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In Video Games We Trust: High-Speed Sociality in the 21st Century

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Introduction

Online games continue their rapid emergence as mediators of networked societies. The expansive growth of the console[1] gaming industry and the ability to play games on multiple mediums, from computers to mobile phones to social networking sites[2], is creating a sustained presence of play in our every day lives. The proliferation of play is accompanied by a burgeoning field of discourse, which either assails or champions the impact of ubiquitous gaming (Bjork et al. 2002). However, both popular and academic discussions alike have often overlooked the ways in which broader social changes, including the acceleration of social and productive life, intersect with, as well as reflect the unique material and social conditions found within digital environments. If our interest lies in understanding the social impacts of deterritorialization and time-space compression we should direct our attention towards the paradigmatic, hyper-accelerated spaces of these effects. Networked games are one of these spaces. This paper thus poses a simple question: what are the characteristics of **trust** in the high-speed and contingent environments of online games? To answer this question I begin by broadly characterizing the diverse literature on trust and exploring what this literature can tell us about social relationships arising online. Following this review, I bring Seth Giddings 'microethnography' (Giddings 2006) to bear on a case study, the popular online game Counter-Strike (CS). Emerging from this ethnographic material, I show how human and non-human agents collide to shape the social consequences of trusting online. Finally, I argue that my findings demonstrate how exploring both the technological and social conditions of game events is crucial to inform our understanding of both the large scale organization of social networks and the daily interpersonal negotiation of trust online.

Trust and Its Changing Contexts

Notoriously difficult to define, trust nonetheless remains a crucial concept for understanding a wide spectrum of human interactions. One of the more commonly agreed upon functions of trust is its fundamental role in maintaining social order (Shapin 1994). Trust is instrumental in social relations because we fundamentally lack the ability to determine others' possible actions with certainty. Trust can also be partially defined by contrasting it to confidence (Luhmann 2000). Luhmann considers confidence as a form of general expectation which is not flanked by competing possibilities. Trust however, is about the ability to consider alternatives, and in the face of possible disappointment, put your trust in one option over another. Trust then is dependent on you having previous experience upon which to base your decision, but acknowledging the risks involved in making that choice. Trust is thus a way of managing and predicting contingency through investing in others. At times trust is a carefully thought-out tool, or the outcome of a series of interactions, at other times a leap of faith. Whether trust is rational or irrational, cognitive or noncognitive (Becker 1996) however, social interaction is predicated on trusting individuals sharing a basic world view (Goffman 1959).

There is a wide range of sites where we see trust residing. For Sztompka (1999) trust is seen as most strongly located among our friends, family, and then outwards to co-workers and business partners. As we move into wider spheres, our trust also extends to members of shared communities, political parties and even more broadly, to those of the same ethnic group or religious affiliation. Offe (1999) similarly argues that the strongest situations of trust are those of personal familiarity which has accrued along a continuous or interpreted time axis of past experiences. When we deal with individuals with whom we have no previous experiences or engagements, trust is in its riskiest form. A hesitancy to engage in the risks of trusting is particularly salient in modern societies where there is daily contact with individuals outside of our comfortable spheres of intimacy and this contact is rarely significant in duration. The nature of this contact is such that Offe (1999:11) argues that we "could speak of the structural scarcity of opportunities to build trust." Giddens (1990) suggests that lack of community based trust is in contrast to pre-modern societies where, he argues, life was filled with intimate trust building opportunities. Strong kinship systems and localized relations which promoted strong interpersonal trust were not yet transformed by time-space distanciation, the idea that social structures and the interpersonal interactions they frame are increasingly manifest across great physical space within ever contracting periods of time (Giddens 1991: 20. One result of this compression is that social experiences are increasingly disembedded from locality (Giddens 1990: 100-109). Giddens is also careful to point out however, that trust has not simply disappeared into intimate relationships, but is in fact has been increasingly transposed into expert systems of knowledge and the institutions of modernity which facilitate these interactions.

What happens to trust when it goes 'online' speaks directly to questions about the nature of trust outside of face-to-face, local interactions and the willingness of people to place trust in expert systems. Helen Nissenbaum's early, influential (2001) exploration of these topics examines a number of challenges to trusting online: missing identities (anonymity), missing personal characteristics, inscrutable contexts (113-114) and the responding security measures which have emerged to attempt reduction of complexity and risks. Nissenbaum cautioned that we would need to have the right balance of security and freedom and openness, with their inherent risks, if we were to have vibrant online economic, social and scientific worlds online. In just over a decade since her early writings however, the rapid growth of the Internet and the immense popularity of social networking and online commerce has shifted academic analyses of trust online in the opposite direction, away from looking at how to promote a positive environment for trust, to looking at how to educate users on the dangers of trusting too much in the process disclose sensitive and personal information online (danah 2004; Dwyer 2007; Fogel and Nehmad 2009).

The proliferation of trust online has also become increasingly documented by scholars of online games. A focus on trust in video games is in contrast to much of the popular discourse concerning games. Video games, argue Dimitri Williams (2003), have been typically characterized similar to how other mass media technologies including television and films, once were. Like these other media forms, video games have been held up as vehicles of both positive and negative social change, linked to school shootings on one hand, and civic involvement (Lenhart et al. 2008) and powerful pedagogical tools (Gee 2005) on the other. As networked games become a component of nearly all newly released titles however, the social ramifications of 'gaming' are coming to the fore of discussions of what has become a dominant form of 21st century leisure[3]. T.L Taylor (2006) has eloquently described the powerful and broad networks of trust that move across online-offline boundaries in the game Everquest. Thomas Malaby discusses how games by their very nature as contingent environments provide the structural conditions conducive to trust building and its maintenance in online games (2009). Duchenault et al. (2007) and Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) evoke the image of online games a 'third place' for developing social relations. These studies make it apparent that online environments are increasingly home to a range of social interactions we associate with trusting relationships.

These studies have steadfastly emphasized the rich networks of trust online and have tempered the older, myopic image of the socially isolated gamer. However, Seth Giddings (2006) has argued that these approaches follow a familiar pattern in cultural studies which emphasizes the role of human agency in reproducing and contesting a range of social interactions which are also found in offline environments. Giddings argues that by following this humanist formula, games research has eschewed the very material and coded structures upon which the experience of play depends. In response to these epistemological concerns, this paper argues that if we see trust as being the foundation of a variety of social interactions across interpersonal, community and larger scale groups, that studying trust online is fundamental in contemporary society, and that studying trust online demands we conduct a more detailed analysis of how the unique social and material (coded and tactile) experiences of play (cf. Taylor

2009) influence the formation of trust. In order to draw out these layered, human-machinic interactions I utilize Giddings 'microethnography' which pays explicit attention to the "overlapping circuits of agencies between human players, media technologies, software, and actual space, objects and bodies" (Giddings 2006: 117). Importantly, microethnography looks at game play as events as opposed to stable cultural texts, foregrounding the temporally situated nature of players, machines and code coming together in cause, effect and feedback (ibid 14). Studying game play as events narrows our gaze to the intersecting material, human and broad factors that come into play during a given gaming session and acknowledges the ambiguous status of games as "at once cultural practices (even rituals), media / aesthetic objects, toys, and social (or solitary) events" (ibid 15). I conduct my microethnographic study on the game Counter-Strike in order to help explore two key questions about trusting online in the context of play: Firstly, what role does the materiality of networks in the context of play have in shaping the 'macro' level of social groupings, that is, the social-topographies that determine which individuals can become practice trusting together? Secondly, how does the time-axis of trust building (Offe) interact with the moment to moment negotiation of social coordination in high-speed gaming environments? I argue that although this analysis describes only one such game of CS, the key elements of material-human interaction in play that are elucidated: speed at the macro and micro level of play as mediated by human and material agents, holds true for all CS games and more so, help inductively demonstrate elements of material-human interaction present in all online environments.

Twenty-first Century Leisure

One of the most popular networked games of the early 21st century is Counter-Strike (CS), a first person shooter (FPS) game developed by Min Leh and Jesse Cliffe in June 1999 which sold 10.7 million copies between 1999 and 2008 (Gamasutra 2008), and continues to sell today. In many ways the history of CS is describable in the emblematic terms associated with new social media. CS was first developed as a mod(ification), a heavily tweaked game built from the source code of another wildly popular and commercial game, Half-Life. The first version was released, free of charge, to the public via digital distribution – production of physical copies only began when it was later purchased by the Valve Corporation. The original developers encouraged community involvement and beta versions of game were tested, criticized and complemented by an active online community. Since its inception, CS has been hacked, cheats developed and anti-cheat programs designed in defense. CS also has global reach – it has been used as a high-tech training tool for police in China (People's Daily 2007), as was blamed by pundits as having influenced or even 'programmed' the Virginia Tech killer Seung-Hui Cho (Benedetti 2007; FiringSquad 2007). There are diverse utilities and activities applicable to this seemingly simplistic round-based first-person shooter game, where people play to win as a member of either a five-man Terrorist or Counter-Terrorist team before time runs out.

The game event that in the analysis that follows is based on audio and video recordings of a group of individuals playing a game of CS in late October 2008.

The Social Topographies of Trust in Online Games

It is evening in early October, and a group of young men[4] gather on a Ventrilo (VoIP)[5] server in preparation for a CS scrimmage (scrim). Yale, a software dealer in his early twenties and I, a graduate student, are the first to arrive. Yale and I have known each other through CS for about four years but have yet to meet in person. I have a special fondness for Yale. Two years ago he generously spent two full days designing a poster for my partner to present at an international medical conference. I ask him how he is and he tells me he is "doing great" and that he "really wants to play some CS." I use an instant messaging program built into the game interface to ask our mutual friends Matt and Mike to come into the server. We are all coming from different cities along the east coast of North America. However, we are stuck on finding a 'fifth', a final player for our five player team. Soon enough, Matt tells us he has found someone, a guy named Joe, who has played with some of his other CS friends but never with Matt. None of us have played with him before either. Matt's vetting of Joe is good enough for us. Joe logs onto Ventrilo - "yo", he says simply, adding nothing more.

During the next five minutes we advertise online for another five-player team to play against. The advertisement reads: 5 v 5 EAST de_any cal-im. "5 v 5" is asking for a 5 player versus 5 player match (a normal team size) and "EAST" asks for only teams located in eastern North America. "De_any" makes it clear that we are willing to play

any 'de' map, those that are based on the bomb planting/defusing scenario. Finally, the term 'cal-im' refers to the caliber of skill we want, 'cal' being the 'Cyber Athlete League', a North American based CS league which had a number of divisions ranking from beginners to the best players on the continent. When we eventually find a team that appears to match all of these criteria, we ask them to join our CS server[6] which we rent monthly from a New York based company. The selection of a high-quality gaming server had been an ongoing issue of concern for our team in the previous two months. A high-quality server would provide all of us the best 'ping.' A ping is created by the fundamental properties of distance, speed and material artefacts – which intersect to dictate limitations on the speed of data transmission circuits. We researched half a dozen server companies with names like Electrify, Quantum and Velocity in order to find the fastest server. This particular New York server gave us an average ping delay of 30-50 milliseconds (less than one twentieth of a second) between our individual computers, the game server and its return trip. Being able to play in near 'real time' was a fixation that, over the years, had driven many of us to purchase better hardware, upgrade to faster broadband connections and compete in 'real-life' tournaments where the 'computer-network-game server-computer' data transmission loop is short enough to allow for pings that are 10 milliseconds or below. In a game like CS, getting kills and successfully executing coordinated plays requires near perfect timing. Having milliseconds advantage over your opponent by having low ping was something we always looked for. Among the group of us there was no one who had a ping over the mid 70s.

How we had learned about what ping was 'suitable' was the result of the complex feedback we experienced over time. This feedback was manifest in the way the game software mediated and translates multiple infrastructural, technological and algorithmic layers into physical, tactile experiencesthat players react and adapt to. Players of both first person shooters and other genres of games feel and describe the effect of bad ping (lag) as a visual and physical sensation. A long time CS player, Steve described 'lag' as feeling: "like you are in a straightjacket, that is exactly how it feels, like you're in a straightjacket trying to catch a baseball." His words vividly describe the strong physical and emotional reaction gamers have to interruptions with or the slowing down of data flow between humans, networks and machines. Another gamer describes the feeling of playing, and lagging, as "like trying to speak while someone's strangling you" (World of Warcraft Forums 2009). It is this visceral, emotional and physical reaction that explains the often seething anger displayed by many users who are unable to experience the game as intended. These deep emotional reactions must be understood in the context of material technologies and the cultural expectations developed in game play and the disjunctures that occur within the game when lagging. When users react emotionally to interrupted playing experiences (lag), they are literally feeling the bricolage of infrastructures, hardware and code as translated into their very hands– a tactile, human-machinic intersection manifesting complex machinic-network-geographic assemblages.

Online games are often imagined to be deterritorialized spaces: digital environments that allow sociality to flourish across great geographic spaces in near real time. In reality, however, the social topography of all online games are circumscribed, to lesser and greater extents, by the material properties of networks, servers and computer hardware in interaction with human beings trying to simply 'play'. In the case study of CS described here, all members of our team lived along what could be broadly called the eastern seaboard of the United States and Canada. While we had sometimes played with, and against, players who lived on other parts of the continent, their experiences of 'lagging', that is, slow connection speeds, had pushed them to play on servers that were literally 'closer to home'. This fundamental starting point, where individuals play in relation to an actual server location that hosts the digital environment, has been overlooked in the what I call the 'search for the social' in online games. The context of play in CS is that of a fast-paced shooting game where milliseconds make the difference between life and death. The literal need for speed in CS and similar games has pushed the development of high-end servers, graphics processors and even computer mice designed specifically for gaming, continually accelerating processing and data response times. This is a logic of acceleration, a desire for real-time play and the elimination of the effects of material-geographic space which the game software seeks to overcome. When the still unknown Joe, entered our server for the first time a host of material conditions had been met before he could even shoot his virtual gun for the first time. On the most basic level Joe's computer met the material requirements to play CS, but more importantly, on the level of Internet infrastructures, it was readily apparent that Joe lived in an area with broadband internet and within a limited distance that allowed his ping to be low enough such that he could play comfortably on our server. And while Joe could choose to play on a server with a high ping, the experience of play would more often than not be so frustrating that it would be unlikely. The need for speed imposes material requirements that are negotiated through the human experience of play to greatly influence who plays where and with who else. This material-human agency can be contrasted to the social framework which had brought Joe to our attention. Joe was recommended

and thus vetted through a community of gaming acquaintances. However, while his vetting was important, we would also often play with individuals who had simply responded to an advertising looking for a 'cal-im' (intermediate) level player who was also 'EAST'. Our only requirement that could be mutually and verifiably satisfied before the game would begin was that the player had an 'EAST' ping, that is, under about 70ms. Their abilities and their willingness to cooperate with the team were unknowns until the actual game began. Players who were 'CENTRAL' (imagine a region consisting of the width of the Candian provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan and tracing downwards until you reach the Mexican border) or WEST would rarely play with us or even against us.

At these 'macro' levels, the desire to play at speed and the material conditions that impose delays in the human-machine feedback loop results in the enforcement of a limited geographic scope of trusting networks in online games. Before social-capital can be built with unknown others, before friendships and romance can grow, network infrastructures shift millions of players around the world into the online equivalent of provincialized networks. The scope of these networks is dependent on how individuals and computer networks come together and how the software of particular games creates the conditions of play. In the case of CS, the high speed environment where milliseconds matter, a social topography is created which can transcend national borders but has a relatively circumscribed geographical scope. For gaming environments that are 'slower', such as multiplayer role playing games, the geographic scope expands greatly, crossing up to half the globe, with suitable pings sometimes reaching over 500ms (half of a second) delay before it becomes intolerable for many players. It is only after players in negotiation with servers, networks and their own computers have managed to sort out the pre-conditions for play, do geographically circumscribed social groups finally get to the business of social coordination in the timeframe of seconds and milliseconds in actual game play. This sort of complex coordination remains a difficult business with familiar friends, let alone those you have just met. Returning now to our scrim, we begin to look at the impact of speed at the level of second to second interpersonal play.

Trust Building and The Axis of Time

Back again in 2008, members of opposing team arrive and affirm that their pings are indeed good enough to play on our server. Often when the opposing team connects to a server and finds that their pings are 'bad' or too slow, they will disconnect immediately. In this case the other team is satisfied and has agreed to play on a map called de_nuke, a sprawling three story warehouse-like facility located in a desert, with two large nuclear missiles hanging from the ceiling in the basement. Once in the server, we take this opportunity to orient ourselves and figure out which part of the map each of us will be responsible for covering during the game. As it is our server we have chosen to start on the Counter-Terrorist team, this means each round we must prevent the Terrorists from planting the bomb at one of two bombsites or killing all of us before time runs out. After we play 15 rounds we will switch teams and play as Terrorists. The first team to win 16 rounds will have won the scrim. I offer to cover "ramp", an area that leads down to the nuclear missiles and Yale calls out over the microphone that he will do the same. Matt says that he will watch the outside of the facility. Mike and Joe announce they will watch the inside of the facility for any terrorists trying to plant the bomb in 'upper'.

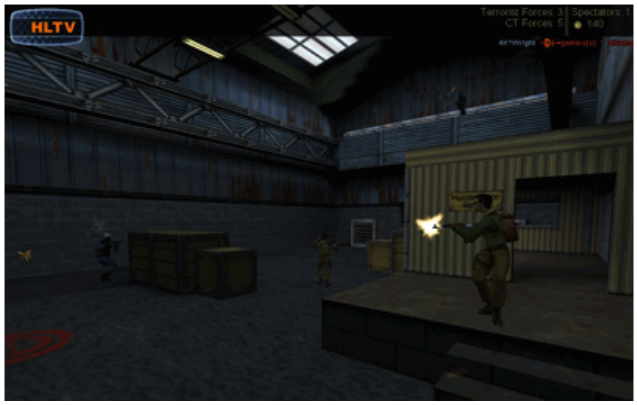

Figure 2. An image of the map de_nuke with two Counter-Terrorists (dark blue) defending the 'upper' bombsite from two attacking Terrorists (green). Source: gotfrag.com

After both teams are sufficiently prepared, we agree to 'go live' and begin the first 105 second round. The first round is crucial in CS; it is called the 'pistol round'. Both teams start with only pistols which are comparatively weak weapons in the game. Winning the crucial first round means taking one round of sixteen that is necessary to win but also earning the ability to upgrade weapons (to rifles and armours), while the opponent team are left to use pistols for a further two.

The first round begins and we run off to cover our various positions. The Terrorists immediately begin to attack the upper bomb site. Mike yells "pre-nade hut" trying to get his teammate, the new player Joe, to throw grenades into the entrance of a hut shaped structure. In the process of trying to avoid getting shot by the incoming Terrorists, Mike accidently gets in Joe's way who yells over the microphone, "or you could block me, that's a cute idea, and then flash me, wow, wow!" Joe has been blinded by one of the flash grenades thrown by Mike. A frantic series of events begins to unravel. Matt gets killed by a Terrorist outside, I kill one of the Terrorists who subsequently drops the bomb before being planted. The Terrorists shift positions and begin to circle the main building killing Mike and Joe, but also sacrificing two Terrorists. I get killed in the ramp room leaving only Yale and two of the Terrorists. Yale slips down the vents into the basement missile room and hops out of the vent. After an exchange of gunshots Yale manages to kill both of the Terrorists and defuse the bomb before it explodes, barely winning the round.

As the second round starts Mike is still responding to Joe's accusations from the first round. Mike answers, "nah bro, I never shot you" in response to Joe's claim that Mike had not only blinded him in the previous round but also shot him, lowering his health significantly and allowing the Terrorists to kill him more easily. Mike tells Joe to calm down, it's "not the end of the world," he says. The second round is now under way and the Terrorists rush ramp with only their pistols, catching Yale and I off guard. We both die quickly, losing our guns to our opponents. Joe begins to call-out the positions of the Terrorists, telling his remaining teammates to "watch one coming around the ladder!" In the next ten seconds our remaining team members are surrounded and killed with the weapons that Yale and I had dropped - all of us dying in a round we should have easily won. Mike screams out angrily "who was watching outside?" "I was" Matt replies, adding that he has just died. Joe gets on his microphone and yells, "this is fucking stupid! I'm gonna leave if you guys keep pulling this shit."

In the third round we make progress. Despite losing all of our guns and money in the previous round we manage to execute a well-timed grenade rush, damaging our opponents heavily with our high explosives before unloading a barrage of pistol fire. In the next round we stifle the Terrorists' planned strategy of planting the bomb downstairs. By the fourth round Joe casually mentions that he was just, "being a dick on purpose," and not to take his previous comments seriously. Round after round go by in rapid succession, each filled with a wide range of decisions to be made by each of us, each one filled with risk and carried out in a fast-paced and contingent set of game conditions. After playing another six rounds, it is clear that we have the game on 'lock-down'. From what could have been a very rough game for us after the humiliating second round loss, we go on to win ten straight rounds in a row. Near the end of the match we are winning so handily that we are laughing as we run around shooting. Joe and Mike are carrying the team and at the end of the first half, the game becomes so absurdly one sided in our favour that we decide to 'kick' out the other team from the server to find another more challenging team. The first game has lasted a total of 15 minutes from start to finish.

In the downtime that follows the win, Yale and Matt announce that they are no longer up for another game and are logging off, leaving Joe, Mike and I in the server. Mike and Joe continue to talk even after all of the opponents have left the server and my character sits motionless in the game as I relax at my computer. Mike is asking Joe "how do you get on that box," referring to a high wooden structure that most players are unable to get on. They hop on and off of the box for a while and jokingly shooting each other even though they are on the same team. Mike laughs as they miss their shots. After a few minutes I decide that I am also done for the day. In the last seconds before I log out of the server, I hear Mike asking Joe over the headset: "hey, where do you live?"

Over the course of approximately 15 minutes of game play, a complex and fast moving series of events, which together comprise the larger event of a single 'game' of CS has occurred. Poor coordination between players nearly cost us the first round only to be saved by the clutch performance of Yale, we pulled off an upset by winning the third round with only pistols, our new player Joe nearly leaves the server at one point before casually joking by the end of the game and we end by winning 10 rounds in a row before booting the other team from the server. From the perspective of an outsider, the environment of games like CS can appear as one violent shootout after another. More so, because of the speed of game play, CS game play can seem like chaos at times. Indeed, the dromological condition of play means that accidents are always potentiated (Virilio 2007 [1991]) and in fact, are always occurring in play in the forms of a misplaced grenade, the failure to shift positions fast enough, or a momentary lapse in

concentration that ends with your teammate dead. For those who play however, the emotional reaction to these accidents are micro-sociological dramas that epitomizes the deep rooted capacity for humans to absorb themselves fully in what, from the outside, might look like a free for all form of leisure. Often threats are uttered to quit and as so frequently happens in online-games, the promise is muttered that someone is "done with the game," forever. Life at the edge of speed, however, is not a life without memory or pattern. The accelerated contexts of game play do not impose a world of the permanent present, a social context without a past or future. The rapid, complex and emotional acts of coordination demand instant and perfect reaction, or promise disaster: your own death, the loss of a match or an international tournament. These hyper-accelerated near run-ins with disaster occur with regularity and in their social context, are the very building blocks of shared experiences as well as means to determine others' possible future intentions. These patterned and shared experiences, whether gained through low-risk casual gaming or otherwise – play out endlessly, round after round, map after map, game after game. It is within these repetitions that personalities arise, patterns and expectations form and, frequently, trust emerges. Offe (1999), in arguing that the strongest situations of trust arise out of personal familiarity which accrues over a time axis of past experiences was careful to emphasize that this time axis could be actually continuous or just interpretedto be. It is my argument that in high speed online gaming, the speed at which individuals demonstrate their ability to perform a range of important bases for trust: defending others, cooperation, self-sacrifice and so on, are done in a hyper repetitive environment that can create a perceived sense of trustworthiness in the matter of minutes. The moment that Joe began to play with the group of four of us, he entered into that ceaseless dyad between enjoyable and frustrable experiences of play, individuals continually "renegotiate the contradiction between trust and self-protection" (Li et al. 2008: 86) which creates the context whereby he can be integrated into relationships of trust. CS can be seen then, as a socially contingent and materially mediated environment that allows for the rapid-fire practice of trust, trust that can feed on the speed of game play to integrate or reject players within a single gaming 15 minute gaming session.

Conclusion

I have argued that online game play at the intersection of human and material networks shapes both the broad social topographies of trusting relations as well as the day-to-day interactions between individual players producing the pithy, personal trust necessary to sustain these topographies. Using a microethnographic analysis of a single game of CS lasting less than 30 minutes from organization to completion, I have teased out both macro and micro characteristics of trust in play. On the 'macro' level, the requirements of high speed servers, broadband connectivity and the necessary computer hardware, manifests in a social topography that both demonstrates and challenges the deterritorialization of social relations online. Ping in particular arises as a key mediator of social topographies. Ping is comprised of multiple layers of network infrastructure and hardware and manifests in an extremely small but sensibly interpretable delay in the moment to moment actions that comprise game play. The opportunities to build trusting relations with far-flung others thus emerges as always possible in play, however this possibility stretches only as far as the delays imposed by network structures in interaction with what players deem to be reasonable. On the level of micro-events, when ping-suitable servers and individuals have been put into close contact, the moment to moment social coordination of game play occurs at tremendous speeds. It is in a situation like this that Joe, a ringer, entered into a complex dance of strategy, skill and communication with a group of unknown others and through a rapid succession of accidents, demonstrations of skill and communication, managed to emerge out of virtual obscurity into a person with trustworthy characteristics. 'Joe' the 'ringer' became a demonstrably reliable player, someone who could be integrated into a web of trust that demonstrates the social capital and rich trusting relationships apparent to scholars of online games. Indeed, each player in the group, Yale, Mike, Matt and myself had come into this web the same way Joe began to in the fall of 2008.

To understand the social consequences arising out of an accelerating world then, I have argued that we must follow the traces of these temporal changes through unique digital assemblages. At the paradigmatic ends of a culture of acceleration lies one of the major components of our contemporary leisure life – video games. The experiences of play in accelerated social contexts remind us that while games like CS can simply allow for individuals to engage in brief, mindless and anonymous killing, they simultaneously provide the structural scaffolding for the practice of rapid and repeating acts of social coordination. Online games, I have argued, are thus sites at the edges of social coordination at speed, and in these practices demonstrate the expansive power of games to bring far flung

others into trusting relationships while simultaneously reinforcing that the trusting relationships formed will always be rich, territorially mediated social tapestries negotiated in day-to-day play events.

Endnotes

1. 'Consoles' refers to game playing systems which are most commonly connected to televisions. With the most recent generation of console systems (Xbox 360, Playstation 3, Nintendo Wii), individuals are able to play an increasing number of games online.

2. Charles Huang (2011) has suggested that online games are one of the prime traffic drivers for social networking sites such as Facebook and Renren and are effective means of keeping users engaged with the sites for extended periods of time. Facebook currently boasts 600 million active monthly users (Carlson 2011). The Chinese social networking website RenRen has 160 million users as of early 2011 (Hille 2011).

3. I categorize online games here as a 'leisure' activity in regards to the specific ethnographic case I utilize in this article. There is a growing body of studies on the variety of important social, political and economic stakes present in online games (Castranova 2005; Lastowka and Hunter 2003; Burke 2002; Taylor 2006, 2009; Silverman and Simon 2009).

4. There is no hard data on the sex distribution among Counter-Strike players, but mirroring other first-person shooter games I would estimate that over 95% of CS players are male. In Massively Multiplayer Online Games approximately 14.6% of players are female. (Yee 2008)

5. The transmission technologies and software that allow for voice communications over the Internet.

6. Game Server (abbr. server): A game server is a piece of hardware (usually a computer) that controls communication between clients at a remote location. Clients (other gamers) connect to the game server in order to play the game with one another.

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