

Beckett Spams *Counter-Strike*

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Article abstract

The following describes an intervention in the game Counter-Strike : Global Offensive, entitled Beckett Spams Counter-Strike - by intervention we mean a form of artistic performance and political action that enters and occupies, or "intervenes," in an already existing environment, institution, and ordered space. The description is interrupted or broken by "signed" remarks from the "players" - the actors, gamers, writers, and artists participating in the project - as we try to make sense of our failure or success at staging Beckett's play and (or ?) playing Counter-Strike, a failure best described as the collapse of theater and game. Furthermore, the description is interrupted or upstaged by excerpts from our performances. Developed over multiple years by a team at West Virginia University, the intervention into the game led to several performances, treating the game as a site of philosophical and pedagogical investigation into purpose and violence. We use the term "intervention" in a particular way to classify actions that cross between gameplay, agitprop political theater, and artistic performance.

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Beckett Spams *Counter-Strike*

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Résumé : Ce qui suit décrit une intervention dans le jeu *Counter-Strike : Global Offensive*, intitulée *Beckett Spams Counter-Strike* - par « intervention », nous entendons une forme de performance artistique et d'action politique qui entre et occupe, ou « intervient » dans un environnement, une institution déjà existante, un espace ordonné. La description est interrompue ou fragmentée par des remarques « signées » des « joueurs » - les acteurs, les « gamers », les écrivains et les artistes qui participent au projet - alors que nous tentons de comprendre notre échec ou notre succès à mettre en scène la pièce de Beckett et (ou ?) à jouer à *Counter-Strike*, un échec que l'on pourrait décrire comme une faillite du théâtre et du jeu. En outre, la description est suspendue ou reléguée au second plan par des extraits de nos performances. Développée pendant plusieurs années par une équipe de la West Virginia University, l'intervention dans le jeu a mené à plusieurs performances traitant le jeu comme un site d'investigation philosophique et pédagogique sur l'intentionnalité et la violence. Nous utilisons le terme « intervention » d'une façon singulière pour qualifier des actions qui recourent le « gameplay », le théâtre politique d'agitprop et la performance artistique.

Mots clés : Samuel Beckett ; *Fin de partie* ; *Counter-Strike : Global Offensive* ; performance ; théâtre-guérilla ; « hacktivisme » ; absurde.

Abstract : The following describes an intervention in the game *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, entitled *Beckett Spams Counter-Strike* - by intervention we mean a form of artistic performance and political action that enters and occupies, or "intervenes," in an already existing environment, institution, and ordered space. The description is interrupted or broken by "signed" remarks from the "players" - the actors, gamers, writers, and artists participating in the project - as we try to make sense of our failure or success at staging Beckett's play and (or?) playing *Counter-Strike*, a failure best described as the collapse of theater and game. Furthermore, the description is interrupted or upstaged by excerpts from our performances. Developed over multiple years by a team at West Virginia University, the intervention into the game led to several performances, treating the game as a site of philosophical and pedagogical investigation into purpose and violence. We use the term "intervention" in a particular way to classify actions that cross between gameplay, agitprop political theater, and artistic performance.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett ; *Endgame* ; *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* ; performance ; guerilla theater ; hacktivism ; absurd.

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“Nothing is more real than nothing”

- Samuel Beckett, in Malone Dies

There are a great many art games, where the dynamics and rhetorics of games are adapted to artistic works, and there are also many works of game art that hack actual games. A project such as Cory Archangel's *Super Mario Clouds* hacks the Atari cartridge to present *Super Mario* as a peaceful setting of nothing but floating clouds. Not all such games fit the sort of interventions that we discuss here. The interventions that interest us are comparatively more parasitic – they do not change the game environment – and they are “lightweight,” involving nothing other than access to the game. Of the many artistic interventions in computer games, the closest precedent for *Beckett Spams Counter-Strike* is Joseph DeLappe's work, notably *Quake Friends* and *dead-in-iraq*. The former involves the simple plan of acting out episodes of the sitcom *Friends* – still popular at the time of this work – in *Quake III Arena*, a multiplayer-based first person shooter where, as the game's description states, “the greatest warriors of all time fight for the amusement of a race called the Vadrigar in the Arena Eternal.” In *Quake Friends*, six performers connected live to the same server of the game and recreated, word for word, episodes in the life of Rachel, Ross, Phoebe, Chandler, Joey, and Monica. DeLappe writes: “The performers functioned as passive, neutral visitors to the game – constantly killed and reincarnated to continue the performance.”¹ The work was performed live several times in the early 2000s, despite harassment from Warner Brothers television studios that claimed copyright infringement.

Instead of *Quake*, *dead-In-iraq* used *America's Army*, a popular team based shooter, where players take on the role of American army personnel fighting in one of the many wars America maintains. The game is unique for being designed and released for free by the US armed forces, and with this – but not unrelated – is unique for its accuracy in depicting current American army equipment, uniforms, and the like. The game is similar in many ways to other team based shooters such as

¹ DeLappe, Joseph, “dead-in-iraq” in *delappe.net*, 2006-2011.
online: <http://www.delappe.net/project/dead-in-iraq> (last consulted August 10th 2015)

Battlefield or *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. It makes no effort to hide its function as a recruiting tool for the military, and in fact opens a browser with a US Army recruiting website every time a player ends a session in the game. *America's Army* could be said to be part of the logistical field of militarized perception (in Virilio's sense). No doubt *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield* are just as much recruiting machines that interpellate players through identification with the characters of soldiers and their violent escapades, but no other game is so explicitly and tightly tied to the actual military apparatus.

In *dead-in-iraq*, DeLappe logs in to *America's Army*, immediately drops his weapon – that is, refuses to participate in the fighting – and instead begins to type into the chat channel names of Americans killed in the Iraq conflict. Typically, other players soon kill DeLappe. According to the rules of his performance, he then logs in again and pursues the same process, continuing to type names, following and copying from a master list of Americans dead in Iraq. *Dead-in-iraq* functions as many things, including a memorial, social commentary, and political protest. Both of DeLappe's pieces can be said to exist as performances as well as documentation. Each piece involves a network and archive of references that are activated in the performance and then continue to function in the documentation.

In *Beckett Spams Counter-Strike* we act out Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* during multiplayer sessions of *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*. The audience was ourselves, but also the other players of the multiplayer session who had no idea what to make of our theatrics, players who we did not know and never met, players in multiple locations around the world. The audience was also the live crowds we performed in front of, notably at several scheduled performances in a nightclub in Morgantown, WV, but also at other venues. The live crowd is a witness to the event, but witness to what? What sort of intervention was it? Part of the question is the place of the performances. It is too simple to state that the performance takes place in *Counter-Strike*. The performance is a mixed reality event that takes place across multiple spaces and never entirely in any space. It "takes place" by displacing, taking places to other places through a process of virtualization and gameplay.

We entered the game and did not take part in the fighting but immediately began reciting the text of *Endgame* into the voice and text chat fields. While continuing to read the play, we would seek out each other's avatars and attempt to act out some semblance of a "staged version of the play" while at the same time attempting to avoid being killed. We were initially inspired to try to act out the entire play but we found that this was almost never possible because we would get killed by opposing players before we could recite much of it. Once killed, we entered a kind of limbo, still in the game and able to send text and voice chat, but not able to move or act, a state again emphasizing the undead non-nature of the game. We were often killed, since we spent the game acting and not fighting or fending off opponents. More typically we would get kicked out and banned from the game by other players – in

practical terms, this meant we could not play for about half an hour, by which time the game we had entered was over.

From one perspective, the project was an attempt at a constrained version of *Endgame*, much like attempts to stage other theatrical works in unlikely settings or with alternative characters, such as "Shakespeare in the Park" or Joss Whedon's recent contemporary Californian version of *Much Ado About Nothing*. In effect, *Counter-Strike* became a kind of score or timing device for how much of *Endgame* we could perform. At the same time, we recognized the tremendous potential of games as performances spaces. Here you have persistent environments with audiences in multiple sites around the globe. The potential audience can be quite extensive, though actual numbers and locations are hard to determine. In practice, the numbers were limited in *Counter-Strike*, since there can not be more than about 16 participating in any given map. We believe it is vital for artists, activists, and philosophers to recognize the potential of these spaces. Where in the past artists might go to tremendous and lengthy efforts to design an interactive 3D environment in Maya or Studio Max, here we find ready made environments for performing art, action, and thought.

Counter-Strike is built around teams. You must work as a team in order to win. As performers of *Endgame*, our relation to the other players is hesitant. We are both interested in response and their trollish anger, but also wary of being killed, needing to survive in order to perform. Of course, Beckett also presents us with group formations, but not ones that are tied to a goal. The characters of *Endgame*, Hamm and Clov and Nagg and Nell, exist within the game but also in another space altogether, haunting *Counter-Strike* and haunted by it.

Counter-Strike is oddly cluttered and full of everyday, banal, popular culture. The combat spaces represent and connote without specifying. Some are urban environments, others are more industrial, some are possibly Eastern European, some vaguely South American, and so on, all are certainly third world. In short, the game is set in the locales of America's war machine. The missions are drawn from familiar Hollywood narratives of bravery and the characters embody heroic male soldiers. This is the case whether players take on the role of terrorists or counter-terrorists. The interactions between players are stereotyped and driven by masculine fantasies. This is true both for the built-in, programmed interactions, and in the team-based activities that play out through group chat.

Samuel Beckett's play is full of daily cultural trash as well. The setting is tedious, agonizing, sadly humorous, reeking of lower middle class Irish life. Of course, this banality may be reinforced for the hardcore gamers or those not involved with gaming at all, who may see the entire exercise – performing *Endgame* in *Counter-Strike* – as banal. What a waste of time this project is! Such banality obliterates the identification and value in culture – for those playing *Counter-Strike*, *Endgame* is not a high culture literary

work by a Nobel Prize winning artist but an irritation, a piece of spam. The “world” as a shared structure fails, and the construction of game and theater collapses.

DEAD Clov: Me to play.

DEAD AbsurdHammster: hi qfertig

DEAD Clov: Old *Endgame* lost of old, play and lose and have done with losing.²

I. The surprising thrills of being an understudy and bodyguard in a virtual war zone. *Beckett Spams Counter-Strike* and Transformative Play

Gabriel Tremblay-Gaudette

I joined the cast of the *Beckett Spams Counter-Strike* three months before the performance that took place at the 123 Pleasant Street nightclub in Morgantown, WV, on May 6, 2015; the other members of the cast had been rehearsing since September 2014. *Endgame* is a play with four actors and a *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* online match team is made of five players, which leaves an open spot for a player to act both as a bodyguard for the players performing the play and as a backup actor if one of the main performers were to drop out of the game due to a technical failure (not likely but possible) or the expelling of one of the players through an in-game voting process (very likely – more on that below).

When I was brought in to the cast, Sandy Baldwin was slotted as the fifth player on the team and was responsible both for the stage setting and bodyguard duties; however, I took his place as the bodyguard as it became soon obvious that he was more interested and proficient in the conceptual thinking surrounding our performance than he was about performing the in-game virtual violence aspects of his task. My colleagues deemed me sufficiently good at the game to assume this role, although I would humbly observe that even though I acquired some meager skills at playing first-person-shooter (from this point on, FPS) through my casual and on-again-off-again relationship with this videogame genre, this optimistic evaluation of my talent as a FPS player by my colleagues was mostly due to a big-fish-in-a-small-pond discrepancy with them.

Thus, my experience of the *Beckett Spams Counterstrike* performance focused more on the in-game action and the videoludic parameters, constraints and challenges it posed, and I will comment on our performance from this standpoint.

² Chat transcript, from *Beckett Spams Counter-Strike* performance April 22, 2015.

The FPS video game genre first appeared in 1974, with the release of the game *Maze War*, developed by Steve Colley.³ Although rudimentary by today's standards, *Maze War* established most of the core principles still prevalent in this genre today: movement in a three-dimensional space seen through a first-person perspective and interaction with other players or enemies by means of a (more often than not) projectile weapon. However, the genre came to the attention of the mainstream PC-Owners public with the release of *Wolfenstein 3D* by Id Software in 1992.⁴ But it was only the next year, with the release of *Doom* by the same company, that the genre exploded in popularity.⁵

Even though the computer hardware's performance and the software's complexity has increased since the release of *Maze Wars*, it would be erroneous to state that the FPS genre has evolved; rather, it would be more appropriate to qualify the innovations of the genres as refinements of the same core principle. No matter how many weapons, enemies, historical settings, multilayered levels and game modes are offered to the gamers with each new iteration of popular franchises such as *Counter-Strike*, *Medal of Honor*, *Battlefield* and countless others, the goal of the game is still "kill or be killed." However, an aspect of the FPS experience which has drastically evolved over the years is the player's skills – which, as we will now see, became the main challenge to overcome – or circumnavigate – for our *Beckett Spams Counter-Strike* performance.

As I mentioned earlier, I've been playing videogames for a long time. I have played FPS for long enough to know the basic principles of its gameplay: look for the most powerful weapons available but don't hesitate to rely on a shotgun in close-quarter fights; strife often to become a moving target; and, in online multiplayer matches, the 4-R strategy – retreat, reload, regroup, retaliate. It should also be noted that playing the same game over and over again allows one to gain additional knowledge, such as overlay of the maps for each level, specificities of each weapon, acquaintance with the visual information on-screen for better and faster discernment of threats and behavioral patterns of both off-line artificial intelligence enemies and online opponents. As is the case with most social activities and/or sports, as an enthusiastic amateur, I know just enough to save face but not enough to impress on a consistent basis.

³ Montfort, Nick, *Twisty Little Passages. An Approach to Interactive Fiction*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 2004, p. 80.

⁴ Hitchens, Michael, "A Survey of First-Person Shooters and their Avatars" in *Game Studies*, vol. 1, no 3, December 2011, online: http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/michael_hitchens (last consulted July 20th 2015).

⁵ Several years after the release of the game, most FPS games were labeled "DOOM clones."

However, as it soon became apparent as I started playing *CS: GO* in order to prepare for the performance, my level of skills as a casual player is far below the average player of this game. The typical player of *CS: GO* is faster, better equipped,⁶ knows every level like the back of his hand, uses a well-coordinated team strategy, and, perhaps most importantly, has a much quicker reaction time than any of the members of the cast of *Beckett Spams Counter-Strike*. I soon learned that before I joined the cast, the rehearsals were practiced against off-line bots in order to give more time to the players to insert text and to defend themselves. After the first practice in which I took part, I could ascertain that a) the offline bots, even at a high level of difficulty, were not very dangerous enemies when compared to online players, and b) members of the cast were having a hard time fighting these lesser enemies, so c) performing Beckett in a live online game would prove even more challenging than I expected.

At this point, I need to specify some technical aspects of FPS games to the neophytes. The principal means of mechanical input for the interaction with a FPS games are the mouse and keyboard. The mouse allows the player to look around, zoom in and out, change weapons and, perhaps most importantly, to fire his weapon. The keyboard handles the rest – which is a lot: moving, reloading, crouching, jumping, buying or picking up weapons, and many other actions, are activated through the keyboard. As for in-game communication, it is possible to manually insert some text to be displayed on-screen via a keyboard “speak” command; but most experienced players, if not all players save a few luddites, use a headset equipped with a microphone and headphones. The headset is used in order to avoid mobilizing the keyboard for communication purposes instead of in-game action, because doing so has the direct consequence of leaving the player’s avatar immobile, a near-certain death sentence in the fast-paced war zone of *CS: GO*.

In order to truly “perform” Beckett’s text inside a game of *CS: GO*, the cast elected to insert the lines of text via the “speak” command; this method also had the significant advantages of, first, displaying Beckett’s text in a less intrusive manner to players of both teams, allowing the opportunity for the opponents to read it at their leisure and if they choose to, and secondly, to avoid overflowing the audio channel with the lines from Beckett’s play, which would most probably have earned all of us a lifetime ban from the *CS: GO* servers. The flipside of this approach is that the actors’ avatars would be paralysed for rather long periods of time.

Interestingly enough, in a 2002 study focusing on the creative player actions in online FPS games, Wright, Boria and Breidenbach posit that “Play is not just ‘playing the game,’ but ‘playing with the rules of

⁶ Players can acquire better, upgraded weapons via in-game purchases or by achieving specific goals. No one in our group purchased any of these upgraded weapons.

the game' and is best shown in the diversity of talk, the creative uses of such talk and player behavior within the game, plus the modifications of game technical features."⁷ They came up with a categorization of instances of in-game talk in 2002's *Counter-Strike*, 39 categories subdivided in 5 general categories: "1) creative game talk, 2) game conflict talk, 3) insult/distancing talk, 4) performance talk and 5) game technical/external talk."⁸ The *Endgame* performance would logically fall into the Creative Game Talk category, but does not fit with any of the categories established by the authors, i.e. "Names, naming and identity talk; Joking, irony and wordplay; Map creations, map judging, and logo comments and designs; Changing game rules and technical limits (reflexive awareness of game features, i.e. low gravity); Popular culture references to in-game talk (for example, *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, *Pulp Fiction*, etc.)" The authors also observe that the in-game language is replete with idioms and technical language commonly known and used by players; abbreviations such as gg for good game or afk for away from keyboard are often used to shorten the amount of time during which the avatar is "paralyzed" while the player is typing a message. Thus, "Mastery of this language, along with strategic playing skill, is a passport to recognition as an adept insider."⁹; following this, the in-game messages sent by the members of the cast were doubly strange, first off because they were not game-related at all and secondly because they were expressed in full sentences.

The challenge stemming from this rather unconventional use of in-game talk and static gameplay was that at any time during a match, a player on any team can at any time initiate a "votekick" which, as its name suggests, allows players to kick a target out of a room via voting. Initiating a votekick is extremely simple – one only needs to hit the Caps Lock key and select a player – and the decision is made by pressing a single key. On *CS: GO's* Wikia page, the following official reasons are listed as motives for a votekick:

"Illegal programs / Cheating
Racism / Inappropriate words / Player harassment
AFK (away from keyboard)
Bugs / Poor sportsmanship Others"¹⁰

⁷ Wright, Tamara ; Boria, Eric and Breidenbach, Paul, "Creative Player Actions in FPS Online Video Games" in *Game Studies*, vol. 2 no 2, December 2002, online: <http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/wright/> (last consulted August 4th 2015).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ No author, "Votekick" in *Counter-Strike Online Wiki*, August 2015, online: <http://cso.wikia.com/wiki/Votekick> (last consulted August 6th 2015)

Needless to say, most players probably feel that the lines from Beckett's play are "inappropriate," or at the very least, the unchallenging performance offered by most of the cast could fall into the "others" category. Furthermore, the Wikia page also states in its "dos and don'ts" section that "Vote to kick a player out only if he/she disrupts gameplay,"¹¹ and if we consider that our Beckett performance was a form of guerilla theater, disrupting gameplay was precisely what we were aiming at. The first rehearsals confirmed my worries as one of the members of the cast (usually the actor handling the opening monologue) was votekicked after a few minutes in almost every game. Thus, an added challenge was to avoid being kicked out in order to keep performing the play, and to quote David St. Hubbins, "There's such a fine line between clever and stupid." We had to thread the line between artists performing a play and trolls flooding the chat with seemingly absurd text.

The solution to this problem was to try to engage as much as possible with our opponents: had we only performed Beckett's play without bothering to take part in the action, our performance would have been lacking and we would have been kicked out within seconds of the beginning of a match. I believed that if and only if we were to do our best to play the game as well as perform Beckett's play would we be acknowledged by our opponents as also players of the game, thus worthy of their attention. In other words, we had to present ourselves as players in the hope that they would accept in turn to become our public.

To sum up, as the team's bodyguard, my duties were to both protect my teammates against our enemies' relentless assaults (because the cast was too busy reciting Beckett to do so themselves) and maintain engagement with our opponents through a more offensive approach in order to pass as credible adversaries and ensure that we would not get votekicked individually or as a group. In addition to this, I found out early on that my in-game skills were vastly inferior to those of my opponents, who obviously had progressed a lot since the 90's when I played multiplayer matches on a more regular basis.

Needless to say, what we were trying to accomplish with our performance is a rather unusual form of videogame play. Many concepts could be used to describe our peculiar involvement with the game. First, the term "expansive gameplay," introduced by Felan Parker and defined as "involv[ing] players dictating additional or alternative rules from completely within the confines of the existing game rules [that is, the affordances and constraints], using the game in a very different manner"¹² is a close fit, but it

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Parker, Felan, "The Significance of Jeep Tag: On Player-Imposed Rules in Video Games" in *Loading...*, vol. 2, no 3, 2008, online: <http://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/44> (last consulted February 9th 2016)

falls short of describing our performance's particular involvement with the *CS: GO* game as we were aiming to go beyond the simple ludological implications of added set of rules. Another concept, "counter play," described as going "against the design of the game"¹³ is also a close fit in the sense that we were not playing the game solely to win a match by shooting terrorists or counter-terrorists; however, true counter-play, such as Joseph DeLappe's performance *dead-in-iraq*,¹⁴ takes the form of an obstruction of the gameplay for all parties involved, and even though we were not intended on playing the game to the fullest of our capacities, we were at the very least trying to provide a minimal challenge to our opponents in the shooting-at-each-other department while performing Beckett's play.

Rather, I consider our *Beckett Spams Counter-Strike* performance as an instance of "transformative play," which Eric Salen and Kate Zimmerman initially described as "a special case of play that occurs when the free movement of play alters the more rigid structure in which it takes shape."¹⁵ Olli Sotamaa later provided this description, which I prefer: "about players appropriating the playgrounds, innovating new tactics and changing the rules,"¹⁶ adding that "transformative play can expand outside gameworlds and brings aspects of play outside the immediate playing experience,"¹⁷ which is exactly what we were doing by introducing Beckett's play inside the virtual war zone of *CS: GO*.

Some forms of transformative play are more aligned with the videoludic parameters of a given game and involve setting personal goals within the game; for example, a famous and well-documented

¹³ Keogh, Brendan, "When Game Over Means Game Over: Using Permanent Death to Craft Living Stories in Minecraft" in *IE'2013*, 2013, online:

https://www.academia.edu/4632514/When_Game_Over_Means_Game_Over_Using_Permanent_Death_to_Craft_Living_Stories_in_Minecraft (last consulted August 10th 2015)

¹⁴ DeLappe describes his performance thus on his website: "This work commenced in March of 2006, to roughly coincide with the 3rd anniversary of the start of the Iraq conflict. I enter the online US Army recruiting game, America's Army, in order to manually type the name, age, service branch and date of death of each service person who has died to date in Iraq. The work is essentially a fleeting, online memorial to those military personnel who have been killed in this ongoing conflict. My actions are also intended as a cautionary gesture. I enter the game using as my login name, "dead-in-iraq" and proceed to type the names using the game's text messaging system. I stand in position and type until I am killed. After death, I hover over my dead avatar's body and continue to type. Upon being re-incarnated in the next round, I continue the cycle. As of 12/18/2011, the official withdrawal date of the last U.S. troops in Iraq, I completed the input of the last 200+ names into the game, for a total of 4484 names (source icasualties.org)" Delappe, Joseph, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Zimmerman, Eric ; Salen, Katie, *Rules of Play. Game Design Fundamentals*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2004, p. 321.

¹⁶ Sotamaa, Olli, "Let Me Take You to The Movies. Productive Players, Commodification and Transformative Play" in *Convergence*, vol. 13, no 4, 2007, p. 386.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

instance of transformative play is the “Quickrun,” where the goal is to reach the end of a level as fast as possible. For instance, in FPS games, this can involve not killing enemies but rather dodging their attacks or taking a few bullets, or even shooting a rocket at the avatar’s feet in order to be launched ahead or higher. Thus, modifying the objective of a game through one’s own decision reconfigures the way to conceive and play a given game.¹⁸

In a sense, the transformative play involved in the Beckett performance affected the game both from outside and from within. From outside, since we were bringing into the game a lauded text from a canonized author into a universe which is not, at first sight, suited for such a recital; and because our performance affected the players in various ways, some of them falling outside of the common paradigm of players’ reactions – uncommon reactions such as bewilderment, incomprehension, curiosity, and laughter. From within, as well, since we were playing with the added challenge of interrupting our fighting from time to time to enter lines from a theater play in the chat command, and engaging opponents in a credible and competitive manner when not typing text.

In order to “succeed” in this transformative play, we had to make some adjustments in our gameplay. For example, Yvonne’s sons, both seasoned players, informed us that we could buy protective gear at the beginning of each round, as well as slightly powerful weapons. We did so at the beginning of each round, not so much as to improve our in-game performance per se (although the body armor did allow members of the cast to survive the enemies’ torrent of bullets for a few more seconds) but mostly because this act of buying gear, which can be purchased automatically by pushing two keys in succession before the beginning of a round, is such a given in the game that not doing so would arouse suspicion as to our incompetence and lack of willingness to play “for real.”

We also had to adjust our playing style in order to avoid quick votekicks. During our first rehearsals, the general strategy was to find hiding places and recite via the chat as much of the text from *Endgame* as possible before being killed. This static approach was a failure since the map levels in *CS: GO* are by now very familiar to the average players, and no good hiding place could be found; also, it led to the perception by our opponents of “not putting up a fight” and playing hide-and-seek instead. The members of the cast who had the highest amount of text to type in still had to seek shelter from the

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that the gaming industry has somewhat co-opted this practice of transformative through the implementation of an “achievements” system, adding several sub-goals to the main objective of a given game, in order to offer more challenges to the players and boasting or promising a longer playing time experience; however, the in-game achievements are determined by the producers of the game and thus exclude the definition of transformative play by Sotamaa where the player’s decision engenders the transformation.

main areas but were instructed to attempt to fire a few bullets at their enemies when found out instead of standing still.

Members of the cast who were not busy reciting the play were instructed to behave more aggressively: charging at the enemies with no clear group strategy is a very poor tactic in multiplayer FPS games but this approach was more convincing to our opponents. As the bodyguard, my role was to balance between following my teammates in their kamikaze charge and try to provide back-up fire and retreating to protect my teammates who were standing still. I went as far as playing for a couple of hours outside of rehearsals, in order to hone my skills, get more familiar with the maps we were more likely to play during our live performance, and try to pick up some tips and techniques by watching the other players perform.

In most cases, the opponents would catch on very fast that “something was amiss” since the chat window was perpetually filling up with text not related to the in-game action, but they would keep playing with us precisely because we were both playing Beckett and the game. Granted, we were not a real threat to our opponents, but they at least appreciated that we were not logging in an online multiplayer game solely to disrupt their fun with a reenactment of a play. Another aspect of the engagement with our opponents which improved the performance overall was banter and witty trash-talk with our opponents. Some of them would insert humorous quips in the middle of the lines of the play to acknowledge our performance and interact with us; at times, members of the cast who were not busy typing lines would also write directly to opponents in order to engage them. Perhaps the most fascinating and unexpected reaction from our public came during recital. Once, one of the opponents expressed commiseration towards me by writing (I’m quoting from memory) “I feel bad for the dude on the other team that has to deal with a bunch of doofus waxing philosophical in the middle of a FPS match”; this form of sympathy for an opponent is seldom found in online video game play.

In conclusion, our performance seen through the prism of transformative play engendered a fascinating acquisition of knowledge. Transformative play as described and understood by Salen and Zimmerman is but a way to renew interest for a game one grew bored with by self-imposing new goals and rules within the game. The extended definition of transformative play by Sotamaa goes beyond the game and accommodates injection of elements from the external world. What I discovered following my participation in the *Beckett Spams Counterstrike* performance is that successful transformative play allows for a better understanding of a given game. Lateral thinking was necessary to face the manifold challenges (such as playing a team deathmatch short-handed) and constraints (such as avoiding vote-kicks through normal in-game behavior and communicational engagement with the opponents)

specific to our performance. In essence, transformative play does not avoid or skirt around traditional play; rather, it can only be achieved through, and after, a solid understanding of the basics of the game. It is both a radical subversion of and a learning tool for traditional play.

Clov: One day you'll be blind like me. You'll be sitting here, a speck in the void, in the dark,
forever, like me.

jthumm: shut

jthumm: up

Clov: You'll look at the wall a while, then there'll be no wall any more

DEAD AbsurdHamster: you shut up

Clov: Infinite emptiness will be all around you, all the resurrected dead of all the ages wouldn't fill it, and there you'll be like a little bit of grit in the middle of the steppe.

II. "It was sawdust once. And now it's sand." Playing a Minor Role in Game and Play

Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang

Similar to some of the project members, my gaming skills are admittedly below average. While I was an avid player of the Nintendo 64 game *Goldeneye*, my expertise with computer games and First Person Shooters has been limited. My interest in the project therefore gravitated more to the question of performing literature in a gaming space, than toward "winning" by racking up the most number of kills, as is the aim of *Counter-Strike*. The absurd leanings of Beckett's work made the former an interesting enterprise.

As was to be expected, the interplay between competing purposes increased the level of antagonism among non-project members but decreased the intensity of conflict within the game, as project members did not consistently engage with opposition members during the various shooting rounds. The game scores were typically one sided as a result. Still, it was helpful to work within an extended period of time practicing and getting acquainted with both the play *Endgame* and the game *Counter-Strike*. One can note that "game" and "play" can be used interchangeably in particular contexts; the fluidity through which project members moved from play to game and back helped us question the implications of performance while adding extra layers of complexity to both game and play.

I adopted the character Nagg, a minor character in *Endgame*, whose name is a play on the German equivalent for the word "nail"; this feature is similar to the other characters ("Clov" is a corruption of the French word "clou" meaning "nail," while "Nell" bears similarity to the term "death knell" and shares

homophonic relations with “nail”) aside from the main character Hamm, who according to Ian Shuttleworth is thus the hammer that beats at all the other characters.¹⁹ One of the popular dialogues in our performance was the following:

HAMM: Do you hear that? There's no more pap. You'll never get any more pap.

NAGG: I want me pap!

HAMM: Give him a biscuit. Accursed fornicator! How are your stumps?

NAGG: Never mind me stumps.

This exchange is symptomatic of the relationship between the two, with Hamm as the provider and aggressor (verbal in this case) and Nagg playing the part of the receiver (whether of prospective pap, biscuits, or insults). Even though Nagg gave birth to Hamm, in the play he is at the bottom of a largely vertical relationship, both thematically and structurally. Positioning Nagg as the recipient of aggression played into the lack of gaming skills that I possess, as I was, to put it lightly, killed much more than I registered kills. The position of victim was made clearer with the need to perform while the game was in session. From a gamer's perspective, performing a play within an intense game like *Counter-Strike* increases the handicap, as my character would be static and thus an easy target for the opposition.

While performing, the stationary nature of my character resonated with Nagg's situation in the play, where he is ensconced in an ashcan the entire time. Like other Beckett characters such as Winnie in *Happy Days*, this entrapment reinforces the absurd nature of the play and foregrounds the relationship between agency and mobility. The disability inherent in my situation did not hamper my performance as Nagg, regardless. In a paradoxical way, the freedom to not worry about the core purpose of *Counter-Strike* allowed me to play the role of Nagg without inhibition. As a performer, the question of audience was complicated because of different categories: there were the other gamers, co-project members, and a general audience who was present at our final performance (which was a public one). In other words, some were involuntary while others were participatory and the rest conventional.

The fractious nature of the audience recalls Michael Springer's argument in “*Endgame* and the Meaning of Meaninglessness” that Hamm and Nagg require an audience to display their agency, as their conflict is borne out of the need to have an audience.²⁰ While his argument defines audience in terms of characters in the play, the extension to other audiences could mean that regardless of how poorly my character plays in the game, there is agency gained from addressing the audience. Irrespective of whether the audience was involuntary – we received a fair bit of abuse from fellow gamers who were

¹⁹ Shuttleworth, Ian, “*Endgame*” in *Financial Times*, Oct 19 2009, p. 15.

²⁰ Springer, Michael, “*Endgame* and the Meaning of Meaninglessness” in *Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 26, no 1, 2010, p. 187.

not amused by the performance – or otherwise, we were largely in control of directing our version of the play.

As Normand Berlin notes in “Traffic of our Stage: Beckett’s *Endgame*,” Beckett shocked the theater world and challenged mainstream notions of theater with *Waiting for Godot*.²¹ In a less profound sense, the *Beckett Spams Counter-Strike* project participants at the very least jarred the assumptions of other gamers through performing Beckett in an unconventional space. The word “Nagg” could be a pun on the verb “to nag”, which means to irritate or annoy and in the context of the game, the inability (or refusal) to “play the game” served as exasperation for gamers who had no idea what the project was about: the inability to “play” *Counter-Strike* at this point meant I would be a pain to team members who were not part of the project and were bent on winning the particular round. In a play where madness is thematically emphasized,²² there was both madness in terms of anger and madness with regards to chaos. The irony in this point is that the presence of order in the game would be to kill people repeatedly.

Unlike other project members playing Hamm and Clov, my engagement with the play was minimal because my character Nagg had a minor part to play. When my parts were not to be performed, I could concentrate on the game and attempt to kill and gain points for my team. The lack of skill meant that the target was not always achieved. As mentioned previously however, the exercise was fruitful in helping project members interrogate the absurd within an environment where another definition of the absurd (senseless repeated killing) is presented as normal, or even desired.

Damage Taken from “BearlyFit” – 108 in 4 hits

DraconJet: there's no more pap

GolazoCLC: I want me pap!

[Optic] L1ghtSw1tch: no more pap you fools

GolazoCLC: I want me pap!

²¹ Berlin, Normand, “Traffic of our Stage: Beckett’s *Endgame*” in *Massachusetts Review*, vol. 50, no 3, 2009, p. 402.

²² Dilworth, Thomas ; Langlois, Christopher, “The Nietzschean Madman in Beckett’s *Endgame*” in *The Explicator*, vol. 65, no 3, 2007, p. 168.

III. [Dead] Clov Speaks; or, Beckett Pwns n00bs: Challenging the “War on Terror” Ideological Fantasy by Performing Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* in *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*

Philip Zapkin

In his 2001 “State of the Union” Address, US President George W. Bush launched what has become known as the “War on Terror.” This “war” fundamentally reshaped mindsets and worldviews across the globe, creating, on the one hand, a climate of fear, Islamophobia, and xenophobia in the US and allies like Britain. On the other hand, Arabs and Muslims (or sometimes Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and occasionally Latinos mistaken for Arabs) found themselves on the wrong side of a “clash of civilizations” pitting the defenders of freedom, justice, and liberty against barbarians using violence and terror(ism) to try and impose their own distorted brand of Islamic fundamentalism on the world. In his speech, Bush divided the world between the camp of the good and the camp of the evil. As he put it, “Every nation, in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” Despite fears, anxieties, and uncertainties created by the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, George Bush strove to make the world simple again. The choice was either-or. Either good and freedom or evil and terror. Much of the Bush/Cheney era “war on terror” was run on this premise. Which leads us to the popular video game *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*.

Counter-Strike is a first person-shooter pitting teams of counter-terrorists against teams of terrorists, generally in either a hostage rescue mission or a bomb defusing mission in any number of scenarios from a Middle Eastern bazaar to Parisian streets to a Haitian dock. Part of the appeal of this game is that it plays out the ideological fantasy of the “war on terror;” specifically that the conflict can be separated from ideology, motives, and causes and reduced simply to a clash between two opposing forces. Each scenario features groups of counter-terrorists fighting groups of terrorists. The objective is always determined by the mission type – bomb scenario or hostage scenario. Other than changes in scenery and uniforms, there are no substantive differences between Chechens bombing a defunct Soviet nuclear silo, Arabs bombing a market, and French (probably) eco-terrorists bombing the Paris underground. In this sense, the game seems to bear out Bush’s promise that the “war on terror” “will not end until every terrorist of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.” But this is precisely the ideological fantasy that stitches together the “war on terror” worldview – the constitutive fantasy that provides its coherence. Slavoj Žižek explains that an ideological fantasy is the constitutive excess that allows a society to pull its disparate parts together into one seeming whole. He writes:

What appears as the hindrance to society's full identity with itself is actually its positive condition: by transposing onto the Jew [or in this case, the terrorist] the role of the foreign body which introduces in the social organism disintegration and antagonism, the fantasy-image of society qua consistent, harmonious whole is rendered possible.²³

In other words, only through the constitutive excess of the terrorist does it become possible for post 11 Sept-US/Western society to imagine itself as a unified whole. In the context of the "war on terror" and *Counter-Strike*, terrorists are imagined to be non-differentiated "bad guys" fought by non-differentiated "good guys," reducing the war on terror to a simple and non-ideological conflict.

The Real of this desire – the limit into which the ideological fantasy crashes – is precisely that terrorism is not non-differentiated, but that the "war on terror" is run through with racist, Islamophobic, and xenophobic undertones. Take, for instance, the difference between how US politicians and media (especially those with a conservative bent) discuss different types of terrorists. Islamic fundamentalism as a well-organized and funded menace looms large in the political imaginary of terror, while right-wing militias in the US are regarded as patriots defending their Second Amendment rights, or individual terrorists like the Unabomber or Dyllan Roof are regarded as mentally ill loners and many of their stated ideologies are downplayed or dismissed. What this tells us about *Counter-Strike* is that it endorses the Bush-era fantasy of a divided world characterized by a battle between good and evil with no middle ground, ideological motives, or rationalizations. In this sense, the "war on terror" mentality represents a continuation of the American worldview, shaped by the Cold War; the "war on terror" did not change US culture, but merely intensified trends already fundamental to the US self-image. Jacques Rancière argues that, despite media claims to the contrary, the September 11 attacks were not a rupture in US culture, but instead confirmed existing ideology. He explains that

a symbolic event is the name for any event that strikes a blow to the existing regime of relations between the symbolic and the real. It is an event that the existing modes of symbolization are incapable of apprehending, and which therefore reveals a fissure in the relation of the real to the symbolic.²⁴

This means that a rupture has only occurred when the event transcends the linguistic, narrative, and ideological structures that give meaning to daily life – when what has occurred cannot be understood or explained through any conventional worldview. However, Rancière claims that September 11 was not such a rupture because "On the evening of the same day, the president already had the words on hand to capture what had happened: forces of evil had attacked the forces of good."²⁵

²³ Žižek, Slavoj, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 104.

²⁴ Rancière, Jacques. "September 11 and Afterwards: A Rupture in the Symbolic Order" in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. by Steven Corcoran, London, Continuum, 2010, p. 97.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Through our performance in *Beckett Spams Counter-Strike*, we sought to disrupt this simplistic dichotomy by using guerilla performance to make the game space strange – to disrupt the seeming normalcy of the game, thereby revealing the already absurdly constructed space of a non-ideologically motivated “war on terror.” Performance (or re-performance) is a space for generating both knowledge and error, particularly when (re-)performance takes the form of military re-enactment.²⁶ In *Performing Remains*, Rebecca Schneider argues that re-enactment – through its postmodern disruption of linear history – works to both encode the past on bodies and highlight the error of the past which is always already performative. Schneider claims, “The resiliently irruptive rub and call of live bodies (like biological machines of affective transmission) insist that physical acts are a means for knowing, bodies are sites for transmission even if, simultaneously, they are also manipulants of error and forgetting.”²⁷ In the case of *Beckett Spams Counter-Strike* our verbal performance of the lines of *Endgame* and our physical performance of playing the video game combined with the digital performance of our characters, who acted and spoke in digital space, interacting with other players (usually by us getting killed). We performed both physically in the 123 Pleasant Street nightclub and digitally in the game environment. In these performances we confronted both the remembering of terrorism and the error/forgetting inherent in the game’s ideological fantasy.

Given our ideologically disruptive goal, Beckett was a fitting choice of playwright to import into the space of *Counter-Strike* because Beckett is the dramatist of dead ideology and anti-ideological spaces. But he’s also a dramatist of the absurd, which gave us as performers the opportunity to highlight the absurdity of the game’s fantasmatic non-ideological space. Plays like *Waiting for Godot*, *Happy Days*, and *Endgame* are essentially non-spaces, places outside the normal realm of human activity, whether in barren wastelands or a house which seems to hold the last living humans (however worn down and deformed) after some kind of apocalyptic cataclysm. But in these non-spaces devoid of the socio-cultural structures that made ideology necessary, characters continue to cling futilely to remnants of memory and culture – a shredded symbolic order amidst the eruption of the Real. There is a sullen inevitability about the characters in Beckett’s drama, a sense of the continual and never-ending

²⁶ In using the term re-performance, I’m largely picking up on the work of Schneider, who writes about war re-enactment as re-performance and argues that re-enactment is a way of constructing new historical knowledge. In the Beckett Spams *Counter-Strike* project I think we’re re-performing in three senses: first, we’re re-performing Beckett’s play in a new and alien context; second we’re re-performing the war on terror in game form; and third, each round of any given game re-performs the goals and characters of the previous rounds, which will again be re-performed in the subsequent rounds. (Schneider, Rebecca, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, London, Routledge, 2011, 272 p.)

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

drudgery of existence. When Clov asks, "Why this farce, day after day?" Hamm responds, "Routine. One never knows."²⁸ This is the way with Beckett's drama – the characters are caught in the routine of their daily lives in which they can change nothing and when things do change they become worse. Even death doesn't offer an escape for the characters in *Endgame*. Death is simultaneously impossible and inevitable – the paradox of the non-life these characters lead. In roughly the middle of the play, Hamm asks if Clov would come and say goodbye before leaving, leading into a dialogue about death and the universe:

Clov: Oh I shouldn't think so.

Hamm: But you might be merely dead in your kitchen.

Clov: The result would be the same.

Hamm: Yes, but how would I know, if you were merely dead in your kitchen?

Clov: Well... sooner or later I'd start to stink.

Hamm: You stink already. The whole place stinks of corpses.

Clov: The whole universe.

Hamm: To hell with the universe!²⁹

This tedious sameness is matched by the repetitions of meaningless life and death in *Counter-Strike* – a game in which dead players come back to life several times during each round, resuming their (ghostly) duties as either terrorists or counter-terrorists. Without meaning to trivialize gameplay, each round has the same combatants, the same objectives, and the same limited number of tactical approaches to objectives. However, by importing the already alienated dramaturgy of Beckett's *Endgame* into *Counter-Strike* we attempted to disrupt the usual horizon of expectations for gameplay. This is the goal of guerilla theatre, or guerilla art in general – to make the spaces of everyday life strange by imposing art where it is not expected, thereby drawing attention to the constructed nature of norms. Whether or not our performance made other players question the reality of *Counter-Strike*, it drew attention to the ideological functioning of the game among those who saw our performance live, and certainly affected our perception of the game as performance space, cultural text, and ideological artifact.

GolazoCLC: It was sawdust once

GolazoCLC: and now it's sand

GolazoCLC: from the shore

[Optic] L1ghtSw1tch: It was totally sand

DEAD AbsurdHammster: Now it's sand.

²⁸ Beckett, Samuel, *Endgame*. *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*, London, Faber & Faber, 1990, p. 107.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

[Optic] L1ghtSw1tch: It was a friggen desert.

IV. "It's lower down, in the hollow"

Yvonne Hammond

Though I continually surprise teenage boys with my ability to go round for round in games like *Tetris* and *Dr. Mario*, my skills in first-person shooter games, particularly those based in 3D imaging, discourage invitations to play or lead to full-belly guffaws. Joining Sandy Baldwin's performance meant that I had to learn how to play *CS: GO*, which also meant downloading and learning how to manage my son's Steam account and fielding IM messages from his friends. Sharing his account meant that I would be able to access his bonus gear, but it also meant that my poor game statistics would impact his high scores. While my kids attempted to coach me through what was for me a foreign world, I attended rehearsals that were in some ways much more aligned with my work in academia. The absurd was intuitive in a way pressing shift-E for weapon purchasing was not. However, though my literary background provided more familiarity with Beckett's play, I am neither a theatre actress nor am I a Beckett scholar. In every sense of the word this project forced me to acknowledge the limitations of my skills, demanding that I pretend to be a "player." Acutely aware of my own shortcomings, I increasingly focused on the notion of performance: our performance of the play, the gamer's performances within the game, and the performance of the game as we disrupted the game play for our opponents.

In our early practices we could not keep up all three performances. Even using bots, we often failed to complete a single round. The more often we failed the more often the play stopped; it didn't take long for us to realize that we would never be able to perform the entire play. Although we considered several options, we decided to trim the play, each character in charge of deleting what he or she felt were unnecessary lines. Despite these cuts, typing was still difficult, particularly passages longer than a sentence. Characters with long passages often had to spend games hiding or dying quickly, unable to defend themselves from quick attacks. We were not just vulnerable because we lacked skills, but also because we were typing when we should have been warring. We learned quickly that our performances were a series of interruptions and we shifted in and out of Beckett into our crude knowledge of negotiating *CS: GO*. Adding to this already complex system, glitches in our connection to Steam would cause members of our group to be randomly dropped, which meant that another member would step in to read lines. There were, in fact, few if any stable performances in this project.

Having just finished an in-depth study of identity performance, my initial interest in the project was related to the shifting identities, specifically in what I perceived to be the ways these shifts revealed the imaginary 4th wall. I assumed as a non-gamer that maintaining the illusion seemed really important to the gamers with whom we played. It was equally fascinating to examine our own behavior as we moved in-between the play's performance and our identities as gamers (which became, for me at least, more aggressive than I might normally be in life). However, our connections to the other gamers were contingent on our ability to play and as soon as our lack was revealed we were rejected, outed as the "not" gamer. As interlopers who were outside of the "normal" realm of activity, we were opened to "friendly" fire, pointed comments, and exit votes; however, conversely, these moves to force us out of the game space strengthened our core group. We had to learn to "fight" together in order to stay in the game. Ironically, while we recited Beckett's lines through characters clinging to false memories and deteriorating relationships, we built a team.

As our gaming skills increased, paradoxically our investment in the play decreased. Sometimes we had to be cued (more than once) that it was our turn to read. We found ourselves drawn into conversations with other players, who usually recognized our poor playing with crude and (occasionally) profane comments. We became ever more excited by kills, screaming enthusiastically when we finally successfully defended our teammates or ourselves. Those who were reading through the script usually found a somewhat quiet or safe corner in the game in which to hide, a strategy that had limited success. The limited success was primarily a result of the complicated process of reading, playing, and typing simultaneously; those actively reading had to recall gameplay combinations without hesitation while typing what they were reading into the message box. Long passages were difficult, riddled with spelling and grammar errors, ultimately looking more "authentic" than initially anticipated. Gamers were not easily fooled though, and while not our intent, many perceived the play's dialogue as "trolling."

Urban Dictionary defines trolling as the use of sarcasm and cynicism on the Internet; it is "being a prick on the internet because you can."³⁰ This type of incendiary behavior includes those who purposefully bait others, with or without clever sarcasm. Gamers, especially competitive gamers, seem to hate trolling. Though we began with bots, we moved through various types of game play options. The most successful exchanges were in live competitive matches, produced in moments when our teammates assessed our skills as less than satisfactory. To be clear, it did not matter to players whether we played as counter-terrorists or terrorists; in either case our level of game play irritated them. They demanded that we be more serious, asked if we were going to "play," and begged others to help get us

³⁰ "Trolling" in *Urban Dictionary*, online: urbandictionary.com (Last consulted July 20th 2015)

out of the game or to allow them to join another team. Their pleas and complaints came in between lines of the play, disrupting Beckett's world as much as we were disrupting their *CS: GO* world. Sometimes the complaints were simply mocking. For example, in one exchange between Clov and Hamm, a gamer ignores the word pap and joins the dialogue:

Damage Taken from "BearlyFit" – 108 in 4 hits
DraconJet: there's no more pap
GolazoCLC: I want me pap!
[Optic] L1ghtSw1tch: no more pap you fools
GolazoCLC: I want me pap!

Benign exchanges like this were not nearly as comical as the following, clearly more frustrated set of comments:

Damage Taken from "BigGun555" – 152 in 3 hits
[Optic] L1ghtSw1tch: yin or on
DEAD AbsurdHammster: Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that but –
DEAD GolazoCLC: could you give me a scratch before you go?
DEAD AbsurdHammster: No. Rub yourself against the rim.
DEAD -pg- Ares: is it time for anal?
DEAD GolazoCLC: it's lower down. In the hollow
DEAD AbsurdHammster: What hollow?
DEAD GolazoCLC: The hollow!
DEAD -pg- Ares: the hollow of your ass
DEAD GolazoCLC: Could you not?
DEAD [Optic] L1ghtSw1tch: Then the hollow becomes the abyss of nothingness
DEAD -pg- Ares: in the anus if the enemy
DEAD GolazoCLC: Yesterday you scratched me there
DEAD AbsurdHammster: Ah yesterday
0: Reinitialized 2 predictable entities
Player: Clov – Damage Given

The more frustrated and vulgar our opponents became the more we laughed and continued to bait them; we were eager to invite them into our notion of game play, particularly if it meant they would reveal the polysemy of our lines.

Within this exchange we began to fall in and out of our roles within the play to play our roles as gamers, a sort of diametrical flip-flop in which we swapped the philosophical opposition to war to join the pretend fight for ideological right. For me, this meant performing a less public self. Publically, I would not condone war as resolution, and even less so in the racially bifurcated world of *CS: GO*; but, as

a gamer I could play a soldier and shoot the “bad” guy without consequence. There is nothing new about my experience. In defending his claim that we know and define identities as both individuals and members of various groups, Philip Deloria remarks that early Americans acted out political and economic discontent using Native American disguise. Performances (such as the Boston Tea Party) in disguise, with the “infusion of Indianness,” allowed for “misrule and carnival” and “offered proto-Americans a platform for imagining and performing an identity of revolution.”³¹ In this case Deloria argues that Americans needed to pretend to be the “savage” Other in order to act out their rebellion. It is worth noting that other pop culture expressions show similar themes. White appropriation of hip-hop culture also seems to be a form of social rebellion based on the “disguised” identity of the racial Other. While *CS: GO* provides game play as either the “good” counter-terrorist or the “bad” terrorist (who is obviously Middle Eastern), and while we have no way of knowing why or if players choose sides, in the end the disguise they wear as the game characters is ultimately a choice to participate in killing as a means of play. Our performance of the play was always butting up against their performance as gamers, interrupting their experience of the pretense that they were, in fact, skilled soldiers. The lines of the play were inconsequential to outside parties; they didn’t start their gameplay to debate the philosophical points of war, but rather to adopt the garb of a pretend killer in a forum where killing is okay.

The measure of disruption that we sought to make the game space strange is difficult to quantify. Our naiveté of the game precluded our ability to anticipate what we would need to do to produce and track results. I don’t believe we ever defined our terms and thus individual interpretation of our success or failure varied. As novices and academics we recognized the space as counterfeit, empty, non-spaces, but our competitors seemingly did not. There did not seem to be anything absurd to our fellow gamers about the repetitive rounds of enemy engagement, the planting of the bomb over and over again, starting at the same place with the same weapon no matter when or how you died. But to be fair, this may be an intentional fallacy – after all, gamers are a diverse population. However, what we perhaps failed to acknowledge is the liminal space in which disruption might have occurred. Given the shifting and unstable performances – those within and outside of the game – it seems possible that the Real is never that far away. To think of it another way, the “escape” from the Real is what is valued, but difficult to achieve. *CS: GO* gamers may not acknowledge the absurdness of the world in which they play, but they may always already be aware of the thin line separating them from their living spaces and the world of the game. Though technology has worked to create ever more realistic experiences – headphones with in-game sounds, graphics with bullet impact and blood damage, 3D manipulations

³¹ Deloria, Phillip Joseph, *Playing Indian*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998, p. 14.

and first-person view – players are also constantly watching fellow players talk through messaging or video-conference talk. Our experience showed me that our opponents verbal and written exchanges are not all about the game. For example, my own son has built a wide group of friends, many of whom he met through gaming but has now met in person at his high school. Our disruption was not measured as disruption as much as it was registered as an annoying conversation, and even that was primarily related to game play. Had we been good gamers our conversation would likely have not been much of an issue.

My interpretation of our experiment calls into question the role of audience as it connects to and controls the outcomes of any performance – how important is it for your audience to recognize what you are doing? Did we need our audience to recognize their constructed space? Did they need to know the ideological (or “non-ideological” in the case of the game) reasons for the “war on terror?” If our audience only cared about winning, what hope if any would we have of introducing guerilla tactics to force them to see the absurd nature of their gaming performance? Our performance in the space at 123 Pleasant mimicked much of what we had already seen in our practices; the audience was limited, the sensory experience layered, and the exchange primarily benign. Yet, isn’t this much of what we have learned to expect from the “war on terrorism?” Disconnection from the Real could be a function of gaming, but could equally be related to the ideological effort to disconnect citizens from the act of war except through artificial means. George Bush’s infamous reaction to 9/11 encouraging business as usual provided a crucial precedent for dealing with tragedy. To support the “war” citizens were only required to purchase yellow ribbons, to purchase fuel and fuel byproducts for a higher price, but most importantly – to simply purchase. Our fellow gamers were purchasing a connection to “war,” paying Steam to access *CS: GO* and “buying” into the good/bad guy narrative for a few minutes of entertainment.

The fantasy produced by the game begs the question: do these performances reveal a hidden desire to be something else, or are they just fantasy? While I may not have been fooled by the all too typical racialized binary, it did not stop me from participating in the illusion of warfare – and more specifically – the illusion that I might be able to win. My investment in propping my temporary, constructed identities was justified by my desire to participate in their communities. To be a part of a culture, sometimes you have to pretend. At the end of the performance, screens packed away, computers safely stowed, I was no longer a player in any sense of the word (not an actress, not a gamer), my performance in the fantasy safely relegated to the performance in which I find the most comfort, as an academic. Yet, even as I write this I wonder: is my comfort justified or merely a reflection

of the players with whom I have chosen for my team? Much like Clov's relationship with Hamm, our participation in performances – and (just as important) our conflicted memories about that participation – helps construct the fantasy we use to interrogate the limitations of both our desires and their fulfillment.

DEAD Clov: Nothing
qfertig: UR MUM IS 4 LOSERZ
DEAD Clov: Clov!@
DEAD Clov: I'm obliged to you, Clov
qfertig: I know
DEAD Clov: For your services.

V. Conclusion

Our project involved direct confrontation between literature and computer gaming. Not simply a computer game that was about literature or thematized literature, nor a literary text that included reference to computer games, but rather the playing of the game and the staging of the text in the same space. Can they co-exist? What does “performing *Endgame*” mean in the context of *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*? Perhaps this question, pointed out by my student and colleague Dibs Roy, goes to the heart of the intersection of literary and cultural studies with computer gaming. One way I understand this question is to rephrase it: “how much *Endgame* is enough?” If I claim a corpsed, materialized, absurd body, a body without being, is staged by Beckett, how much is needed to stage this? Does there need to be enough, a large enough fragment of the play, for the question to be clear, for it to be evident and displayed as a matter of the encounter of literary text and computer game?

Yet, does that not return it to simply yet another performance of *Endgame*? In the other direction, if the other players do not recognize Beckett, do not know what is being performed, is it still a performance of *Endgame*? Yes, of course it is for us, those who act it, but is the absurdity enough to stage the end, the end of the game of individuality and being? If I login and stand in the corner and do nothing, is this performing *Endgame*?

DEAD AbsurdHamster: Time for love?
GolazoCLC: Were you asleep
[Optic] L1ghtSw1tch: time for hate
AbsurdHamster: Oh no!
[Optic] L1ghtSw1tch: Bring the hammer!

GolazoCLC: Kiss me
AbsurdHamster: We can't
[Optic] L1ghtSw1tch: no
GolazoCLC: try

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