

Exploring in-game military identities within CS:GO

Matilda Ståhl

Åbo Akademi University
Strandgatan 2
65100 Vasa, Finland
matilda.stahl@abo.fi

Iain Donald

Abertay University
Bell St, Dundee DD1 1HG,
United Kingdom
i.donald@abertay.ac.uk

Keywords

military identities, ethnography, first person shooter, game design

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although identity construction in video games has been researched since Turkles (1995) study on multiple identities in MUDs, the field can be considered fragmented (Ecenbarger, 2014). Games with customizable avatars and narratives, such as RPGs and MMORPGs, have been studied extensively in relation to identity (eg. Gee, 2003; Hayes, 2007; Yee, 2014). The multitude of options for customization in MMORPGs results in certain players might even encourage players to roleplay as their characters (Tronstad, 2008). Previous research on identity construction within FPS is however limited (with the exceptions of Kiourti, 2018; Rambusch et al, 2007 and Ståhl & Rusk, n.d.) and one possible reason might be the low level of customization options available to the player. However, as multiplayer FPS such as Counter Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO) offers perspectives as interaction with both the game itself as well as other players while part of a competitive gaming scene, the identities constructed in-game should be further explored through research.

CS:GO (Valve Corporation & Hidden Path Entertainment, 2012) can be seen as a war game as it is simulating battle strategies based upon the definition by Fine (1983), yet with limited *historicity* as the game is loosely connected to actual warfare. Its predecessor, Counter-Strike (Valve Corporation, 2000), was one of the first video games to offer the player a war-themed video games, not with a god-like vision, but from the perspective of a soldier (Mantello, 2017).

War-themed video games are a platform where entertainment and the military meet: resulting in so called militainment (Stahl, 2010). War-themed video games have an impact on military technology, training platforms and recruitment practice. With the advancement of interactive digital platforms, collaboration between the game industry and the military has been beneficial for both sectors. Although they are simulating warfare, war-themed video games can not reflect all horrors of war and remain firmly regarded as entertainment by real world veterans (Lomberg and Mull, 2012), resulting in conflicting messages to the authenticity of the war-themed gameplay (Andersen &

Kurti, 2009). Furthermore, war-themed video games do not only mirror political agendas, but are part of a discourse that glorifies advanced weaponry (Mantello, 2017).

Stahl (2003; 2010) describes the player of war-themed games taking on a virtual citizen-soldier identity since “the invitation to cross over and try on a soldier identity” is a crucial aspect of war-themed games (Stahl, 2010, p.92). Within his analysis of militainment, Stahl (2003) triangulates broader trends in the screen logic of war by focusing on training, battle and recruitment. In this work in progress, we employ a player centred research approach on constructing in-game military identities in an online competitive setting. The overarching aim of the study is to explore player construction of in-game military identities as they play CS:GO. The categories for triangulation provided by Stahl (2003; 2010); training, battle and recruitment, will function as an initial framework for the analysis. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the respondents construct in-game military identities?

RQ2: How is the educational context connected to the identities constructed?

The ethnographic data used in this study was collected in collaboration with a vocational school with an esports programme in Finland in 2017-2018. Seven of their students (aged 17-18, all male) playing CS:GO took part in the study by sharing screen recordings of their games (see figure 1) and by taking part in interviews. The students that volunteered to be part of the study all played CS:GO and the choice to focus on that specific game was therefore made by the participants and not the researchers. The students were part of two teams and the in-game data will be analyzed from both teams’ perspectives. The data consists of almost nine hours of screen recordings from both teams (amounting to ten games) and of group interviews with both teams (amounting to seven interviews).



Figure 1: Counter-Strike: Global Offensive.
Screenshot from the data: Team 1, Game 7, Mirage.

The preliminary results indicate that the respondents do construct in-game soldier identities in relation to recruitment and training, yet the competitive nature of the game might emphasize game play over a realistic experience of warfare. The all-male group

of respondents was not a choice made by the researchers, but supposedly a result of the predominantly male online game culture resulting in few female students in the eSports programme, which in extension affect the locally situated in-game military identities constructed. Previous analysis of the material stressed that the norm of technomascularity (Johnson, 2018) forms how and what identities are constructed within CS:GO (Ståhl & Rusk, n.d.). Therefore, discussing in-game soldier identities in relation to technomascularity could be fruitful and provides a perspective of game players who desire an identity that is more realistic than those of fantastical related games such as Overwatch for an example.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank *Svenska-Österbottens kulturfond* for funding travel expenses during the data collection phase. While DIGRA 2020 was canceled due to COVID-19, we wish to thank *Högskolestiftelsen i Österbotten* and *Svenska-Österbottens kulturfond* for the funds to attend the conference had it been arranged.

We further wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments that helped us revise the extended abstract and provided us with helpful insights once we transform this abstract into a full paper.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andersen, R., and Kurti, M. 2009. "From America's Army to Call of Duty: Doing battle with the military entertainment complex." *Democratic Communiqué*, 23(1), 45.
- Ecenbarger, C. 2014. "The Impact of Video Games on Identity Construction." *Pennsylvania Communication Annual* 70 (3) 34–50
- Fine, G. A. 1983. *Shared Fantasy. Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Gee, J. P. 2007. *What Video Games have to Teach us about Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hayes, E. 2007. "Gendered Identities at Play. Case Studies of Two Women Playing Morrowind." *Games and Culture*. 2(1)
- Johnson, R. 2018. "Technomascularity and its influence in video game production." In *Masculinities at play* edited by N. Taylor & G. Voorhees, 249–262. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Kiuorti, E. 2019. "'Shut the Fuck up Re! 1 Plant the Bomb Fast!'" Reconstructing Language and Identity in First-person Shooter Games." In *Approaches to Videogame Discourse: Lexis, Interaction, Textuality* edited by A. Ensslin and I. Balteiro. 157–177. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Mantello, P. 2017. "Military shooter video games and the ontopolitics of derivative wars and arms culture." *American journal of economics and sociology*, 76(2), 483–521.
- Rambusch, J., Jakobsson, P., and Pargman, D. 2007. "Exploring E-sports: A case study of gameplay in Counter-strike." Paper presented at the *Digital Games Research Association Conference (DiGRA 2007)*, Tokyo, Japan, 24–26 September. Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA).
- Stahl, R. 2006. "Have you played the war on terror?." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23(2), 112–130.

- Stahl, R. 2010. *Militainment, Inc: Militarism and Pop Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Ståhl, M. Rusk, F. n.d. "Weapon customization, player competence and team discourse – exploring player identity construction and co-construction in Counter Strike: Global Offensive". Manuscript submitted.
- Tronstad, R. 2008. "Character Identification in World of Warcraft: The Relationship between Capacity and Appearance." In *Digital culture, play, and identity: A World of Warcraft reader* edited by H. Corneliussen and J. W. Rettberg, 249–263. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.
- Turkle, S. 1995. *Life on the screen. Identity in the age of the internet*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks
- Valve Corporation. 2000. *Counter-Strike*. Valve Corporation.
- Valve Corporation & Hidden Path Entertainment. 2012. *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. Valve Corporation.
- Yee, N. 2014. *The Proteus paradox: How online games and virtual worlds change us- and how they don't*. Yale: Yale University Press.