerabilities that, compared to studio developed games, made it easier for the player base to develop cheats. Cheating was so endemic within *Counter-Strike* that Valve developed software specifically to identify cheaters and ban them from the game (*Steam*). Cheaters created a new dynamic outside of gameplay by both effectively operating a black market for cheats and embodying a villain for the community to unite against. Additionally, the cheaters create a nexus by which the gaming community and the corporation that owns the game, who are often at odds, can unite against a singular force. I use the language

of game studies to examine first-person shooters. Specifically, I look at the role that cheaters play in altering gameplay and how these formal changes relate to the military themes of the game.

Much has been written about the connection between video games and the military industrial complex. No historical tract on the video game can leave out that military research, and training, has utilized video game technology since the early eighties. However, while these texts seek to understand how the military has influenced the video game medium, I seek to understand how video games, specifically the role of cheating in first-person shooters, can influence an alternative analysis of war. By looking at primary sources from the early 2000s, when the popularity of *Counter-Strike* was at its peak, I intend to argue that the cheater both reorganizes and reifies the game's rules. I look at blog posts from the creators of the game as well as commentators on the gaming community, gameplay footage, and a documentary that captures the essence of the gaming community through interviews with players.

I develop a critique of the game's ideological underpinnings through a formal critique using what are known as frag movies, self-produced videos of gameplay made by players and shared organically through message boards, as well as archived forum posts from the original *Counter-Strike* developer team that chronicle the game's development. These updates show the developer's obsession with maintaining a certain level of symmetry in the game, via balancing the skill sets of players and the power of in-game items, which stands in contrast to the inherently asymmetric nature of the counter terror operations the game is based on. Over the course of the game's rising popularity, these blog posts show the player base's rising fascination with the contemporary War on Terror, such as the popularity of desert-based maps and weapons like the AK-47. This push by the player base for a more direct depiction of contemporary

political events belies the apolitical motivations of the game's original developers. But they also undermine a more simplistic analysis of the video game as a tool of ideological complacency as there is much identification of the player on the side of the terrorists.

For an understanding of the player base at the time, I primarily draw from the documentary *G4M3RS* (2002, Kiyash Monsef). Filmed at an international *Counter-Strike* tournament, the documentary features many interviews with dedicated *Counter-Strike* players, who spend much more time thinking about *Counter-Strike* at a higher level than the average player. These interviews are useful in examining the idea of realism that attracted many players to the game such as the game's novel recoil patterns and revival system. Additionally, the documentary explores the phenomenon of cheating within the game by interviewing both cheaters and players about the subject. These interviews reveal that the phenomenon of cheating does indeed further solidify the rules of the game by bringing the community together against the common enemy of the cheater.

With regard to the first person shooter, I utilize Galloway's theoretical understanding of the video game as an interplay between a machine algorithm and a human player. Torben Grodal and Martti Lahti write on the first-person perspective in video games as the apex of a player activated embodied experience. Regarding the first-person shooter, Alexander Galloway laid the groundwork for analyzing this genre. He traces the roots of the first-person perspective from cinema, wherein he identifies the framing as inherently indicative of an alienated state (Galloway 56). However, he claims that the first-person perspective is recontextualized in the video game as indicative of the illusion of control that underlines the medium. Put simply, the first-person shot is a formal representative of the player action (Galloway 65). Contrary to Galloway's interpretation, I argue that the first-person perspective within video games has an alienating

quality. This is important when considering the relationship between the player, cheater, and community as well as the games' military themes – particularly regarding the depersonalization of the War on Terror.

I challenge his conception of alienation with regard to the first-person shooter. Galloway asserts that the first-person point of view formally represents the player's agency within the machine algorithm while I contend that the first-person point of view represents a heightened sense of alienation. Alexander Galloway writes that the first-person perspective allows the player to formally embody the character, with the camera view positioned in the player characters head. In this sense, the agency of the player is at the forefront. However, this overt emphasis on agency masks the limitations of choice within the game space, in the form of the limited field of view of the player and the limitations of the game's physics engine. Galloway notes that in the first-person shooter, the player's weapon is also always at the forefront of the player's vision. This pinpoints the player's agency, that their tool for solving problems in the game world is a weapon, and increases alienation by further pitting the player against their surroundings. However, *Counter-Strike* is also inherently a multiplayer game, which would imply some need for teamwork. But, the first-person perspective instills a sense of individualism within this cooperative space, limiting the possibilities for alternative forms of play. These alienating qualities are also why first-person shooters popularly use alienating, us vs. them narratives such as war. The presence of the cheater reasserts both the agency and collective identity of the player by instilling a dynamic outside of the machine algorithm.

I draw from the base of game theory as established by Johan Huizinga and video game theory, particularly with regard to the first-person shooter, as established by Alexander Galloway. Game theory provides a base for understanding the social relations between players

and the game. Specifically, I draw from the understanding of the cheater as not spoiling the game or working in their own self-interest but playing a role that creates a game within the game, the outcome of which, ultimately, reifies the established rules of the game. I seek to extend this analysis to the geopolitical sphere where disturbances to the status quo ultimately reify that same status quo by contracting social relations, particularly with regard to the War on Terror.

To begin, I take a look at the core gameplay of *Counter-Strike* and how these formal qualities show symmetry and asymmetry at odds. Then, I examine what new dynamics the cheater introduces into gameplay. Finally, I analyze these new dynamics in the context of the military themes of the game.

CHAPTER TWO: THE PLAYER VS. THE ALGORITHM

Counter-Strike ostensibly offers players a unique military themed gameplay experience, yet is fraught with contradiction. Central to the game's appeal is the quickness of each match and the ability the exponential increase in skill. The game is premised on matches following particular scenarios, for example disarming a bomb or recovering a hostage, that pits two teams of twelve against each other. This is an unusually high number of players per team and was intentionally designed by the game's original developers to increase the sense of urgency and chaos in each match. Although the teams represent two diametrically opposed entities within the popular American consciousness, terrorists and counter terrorists, the two teams are presented as equals and their characterization is almost simply aesthetic. Over the course of the game's popularity no faction is more favored than the other, owing to this lack of formal distinction. In this way, the game obsesses itself with symmetry and meritocracy. That all other factors, that would contribute to military victory in reality, are rendered null and the player's success is reduced to their individual skill level. This ideological framework provides a corollary to the actual warfare on which the game is based. The suggestion that all sides of a conflict are equal and the outcome of a war is determined by the best, read well-funded or supported, army leads to an erroneous evaluation of conflicts, and their causes and outcomes. Within the framework of the game, winning a round increases the player's skill in more ways than just experience. Winning a round gives the player the opportunity to buy more or better weapons, thus further increasing the skill gap between players and undermining the game's appeal to symmetry.

The first-person shooter genre, that *Counter-Strike* exemplifies, forces the player into a position of alienation. For example, Anne Marie Schleiner's project *Velvet Strike* imagines a new scenario within *Counter-Strike* wherein the two opposing sides resolve the conflict through diplomacy. This mod interjects its anti-war message more explicitly by including in game graffiti with anti-war messaging. I suggest that the cheater represents the logical extension of the agency of the player through its interventions within the actual code structure of the game. Through these interventions, the cheater makes the alienation of the player more prominent by sharpening the contradiction between the player and the corporation behind the game, as evidenced by the intense pushback against the phenomenon of cheating.

Central to the idea of skill is *Counter-Strike* players' perception of realism, which serves more as an ideological choice than as an appeal to reality. One example is the way guns are coded in the game to have more complex mechanics than previous first-person shooters. In interviews with avid *Counter-Strike* players, the novel recoil patterns of the game were a particular initial draw. In past, more rudimentary, first-person shooters there was no recoil. Then, as games became more complex, recoil was added but reduced to randomized patterns. Including recoil was meant to give the action of shooting a gun in a first-person shooter a tinge of reality, mirroring the fact that in real life firing a gun involves more complex physics than simple projectile motion. As gamer Robin Grajeda explains in the 2002 documentary *G4M3RS*, "in real life, you have to be aware of the recoil." Though this more complex recoil system is novel, could it be said to add a meaningfully new intervention to the actual gameplay? I suggest that the randomized recoil can still be reduced to an aesthetic decoration.

The recoil patterns in *Counter-Strike* appeal to the player's sense of realism by creating a more strongly skill-based mechanic. In *Counter-Strike*, each gun has its own unique recoil

pattern that corresponds to how heavy the gun is and how long it has been firing, imitating reality wherein firing a gun for too long would inevitably reduce the accuracy of the shot. Rather than being random, the recoil follows a predictable pattern. This has been the source of endless fascination and study for players, many of whom conduct experiments to measure these patterns. Although this seems like an insignificant aspect of the game, its uniqueness drew a lot of the game's early popularity and a lot of what players touted as its realism. These recoil patterns made selecting a weapon a more meaningful choice in game. It also made the process to determine which weapon was the best choice a source of endless experimentation on the part of the player. Practice with each gun netted useful information which, in turn, translated into skill. This kept players coming back and engaging more thoughtfully with the game despite its repetitive structure and bare bones narrative.

Once *Counter-Strike* was bought by *Valve* from its independent developers, players increasingly served the function of a consumer base in more literal terms than in the virtual markets in the early versions of the game. The fascination with gun choice in the game grew into a lucrative business for *Valve* in the form of a system by which players could purchase guns outside of the game, for real money, to use in-game. As a cornerstone of the game's perceived realism, this idealized space is easily disrupted by the cheater. In the first round of a typical *Counter-Strike* match, all players start with the same basic weapons, using in-game currency earned from performing skill to purchase different weapons in subsequent rounds. One common cheat allows players to subvert this system and use whatever weapons they choose at any time. This type of cheat is obvious to other players as the cheater will have an expensive weapon in an early round, impossible to obtain through legal means. One player commented in a forum post titled "PLEASE LET CS BECOME SKILL GAME AGAIN!!" that this cheat undermines the

supposed meritocratic nature of *Counter-Strike*, as the cheater has something they didn't properly earn (HaTeR oF DumB PeOpLe). I argue that the official starting conditions of *Counter-Strike* are far from reality, as the vision of two technologically equivalent factions doesn't accurately represent modern war, and the cheater, using everything at their disposal to win, brings the game closer to this actual reality.

Counter-Strike's contentious relationship to the reality of war can be traced through its development. Developer Minh Le admits that the counterterrorism theme was intended to capitalize on its ubiquity in the news media at the time, though expressly shied away from tying any of *Counter-Strike*'s characters to real life factions (Naziripour). Players particularly noticed that the character design of the terrorists and counter terrorists looked quite similar, sometimes resulting in friendly fire, and player models that more overtly connected the terrorist characters to the Middle East or Arab culture proved controversial (*Counter-Strike*). Nonetheless, the game's appeal to realism, and the players' affirmation of this appeal, was not lost on commentators who examined the phenomenon through the lens of the War on Terror. A satirical article from 2001 suggests sending *Counter-Strike* players overseas to fight the Taliban because their "mindless, one track devotion makes them the perfect killing machines". In reference to the game's appeal to realism, the article claims that "since they claim to already be so knowledgeable in guns and the art of killing, they won't even need any training" (Kiyanka).

From this microcosm we can see that realism within the game is reduced to individualized simulation. Despite the complexity of *Counter-Strike*'s recoil system, it operates on the same basis as the randomized recoil systems of other first-person shooters. That is, the dimension it adds to gameplay is merely superficial. This recoil system imparts on the player a depth of knowledge that builds an uncritical skillset, giving the illusion of a deep engagement

with the game's themes. The obsession with realism in this sense reduces success to narrow, individual choices rather than an evaluation of the system as a whole. In the context of *Counter-Strike*, the idea that the specificity of the recoil of a gun as a determining factor in the victory of a match can be extended, based on the game's military themes, to an inability to structurally critique war beyond individualized actions.

Like recoil patterns, how death works in *Counter-Strike* is also a site of contention between the game's perceived realism and reality. In *Counter-Strike*, critical damage and death work in ways that are novel and more advanced than many first-person shooters at the time. In more rudimentary first-person shooters, damage was more mechanically simple. Every character has a predetermined amount of damage they can take and shooting in their general vicinity, called a hit box, results in a loss of a predetermined increment of health. Many earlier first-person shooters also follow the arcade model, wherein the player is either given or can collect extra lives and stave off the endgame mode of death. *Counter-Strike* introduced a more complex system of damage wherein getting hit in critical areas, like the head and chest, resulted in a loss of more damage than getting hit in other areas. Similarly, getting hit in a limb too many times can result in the loss of its function but not the death of the player. What players are most drawn to, however, is that when a player dies in a round, they can't be revived. All of these things combined introduce more grave consequences during the game's fast-paced and chaotic rounds. It's easy to see how this complex system caused players to tout the game's realism over more simplistic first-person shooters, even if the death experienced by the player is only temporary, as the player is miraculously revived from the dead to fight in the next round.

However, this is where the contrast between what is perceived as realism and actual reality is the most stark. Here we can see how perceived realism is tied to mechanics that make

the game more complex, and therefore more skillful. But, the reality of death in warfare goes beyond these specificities. The game lacks any significant number of non-combatant characters, despite many maps depicting civilian centers in the form of towns. A big critique of the game's supposed realism is the lack of civilian populations and civilian deaths that marked the War on Terror from which the game draws inspiration. On the part of the player, the supposed lasting mortality of the player character is undone by the brevity of each round. Even though a player is down for the count when they die in a round, starting again can be only a matter of minutes. This is especially compounded by the lack of characterization, reducing the player characters to interchangeable stereotypes and thus minimizing the impact of their death. Even though death is treated in a more complex way than the usual first-person shooter, *Counter-Strike* still presents a sanitized version of the reality of war, reducing death to a minor inconvenience rather than a finality.

CHAPTER THREE: THE DISRUPTION OF THE CHEATER

The figure of the cheater disrupts the normative relationships enforced through the rules of the game. Johan Huizinga writes that, unlike the spoilsport, the cheater does intend to engage with the actual game, at the expense of flaunting the rules. Huizinga draws a distinction between the spoilsport, who “trespasses against the rules or ignores them,” and the cheater who “pretends to be playing the game and...still acknowledges the magic circle” (Huizinga 11). Through this lens we can understand that, unlike popular sentiment would believe, cheaters in *Counter-Strike* don’t intend to ruin the game per se, but engage in playing to win like any other player. What makes the cheater stand apart is their willingness to go beyond the acceptable modes of engaging with the game, however I contend that these cheats represent a logical, albeit radical, extension of the game’s own logics. Cheaters challenge the ideas of fairness and skill that serve as the basis for the game.

While cheating has so many mechanisms to combat its proliferation throughout the game, there are other methods of play that similarly undermine the supposedly meritocratic nature of the game. A significant aspect of the meritocratic basis of *Counter-Strike* is its in-game currency system. All players start out on a similar level, with the same base weapons and the same amount of currency to purchase additional weapons. Winning subsequent rounds gives players more currency with which to buy additional weapons. One common cheat allows players to bypass this system altogether and purchase any weapon they want at any time. Not only does this disrupt the equalizing conditions imposed on the players by the game, it disrupts the meritocratic rewarding of skill that this system provides. Therefore, the elimination of the threat of the cheater in this

instance is crucial to maintain not only the sanctity and supremacy of the rules, but also the ideological basis for these rules.

However, after the acquisition of *Counter-Strike* from its independent developers, *Valve* implemented systems which similarly violated the sanctity of this appeal to symmetry and equalization. McKenzie Wark and Mirko Tobias Schäfer write of the hacker as a utopian figure that resists centralized, corporate control of digital space by reappropriating physical and algorithmic machines, and Bernard Perron write of the cheater in the context of video games in much the same way. In *A Hacker Manifesto*, McKenzie Wark writes of the emergent figure of the hacker within the digital age. Near the beginning of the text, Wark claims that “hackers create the possibility of new things entering the world,” and that “hackers use their knowledge to maintain their autonomy” (Wark 4-6). The hacker takes raw data and creates something new with it, subverting both institutional control and commodification of digital information. This grandiose language belies the utopic connotations associated with the subversive nature of the hacker. Though not expressly stated in Wark’s work, cheating in video games is a form of hacking because cheaters utilize loopholes within a game’s code to bypass the de facto rules of the game. What the cheater creates is a new relationship to the game for all players. For instance, instead of two teams playing against each other, all players on each team band together against the cheater, then the developer who owns the game implements measures to protect against cheating. In this way, the game’s rules are at once reconstituted and reified because of the actions of the cheater.

The defining feature of the US led War on Terror is the presumption of a state of affairs of a new type. Rather than clearly defined arenas and belligerents, war has now encompassed anywhere and anyone. The US, the one who officially declared this state of affairs, attributes the

necessity of these actions to the nature of its enemy – the terrorist. As the terrorist themselves abide by no rules, by virtue of being informally organized, the only way to combat this is for the US to eschew the rules itself.

Other scholars note that this period represents a state of exception, with the US justifying its suspension of the rules with current conditions. This state of exception operates in an extralegal framework, it is not so much a new set of rules than a suspension of all rules. Central to Agamben's conception of the state of exception is the role of the sovereign as defined by Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt. The sovereign establishes the juridical rules as well as the context for which they can be suspended. In this sense, the power of the sovereign is not defined by any claim to authority other than its relationship to the rules "with the moderns that the state of necessity tends to be included within the juridical order and to appear as a true and proper 'state' of the law" (Agamben 26). Additionally, these rules exist in the abstract as it is accepted that their legality is conditional. That is, they are not obeyed because of some appeal to order, even if that claim is often a stated logic, but because the necessity of the sovereign to establish the state of exception (Agamben 24-26).

In this state of exception, the true nature of the rules is revealed. The rules are arbitrary bounds to establish the sovereign's authority over others, and the suspension of the rules reveals their arbitrary nature. Mapping this understanding of the state of exception onto the U.S. led War on Terror helps to elucidate this point. Agamban writes that this state of exception was kicked off by the attack on the World Trade Centers. Since the terrorists used extralegal methods, the reasoning went, then it was necessary to use extralegal methods to combat terrorism. However, Agamban notes that this state of exception was much less a temporary suspension of the rules,

rather a new set of rules altogether. The enhanced security techniques deployed to fight terrorism, from torture to mass surveillance, became the status quo.

The label suggests that the terrorist does not conduct warfare within the accepted legal framework. Not only does this label suggest a certain legality and illegality with regard to warfare, which belies a worldview favorable to US intervention, it allows for a suspension of these rules. This can be mapped on to the attack on the World Trade Center which precipitated the War on Terror. However, in this event we can see the tension inherent in the imposition of the United States's repeated flouting of international law in its subsequent military conflicts. Immediately following the attack the US what not clear who the perpetrators were, attributing it to a number of suspected groups. Why is the suspect list so long? It belies the extent of US intervention and provocation, muddying its image as the impartial bastion of civility. If we don't take for granted the United States's claims of its own innocence, we can ask some questions about this rules based order. Does this event really represent an upending of the rules, or merely a continuation of already established modes of warfare?

Central to Agamban's conception of the sovereign exemption is the concept of the bare life. The figure onto whom the sovereign exemption is concentrated is relegated to the bare life. Agamban pulls this from the homo sacer of Roman law, someone who is officially outside of society (Agamban 71). In this sense, we see the contradiction between alienation and community as the bare life serves as a rallying point for the community to reaffirm itself. That is, the bare life allows the sovereign to reconstitute, and further entrench, its power in society. In the context of the War on Terror, this is mapped onto the figure of the terrorist. Rather than being a fixed group of people, the terrorist is an abstract category into which any person can be designated, from sovereign nations to independent militias to individual American citizens. It is in the

pursuit of this abstract figure that these new rules of engagement are enacted. The sovereign exception is concentrated on this figure as, once this designation is established, the juridical rules no longer apply and any person becomes an individual sovereign over the bare life. Thus any individual violation is not perceived as an individual crime, but rather representative as the actions of whole abstract categories – either the sovereign or terrorist.

In both video games and real warfare there exists a certain rule-bound play, in the sense that there are opposing sides set to achieve mutually exclusive goals with a certain rule set mediating their activities. In video games these rules are imposed de facto by the machine, both the limitations of the game hardware and the algorithm that runs the game, with little ability for the player to autonomously deviate from the rules within this framework. In real war, the rules are set and mediated by legal bodies, entities such as the United Nations and its subsidiaries. However, real wars, unlike video games, don't exist in a vacuum unto themselves, thus the enforcement of the rules, and the notion of legality itself, is affected by political factors extenuating beyond the scope of a singular war or event.

Since the inception of the video game, war has been an easily exploitable theme. From Atari's *Red Baron* (1980) to the *Call of Duty* series (2003-2023) video games have explored real wars and battlefields. Video game developers haven't shied away from depicted any number of real life conflicts, or utilizing real life conflicts in a fictionalized space – e.g. *Castle Wolfenstein* (1981) or *Command and Conquer: Red Alert* (1995). What makes *Counter-Strike* unique in this space, is that it utilizes what is clearly a contemporary depiction of the War on Terror in an almost anonymized way. While there are the figures of the terrorists and counter terrorists, there are no references, oblique or otherwise, to any sort of relation to real world factions or countries. Additionally, the game has little in the way of a strict narrative, opting instead for a series of

basic scenarios that serve to set up the player versus player combat that is the real heart of the game. In this way, it makes it easier to see the first-person shooter game as a general and abstract depiction of warfare, and more clearly reveals its sanitized relationship to real war.

Counter-Strike was originally developed as a mod of the game *Half-Life*. The original game *Half-Life* is a single player, narrative based game but the *Counter-Strike* mod transforms it into a team based, “capture the flag” game. Game modifications, or mods, had become widely popular in the 1990s after the success of *Doom*, a game whose developers encouraged them. Mods allow anyone to edit a game’s base engine, ranging from aesthetic changes to the creation of entirely different gameplay.

The cheater is often viewed as an agent intent on ruining the game. This view fails to see the way that the cheater uniquely navigates the establish rules of the game. Johan Huizinga makes this distinction in *Homo Ludens*, identifying two figures – the cheater and the spoilsport. The spoilsport encapsulates the one-dimensional view of the cheater, that is, one who eschews the rules of the game in their entirety, such that the game itself is ruined. The cheater, however, eschews the rules of the game in a unique way. The cheater navigates the game such that the base logic of the game remains intact, while the conditional rules are treated as arbitrary. This effectively reorganizes the game’s own logics by playing into them without following the rules.

An example of this view of the cheater as a unique player is in the game *Monopoly*. A common cheat in this game consists of taking unearned money from the bank. While this surpasses the game’s rules of earning money through property ownership, it fits withing the game’s underlying logic of accumulating as much wealth as possible. In this way, we can see how the figure of the cheater reorganizes the game, effectively creating a new game. If all bets are off, so to speak, it forces other players to eschew the rules as well.

When considering the figure of the cheater as it relates to video games we must consider narratives around digital space. One that naturally lends itself to the preexisting figure of the cheater is the figure of the hacker. As Wark explains in *Hacker Manifesto*, the hacker disrupts the digital space by utilizing existing digital infrastructure for one's own ends. This is often given utopic connotations, that the digital infrastructure is representative of modern neoliberal corporate domination and the hacker is representative of the individual's abilities to subvert these totalizing structures.

Cheating in video games is necessarily hacking, as a player must alter some aspect of the game's code in order to subvert its rules. Even exploits that don't require extensive alterations, such as those that take advantage of oversights in the game's infrastructure on the part of the developer, are colloquially referred to as hacks. However, the figure of the cheater is not largely associated with the figure of the hacks, particularly in regard to the political associations of the hacker.

Velvet Strike is a mod that serves as a political exercise to more overtly question the political underpinnings of *Counter-Strike*. The main content of the mod is a cheat that allows players to spray graffiti in the digital space, a common cheat. The provided graffiti in the mod consists of explicitly anti-war posters, ranging from riffs on the in-game character models to explicit references to the War on Terror (Velvet-Strike). Additionally, the mod encourages players to avoid the main rule of the game, to battle against one another in two teams, to instead resolve the fictional conflict through diplomacy. In this way, the cheat used is not overtly self-serving, like many other cheats, but still serves to undermine the rules of the game. However, while other cheats ultimately support the main thrust of the game, to "win" within the provided

framework of the player vs player match, *Velvet Strike*'s overtly political aspirations allows it to more directly confront the base logics of the game.

While *Velvet Strike* is not a cheat in the traditional sense, in that it exploits the existing in game feature that allows players to “spray” graffiti throughout the in-game map, it's social practice exists to disrupt the game such that it creates a new play dynamic similar to other cheats. Most notable, like other cheaters, the artists of *Velvet Strike* are singled out by other players for refusing to participate in the game through its prescribed rules. “I remember us getting killed a lot,” said Brody Condon, one of the artists involved with *Velvet Strike*. The fact that *Velvet Strike* more directly confronts the base logics of the game belies its creators' political intentions. It's construction particularly seeks to undermine the “right wing ideology” that permeates the game's vision of war and to challenge the game's relationship to real war. According to Schleiner, “We are also opposed to military fantasy masquerading as ‘realism’. I am also disturbed that the binary logic of the shooter is being implemented on a global military scale” (Naziripour). What *Velvet Strike* shows is the possibilities inherent in the subversion of the game's rules. Though the cheater does not subvert the game for overtly political purposes, the act of cheating provides a framework by which the game's sanitized vision of war is challenged.

In the context of video games, cheating operates through the logic of hacking – that is, infiltrating the game's code in order to restructure it and create something new. Within the discourse of digital studies, hacking is often discussed in a utopic sense. Scholars suggest that the logic of hacking allows individual users to circumvent repressive rules in order to undermine larger corporate and government entities. However, cheating is rarely, if ever, discussed in this framework as it is often perceived as an individual action whose goals are smaller in scope.

The corporate and individual dichotomy of hacking does take shape within the phenomenon of cheating, as can be seen in the actions of video game companies to curb cheating. In particular, the ubiquity of cheating within *Counter-Strike* prompted *Valve* to implement wide-reaching limits on cheating – consisting of a one-strike policy that would see players banned indefinitely. In fact, the contradiction between individuals and large corporations is embedded within the fabric of the game itself, due to its birth as a mod of an existing game. While *Valve* had an interest in cracking down on hacking that affected gameplay, the game itself being a hack – in the form of a modification – of an existing *Valve* property was acceptable in that it required anyone who wanted to play *Counter-Strike* to buy the base game of *Half Life* to run the mod. This shows us that hacking, cheating, and modifying aren't discreet categories and that the act of hacking has no intrinsic positive or negative attribute, even to the corporation that legally owns the game.

Kiyash Monsef's documentary *G4M3RS* (2002) follows the early days of the competitive *Counter-Strike* community, interviewing up and coming, semi-professional players and covering an in person tournament. Gamers are interviewed about a wide variety of subjects related to the game and its impact on their lives. A section of the documentary is dedicated to the subject of cheating, with both players and cheaters alike interviewed, indicating the importance of the question of cheating to the game and its community. While players give standard talking head interviews, the interviewed cheater is treated with the anonymity awarded to protected witnesses in crime documentaries, replete with a dark shadow to obscure their features and pitch shifting to hide their voice. While this is certainly exaggerated for effect, it highlights the alienation of the cheater from the average player and the community as a whole.

We can ascertain the general perception of cheaters from the various interviews in *G4M3RS*. Gamespot editor Greg Kasavin explains the general player frustration with cheaters by saying: “You’ll be playing and there’s some guy who’s magically able to kill everyone around you because he can see through walls.” Cheaters are universally reviled, yet a never ending object of discussion and fascination. Within the context of *Counter-Strike*, the actions of cheaters are perceived to negatively affect the other players by conflicting with the supposed meritocratic basis of the game. Within the game, players advance by ‘ranking up’, which allows the matchmaking algorithm to match players of similar skill. The sanctity of this system is threatened by players who win unfairly, therefore ranking down other players unfairly.

The players in this documentary are meant to represent the average *Counter-Strike* player, yet they differ in that the majority of them are competitors within the burgeoning world of esports. So, the actions of cheaters not only affect a personal sense of fairness, but are also perceived to affect a player’s potential income.

Much thought is put, by both players and scholars alike, toward examining the motivation of the cheater. Often this results in a conclusion revolving around a supposed antisocial impulse, or for exclusively self-indulgent reasons. Adrian Martinez of Speakeasy Inc. – an internet broadband service provider – sums it up by putting cheaters into two categories, “There’s people who are cheating for their own personal gain. People who actually use cheats in leagues and competitions. The second level of cheating is it’s not for personal gain so much as a destructive tendency.” When examining the phenomenon of cheating, both these explanations fall flat in providing a general explanation for cheating behavior. Through the interviews in *G4M3RS*, the general consensus is that cheating provides a way to more thoroughly involve oneself in the game, or to exert more control over the game environment. Co-leader of the myg0t cheating

collective OldManPeterson explains how the cheater reconfigures the game by saying cheaters are “the true evil of the game. You can play a game where it’s terrorists versus counter terrorists ... but you get someone like me in the server and suddenly everyone is going to gang up just to try to kick [my] ass.” Because the cheater seeks to exert their own autonomy within the framework of the game, this puts the cheater along the same logics as the non-cheating player, who seeks to exert their own autonomy in order to win through conventional means.

Within the notion of cheating, or breaking the rules, there is the unspoken belief that the rules are sacrosanct or value neutral. That the rules exist a priori as a mediator between the autonomous players. In reality, the rules themselves are loaded with ideological baggage meant to suppress one playing side. Rather than acting as an equalizer, or a representation of shared values, the rules reveal the inequalities inherent within the game. And, it is the act of cheating that brings these contradictions to light.

In the context of the War on Terror, the presumption of the cheater breaking sacrosanct rules serves as a justification for upending the rules altogether. Giorgio Agamban describes this as the “state of exception”, wherein it is decided – by arbitrary measures – that the accepted rules of war no longer apply due to the nature of the fighting. This suggests that, because the enemy eschews the rules, it is acceptable for the U.S. to eschew the rules as well. What this ignores, however, is the vast disparities between the two warring sides. In fact, it is through the specter of the cheater, which in the context of the war on terror is associated with the terrorist, that the U.S. is able to manufacture consent for its disavowal of the accepted rules of war.

It must be said, however, that this is a mere rhetorical trick. What is presented, during the War on Terror, as a sort of unique brutality in actuality brings to light the mode of operations the U.S. had participated in for decades. For example, the targeting of citizens became more

commonplace during the War on Terror because of the abstract category of terrorist allowing anyone to be target. But, we only need look to the downing of Iran Air Flight 655 or the Highway of Death in Kuwait to see the U.S.'s history of targeting civilians. What is significant during the War on Terror is that the U.S. felt less need to be elusive about these illicit operations, as can be seen in the extensive documentation of the tortures at Abu Garib prison.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

As the U.S.'s endless wars continue on, so too does the entanglement between video games and the military. The year 2023 saw the announcement of *Counter-Strike 2*, the fourth installment of the *Counter-Strike* series after the release of *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* a decade before. However, the continuity evoked by the name *Counter-Strike 2* suggests a return to the simpler, more sanitized world embodied by the original *Counter-Strike*. Indeed, the waning of the politics of the War on Terror has allowed for games such as Victura's *Six Days in Fallujah* (2023) to finally see a release despite the controversy upon its initial announcement in 2009. Despite the shifting public attitude towards war, the appeal to realism through individualized simulation, as pioneered by *Counter-Strike*, continues to be the defining feature of first-person shooter video games. This is most evident in the *Counter-Strike* inspired *Escape from Tarkov* (2017) whose gameplay revolves almost entirely around a fetishization of realism, particularly with regard to the specific weapons used in the game.

Much like our conception of the cheater has changed little since the early days of *Counter-Strike*, the battle against cheaters remains a perennial problem for game developers, our relationship to war – with its black-and-white motivations and zero sum rewards – has similarly progressed little. Through examining the new dynamics introduced through the phenomenon of cheating we can more fully embrace the expansive possibilities promised by the digital space.

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