

Counter Strike: Global Offensive Forming and Maintaining Social Connections Through Success

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ABSTRACT

Gaming in general receives a lot of praise and criticism in terms of social play. Some believe it provides the user with more opportunities to maintain meaningful social connections while others believe the notion of isolation in every ‘hard-core’ player to reality. In this Paper we will be exploring the social implications of *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* and how they are exhibited to both provide and maintain a social connection with other players based on the success of them as a team generally. This would be beneficial as we could analyse what this means for the community and if very competitive focused team-play is beneficial to the players and their social connections, borrowing perspectives from social sciences as well as cultural studies.

Keywords

Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, Social Play, Competitive Team-Play.

INTRODUCTION

Online gaming as a whole receives continuous slander from popular main-stream media sources such as the news, reference point being BBC News using headlines such as “Video Games cause addiction, violence and distress” (Klienman 2015). The slander it receives however doesn’t hold much merit as the ‘studies’ they quote and cling to have such a small focus group, furthermore many of the focus groups already had a disposition to an issue they were raising (Copenhaver, Mitrofan and Ferguson 2017). Contrary to this, many academics believe video games are a positive thing and help enhance the user’s cognitive abilities and the point of this paper; giving the players a social environment in which they otherwise might not have (Hanghøj, Lieberoth and Misfeldt 2018).

There are a variety of ways for players to interact with games directly these include; solo-play, co-operative, competitive and MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online). These have been identified as the main methods of play a user can have with the social aspect. CS:GO is considered to be approachable from each of these positions, that’s what keeps the game relevant 6 years after release and widely mechanically unchanged since launch in 1999. This could be one of the revealing factors as to why relationships seem to be based solely on the success of the general in-game team and whether this is a positive or negative thing. This isn’t unique to *Counter-Strike* however, with other games such as *Rainbow Six Siege* (Ubisoft, 2015) they have a larger focus towards casual gameplay. The

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majority of the community in *Counter-Strike* is purely based on the competitive aspect and as such lends itself to the leading question more prevalently.

There are two main trains of thought for answering this question; whether the player is encouraged by the increase competitive aspect to maintain a social interaction as continued teamwork despite loss would enable them to grow as a team and in turn make the players closer friends. The other being, the competitive aspect pushes players further apart as the demand for success is higher. The skill level required would be higher and more is expected of each player. Expectations are potentially detrimental because it is unlikely anyone would ever meet the competitive expectations as a player has, due to the exemplary play employed by the professionals.

This paper will be using the social science methodology alongside theoretical game knowledge. Imposing questions to avid competitive players regarding their preferences to playing with players of a lower skill level. Their avoidance of such and why having something in common or having similar personalities is less of a basis for continued social association opposed to winning a virtual game. Gaining no real meaningful social connection and if that is an adequate trade-off for winning the game.

There is no existing methodology for examining the social connection between players. Some important scholars such as Aarseth (Aarseth 2012) have noted that not a great deal of methodologies exist for critique and analysis of a game. Even less methodologies exist to properly identify social aspects within an online game. Using qualitative data would be ideal as no amount of numerical data could properly represent the status of a players thought process and focuses in the game. The favoured methodology employed would be the one-on-one interview technique. Deciding against using surveys to gather information as the data would be too sparse and the time restraint of having to categorise and analyse the data.

MAIN

Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO) (Valve, Hidden Path Entertainment, 2012) quickly rose to heights after release in August 2012 having a peak of 56,00 players in the first month alone. Following this, peak players of 850,000 during April 2016 with a consistent average players of 300,000+ after May 2015 until now, as of writing December 2018 (SteamSpy n.d.). With a huge player-base you would expect some well suited relationships to form and some would be relationships to be furthered, while yes it does help maintain connection with players we can see a large rift in the community due to the skill level. I have been personally playing this game since release, and on and off been involved in the community. All of the experiences and opinions though are widely adopted, may not all have sources as they are gathered through experience of play-time (time I spent playing the game, I have excess of 1000 hours over 6 years as of writing). My experience with the game and with the community is thorough, playing at a high level for 2 years.

Counter Strike History

To better understand the social aspect of this study, we had first examine the origins of the community where you can find the birth to a sense of elitism. *Counter-Strike* was originally released in 1999 as a Mod (Modification) for *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998). After one iteration in 2004 titled *Counter-Strike Source* (Valve, Turtle Rock Studios, 2004) *CS:GO* was eventually released in 2012. In the community, during the launch of *CS:GO* common practices were to degrade the skill level of other players and state you had been

playing since 1.6 (the *Counter Strike Source* iteration). The community was widely regarded to be a good community in the early stages of the game, however further down the line it would be home to what is widely considered one of the most toxic (communication and/or behaviour that both risks emotional harm or distress and achieves higher objective) (Spartan75369 2017) communities around. Followed only by MOBAs (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) and *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2016).

Counter-Strike Social Aspect

Much like the early iterations of the game, *CS:GO* is a very social intensive game if you intend to win. It requires good communication from your team about each of the strategies to employ. However, there are possible roles to play in the game where you can retrospectively play on a team alone separate to what your teammates actually accomplish with/without you. Of the four noted possible interactions a single player can have with any game (these being Solo-Play, co-operative, competitive and MMO) 3 of these can possibly be employed within a single game. It all depends on how you approach the game-state

Counter-Strike Game Modes

To understand the social implications of the game, understanding that each variation of game-mode has different inter-societal values is paramount. There are two teams CT(Counter-Terrorist) and T(Terrorist) in every mode, each team has different weapon selections. All purchasable at the start of an in-game round. Winning conditions are as follows; for objective based game modes each team can either kill all of the enemy team or they can complete the objective. CT's have to defuse the bomb if it has been planted or the T side run out of time before they plant the bomb. T's have to plant the bomb and protect it until it explodes. In hostage it is reversed roles, and CT have to carry the hostage back to their spawning area. With the objective based games, you switch sides half way through the game. As of writing there are 6 important segments of games, each having different value in the community those being:

- Casual – Consisting of a selection of both hostage style and bomb defuse maps. It has 10 players on each team and has no ranking system or way to track your progress as a player. This is an easy objective based game, more money to buy guns longer round times, maximum of 15 rounds.
- Wingman – A two player a-side objective based game-mode, this is ranked. Smaller map selection due to player size. Leaving this prematurely will result in a ban (being banned from competitive game-modes for a set time).
- Competitive – The most popular, a 5 vs 5 objective based game-mode. This is ranked and kept track of, you can re-watch your games later on. This is the game-mode that is supported by E-Sports. Leaving prematurely will result in a ban as will doing too much team damage. Rotating map choices with each update.
- War games – This a small game-mode, featuring mini game-modes. Respawn is enabled for all of these but the match rules different between the mini game-modes.
- Deathmatch – Respawn (player character spawning after death) is enabled, no rank or progress tracking. You get more kills than anyone else is the only win scenario.

- Demolition – A mix between the competitive and casual game modes, with no ranking but a good place to practice the competitive game-mode as it's a 5 vs 5 scenario akin to competitive.

Social Stigma based on the modes above

There are varying degrees of toxicity and social stigma on the different segments, but the two I'll be focusing on are the two that players take more seriously than the other modes (though the other modes do still get a large amount of toxicity if you are an objectively bad player), those being competitive and wingman. These are the two modes that are ranked and as such you have something to show for your time playing. In this game you have a collection of knowledge and skill based on the game, rather than virtual items which are inherently better than the last gained by levelling up. One model to use this system is *Destiny 2* (Bungie, *Vicarious visions*, High Moon Studios, 2017) (Reynolds 2018).

The large majority of the stigma generated is based upon which mode you're playing and your fidelity at the specific mode. No matter the setting, there will be negativity unless your team is winning. Even then, depending on the performance of each individual there still may be toxicity.

Gameplay

From a gameplay perspective there are many different ways to enter into each game-state (this is the term being used to represent the map the player is on, the possible positioning of both the teammates and enemies) you can enter. Depending the way the player interacts with the team-mates and the decisions they make if directly correlated to the amount of toxicity the individual would receive.

Using a basis of the map Mirage, on a competitive setting where players are often harshly judged on their performance. We'll be looking at what appears and the possible combinations from a single instance. There are too many decisions upon a single instance so we'll be focusing on the T side specifically.



Figure 1. Picture of Mirage map as seen from a tactical view

As seen in figure 1, due to the nature of the game-mode CT would have to split up and protect the bomb-sites. Rotating (changing positions) to the other bomb-site quickly would be invaluable for this as it's a team-focused game, 5 vs 2 the 5 would usually win. From the view of T side, they had first to communicate where they are going as a team. Successful communication would mean they are working well together and would most likely be prepared to play again for the sake of victory. This would, overtime mean a relationship could form.



Figure 2. An edited picture of figure 1, showing one possible variations for the start of a round

Looking at figure 2, T players 1-4 are all working as a team and interacting with each other however player 5 has gone off on their own and this can be a valid decision if communicated with the team however this isn't the case during this occasion. If the team works well together they have a higher chance to win. For example, the positioning of T means they could throw smoke grenades to inhibit the CT's from seeing them thus providing a better chance to plant the bomb and winning the round. Player 5 in this instance would be doing nothing for the team as a collective. If the round is lost due to this, the player would receive questioning about what they were doing from other members of the team.

Player 5 not doing what was expected of them could lead to abuse and ultimately exclusion. For this situation, T side would have progressed to win the match, however player 5 not having much involvement within the team. Due to the lack of involvement in the team, player 5 would not likely not have been invited to play another game.



Figure 3. Showing the ranks available in matchmaking. Source <https://gaming-tools.com/counterstrike/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/08/csgo-matchmaking-ranks.jpg>

A single players involvement within the team can drastically change the outcome of the game, this as many other competitive games is the deciding factor for many as to whether they would play a game with their friend. The ranking system within these competitive games is the reason for the callous decisions, see figure 3 the ranking system is extensive. Players of the higher tier, MG2 (Master Guardian 2) would be unlikely to play with anyone 3 rank difference. However, it is not just the rank that segments the players. The players attitude and skill is what is more highly regarded than anything else. If a player of the same rank has a higher skill level, even without team-play the chance of them being invited to play again is higher.

Social Settings

Generally speaking being premade (in a lobby of other people you have played with before and know) has an advantage over solo-queuing (going into a competitive game alone) as you are more likely to work as a team. There are many different forums for players to connect with each other however all of them have one thing in common, the focus on skill rather than the player as a whole (Dream Team n.d.). This in turn could

lead the player to feeling unwanted and give them a sense of segregation from their friends.

Gaming was primarily used as a social platform, even before the days of online play. Physical location with friends sharing the same experiences was beneficial to the friendship. Sharing experiences makes the relationship more meaningful (Yandle 2018). Online play can be counted the same experience, as *World of Warcraft (WoW)* (Blizzard, 2004) is widely considered a social environment being an MMO. VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) with teammates has been shown to lower the degree of loneliness (Martončík and Lokša 2016). Due to the nature of competitive games this isn't the same as within MMO's, VoIP can be shown to both increase the teamwork however also raise the amount of abuse a player receives if they are performing badly. Competitive games as a whole don't lend themselves well to the aspect of maintaining social connections.

Head-to-head competitive games could be seen as a way for the player themselves to improve as the VoIP or social engagement they have with their friends could make them strive to become better players. *CS:GO* is not one of those games, you strive to get better to then gain the ability to play with your friends if they are too 'good' for you. Doing so, you may make new teammates and friends who you then overtake in skill level and no long play with.

Community

Asking various members of the community of a medium high to high skill level has had many benefits, giving another point of view for the main thesis of this paper is crucial. Gathering as much qualitative information with the one-on-one methodology is the main use, as we can have in-depth discussions about the state of the game and whether their skill level and their enjoyment of the game is based solely on the winning aspect and if a bad player could inhibit the winning.

Why do you want to increase your ranking and your skill level?

Increasing their skill level is on the basis to make it "harder and more of a challenge". It gives the player a sense of gratification and bragging rights (this is the notion that people will be impressed by the feats of the player, bragging rights only applies to other players who know what they are talking about). Counting the rank as a sense of accomplishment, as the higher skill level you are the general higher rank you get.

Do other bad players inhibit this?

Other players do inhibit the winning and further on, the enjoyment. But not only bad players inhibit the winning, "toxicity and bad habits make me want to disconnected and accept the ban" by bad habits they further went on to explain that by bad habits they mean the inconsistency from the team. This includes bad callouts (saying the enemy is somewhere when they're not, or vice-versa), inconsistently checking angles and not doing what they are supposed to as a team.

The players' tolerance to bad players has a tendency to decrease the high skill they are, as they are expecting more of a teammate. In the lower ranks, you don't expect your team to be doing one thing to help you win however later on you will expect and almost demand this every-game. Toxicity however is something that is similar throughout the ranks, if there is a player who thinks another player is bad or doing something wrong then they will "keenly point out the mistakes".

Why would you avoid playing with another player if their skill level is low?

If you've put a lot of work, time and effort getting to this rank and the skill level means it is hard to climb back up the ranks then "to play with someone worse and to de-rank is annoying to say the least". To be able to retain the bragging rights you need to retain the rank, playing with lower skill level players can disrupt this. (Milsom and (asonz30k) n.d.)

Avoiding players specifically isn't just based on their skill level, it can also be based their nationality or method of communication. Playing with toxicity inhibits the fun-gain factor and as does "not understand any of the teammates" in a team based game. (miniPotae 2015)

A direct quote from my source is "carrying someone all the time is like taking a test and someone copying you and getting top marks" looking at this even closer, carrying (you doing really well, throughout the game and then getting the win from the match even though they didn't necessarily help the team and as a result didn't 'deserve' it) is seen as a negative thing. However, on the contrary to show bragging rights you would have to be a skill level higher than your subject. (Milsom and (asonz30k) n.d.)

Why do you enjoy the game?

Everyone plays games to gain some form of enjoyment from one sensation of another, the answers from this question require further analysis than the others. Enjoyment is based on one of the 8 kinds of fun, every player from the different skill levels can be seen to be enjoying the game for different reasons and exhibiting different forms of fun. Challenge is one of the prevalent ones as the players "enjoy getting better and seeing what I'm capable of". Challenging themselves is important, as they are the main thing encouraging them to get better. (DylandJohn129 2018)

Enjoyment of the game through playing with friends in the sensation (Hamari and Keronen 2017) of fellowship adds the level of interaction you can get with a fully co-operative game like *Portal 2* (Valve, Mike Morasky, 2011) as you are never pitted against your friends if you play with them.

Being able to "accomplish things in the game" you could never in real life, living vicariously through the avatar seems like a cliché for every game. Including the sense of Fantasy and an almost attainable famous status (such as players in E-sports like Guardian, Apex, KennyS, olofmiester, f0rest) (Nemesiiss 2015). As the community views that famous individuals are no different from the average players. The gap distancing the professionals in E-Sports to the average player seems closable to an average player, this is important because in sport it doesn't appear have the same gap (Wilson 2017).

Qualitative Data Reflection

One of the common feelings exhibited is the notion of wanting to show off your 'skill' level as represented by your rank to your existing friends. However, refusing to play with these existing friends as their skill level is too low appears as counter intuitive, we can fundamentally question if the player is said to be actually enjoying the game from a fellowship (from the 8 kinds of fun as stated by Marc LeBlanc) standpoint.

CONCLUSION

To properly address the title of this paper “Counter Strike: Global Offensive Forming and Maintaining Social Connections Through Success” we would first need to break it up into the two main components. Identifying two key areas under analysis, forming and maintaining connections we would need to break these two main components up even further as they both incorporate a large spectrum.

Forming the social connections can be split up into a couple of categories, meaningful and almost irrelevant. Fleeting connections and meetings are what could be considered (Sanaa and Luis 2016) as an arbitrary social interaction, meaning the connections you make to the other players in a single game of competitive are essentially meaningless. Even continued play with some of these individuals gives fleeting feelings of gratification mainly from the winning aspect rather than the social connection. Most players don't truly bond with other players throughout the game of CS:GO as it is very focused and you don't get to know the other players personality very much. Only after extremely prolonged play does the personality of the player become prevalent and by that time the gratification of winning is acceptable even if you do not necessarily enjoy the other player as person but rather the skill they can bring to the 5 man squad.

This isn't to say forming meaningful connections online is inherently impossible, however it is harder and far less likely in a competitive setting. As written in “Sense of Community, Social Identity and Social Support Among Players of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs): A Qualitative Analysis” (O'Connor, et al. 2015) it notes that many players make meaningful connections and those can and often do overtake real-world ones. During one of the interviews one user admitted in confidence that their real world friends were lacking and that *Counter-Strike* being one of their main games was a source of good friends and good times for them. They are ranked at Silver 2 (refer to figure 3), there could be a correlation with the level of the player and the amount they care about winning. More investigation would be required for this hypothesis.

Maintaining a social connection would be made harder depending on the level of interaction you have with the correspondence. From the data gathered, out of the people interviewed they had all said they had friends that they met through *CS:GO* that they no longer spoke too on a regular basis and would no longer class them as a friend rather an acquaintance. Despite the level of skill the player was, continued social interaction over a long period of time was rare. Very few of the interviewees had even met people they classed as friends online through *CS:GO* and of those a further lower amount stated that those friends were continued friends and carried over to other games and other aspects of life. Classifications for friends varies between each person. It is entirely possible that friends were carried over to other games as no more data was gathered about the friendship and that it didn't extend past a few games of *CS:GO*.

If a player made a mistake, such as going the wrong way or throwing a smoke grenade in the wrong spot (see figure 2) they would be subject to receive some form of mistreatment by the team. Not enabling the ability to form or maintain a social connection. If a player is looking for a social connection, they should first look into the forums for players of equal rank and rating. Proceeded by continued VoIP. Players went so far as to even purchase the game multiple times to smurf (playing at a rank lower than what your skill

level is) just to play with friends and essentially not care about winning the game. This too, wouldn't be conducive as it wouldn't help the original player improve.

The focused competitive based gameplay is detrimental to the social connections you have, refusing to play with lower ranks even though they are your well known friends is common. If a player makes a mistake, even if they are your friend it will decrease the likelihood of being played with again. The toxicity in *CS:GO* can be inferred that success in the game is the only viable option for continued play and further on from that continued social interaction.

ENDNOTES

Amount of playtime acquired is subjective, not all of that was spent playing competitive game-modes. By my meaning of playing at a high ranking, I was matchmaking rank Legendary Eagle Master and Supreme Master First Class. The interviewees were over VoIP.

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