

THE ANTI-ROCK & ROLL

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16 Dec 2003



Recently, MTV approached me, wanting to see my documentary, *SERVICES*, to find out about *Counter-Strike*, and just why so many of their former viewers are giving up TV to play this game – and a whole slew of action games like it. It's getting hard to ignore a game that is basically captivating an entire generation of youth – ones who, 20 years ago, would be heavily into what was then “alternative” rock. However, in their internal musings over how to tap into the energy of action games like *Counter-Strike* they have run into a problem: *It's too damn violent!*

Yet, while a few years ago the media could easily relegate games like CS to a kind of fringe freak medium – one step above pornography (as the great game designer Chris Crawford says) – it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore something that has taken seed in the hearts and minds of millions of computer-savvy youth (mostly male). The “Reefer Madness” logic can only hold out for so long.

The whole thing seems so strangely appropriate coming from MTV – the heights of the rock-and-roll world. I'm reminded of the emergence of rock-and-roll in the 1950s and early 60s. Then there was a society built on highly structured institutions, with a thread of militarism – and implicit violence – running throughout. These institutions had to be structured, as violence is not something that can be played around with by a society that wants to grow in any meaningful way. (Look at the swamp-like state of societies entangled with today's prevalent unstructured violence – from gang warfare, to tribal “warlordism”, to terrorism. One of western society's great successes was developing an effective way to keep the military more or less under the control of the civilian government – so that it didn't revolt at the drop of a hat and take over.) There was an apparent reason for all this structure and militarism. Back then, young Americans – mostly men – had vivid memories of the largest war ever, recently finished; and America was in the midst of another war in Korea; Vietnam would soon follow, and the western world was entangled with the Soviet Union and its allies over the Cold War; plus everyone was just beginning to come to terms with the terrible implications of nuclear weapons (implications we only learned through wargaming, by the way). The high structure of those times – with a militarized, masculine, even “Apollonian” flavour – was very closely connected to the very real matter of war.

Yet, that hyper-structure led to rebellion. For one thing, there was an arising suspicion of this logic national leaders were using – the “game of nations” they were given a blank cheque to play seemed a route only to total disaster (think of the “Guns of August” – when in 1914 the strict timetables for troop deployments then activated ran amok, sparking the First World War). And the logic of logic, if you will, didn't seem able to deal with the near-demonic vortex of thinking that the rules of nuclear brinkmanship inevitably entailed. (If you know anything about strategic nuclear command-and-control, you'll know what I'm talking about.) The way to deal with war seemed to be a way *to* war. A collective response arose in the form of a massive “Chill out, dude!” A dismantling of strategic thought for survival's sake. A retreat from “thinking” and imagining – with all the weird tangents and disconnection from reality it was starting to entail – to sensing and “knowing”, and a kind of feminized thought – or “being” rather – which sought an appropriate compromise (so we didn't kill ourselves off).

Any viewing of 1964's *Dr. Strangelove* bears this conclusion out. Here you see artists – filmmakers, actors, writers – ridiculing the patriarchal, highly structured and militarized perspective now getting out of hand, symbolized there in the form of General “Jack D. Ripper” and his insane need to protect “our bodily fluids” by ordering his bombers off to destroy the Soviet Union.

So it was goodbye Calculation, hello Meditation. Enter the beatniks, poets, pot, LSD, and rock-and-roll... That's the rebellion I'm talking about – or at least it represented its most extreme pole. The Dionysian was in; the Apollonian was out.

Of course, it didn't come in easily. The first emergence of alien rock-and-roll inspired, naturally, a kind of *Reefer-Madness* reaction. Those who had bought into the “engine” of structured society, and playing by the rules then in place, were convinced *rock-and-roll will ruin us!* corrupt our youth!, undermine the pillars of society!... and so on. But, as we know, it was like holding a stop sign up to a tidal wave – the rest is history.

Of course, any student of history knows that new forces, however creative and fresh at their onset, eventually become decrepit and institutionalized.

This rebellion against formalized structure of the rock-and-roll generations was a move to a kind of “me-ism”, emphasizing safety and acceptance, inclusiveness and “celebration”, and having little tolerance for the “war-thinking” of debate and disagreement. It was an acceptance of teleological view of vast conclusions based on senses over the mechanistic thought-orientation of cause-and-effect. Of course there were double standards here, and we saw these in the ultimate conclusion of this movement: heavily feminized thought with a psychologically-devouring political correctness hitting its zenith around 1990 – seeming just as out of touch with reality as General Ripper and his ilk had been 30 years earlier. Of course, Camille Paglia paved the way for a dismantling of a lot of that gobbledygook, as did Bill Maher with his talk show *Politically Correct*.

But by then, a kind of Dionysian-influenced, sense-based, materialistic way of conducting our matters had taken deep root. While we may have discarded the more wacko conclusions of the politically correct thinkers, we by and large retained the basic me-ism it preached in our day-to-day lives and outlooks. Self-hating creative types are still viewed today as weirdo loners, instead of the cutting edge leaders they once were. (Though perhaps they always will be outcasts.) No great artist does not possess some measure of self-hatred or dissatisfaction with themselves or the way things are in the here and now – part of the core force that drives them to pioneer: creativity. The worst sin today in the profession of entertainment (I won’t dare use the term “art”) is to be “difficult” – though it begs to be answered what kind of substance a person who emphasizes acceptance over self-criticism can possibly produce.

(Some will argue here that there was a second ultimate manifestation of that first rock-and-roll schism from structure: shock-rock. This is the logic of rebellion just amplified into a hyper feedback loop, in an endless craving to be demonized. This is revolt taken to the point of absurdity and irrelevance – look at Marilyn Manson. Punk rock was fresh and fun in the 1970s and 80s – but I’m sorry, what it’s become today is mainly dull. It ain’t shock, it’s just strange.)

So how does all of this relate to MTV having troubles with *Counter-Strike*? Well, I’m trying to say that *Counter-Strike* is an anti-rock-and-roll. That it’s a rebellion against that original rebellion. That *Counter-Strike* – and the many games like it – is a sign of a mass dissatisfaction with the me-focussed rules we by-and-large run our society by. (I’m trying to stay away from stale left-vs-right hyperbole – such a distraction from truer values and questions. In many ways these matters cut across those old ideological dichotomies.)

What seems dominant today is a “me-generation” semi-Dionysian obsession with emoting over thinking – process over action; personality over character; being over idealism; self-acceptance over integrity; chilling-out over thinking strategically (because we all know only wackos and “strange loners” do that). When you launch your PC, it’s not called “*The Computer*”; it’s called “*My Computer*” (emphasis: me me me). Subject-relating appears nearly dead (focus on ideas, strategic thinking, creating, essential meanings); Object-relating (focus on feelings, relationships, relativistic perspectives) is stronger than ever!

On the dissatisfied fringes there is arising this world of violent computer games; a world in which “sides” and loyalties once again exist (albeit, in a make-believe world). A world where strategic thinking is no longer considered vulgar. Where the Apollonian is important. Where once more the ability to imagine – and thus act – has value, as it is needed in the accelerated and interactive time-space that the game offers (that art cannot).

That accelerated time-space is a reflection of the world invisible to an outlook based on “being” – though an outlook that accepts cause and effect can interface with it. A world of accelerated time-space is a world where structure of some sort – as with any sport – is needed as a way to win fairly. And where it’s okay to win – if you do it fairly. Where honour is once again important (where before we would let honour go, because honour sometimes means shame, and shame doesn’t gel with self-acceptance). The emergence of games like CS seems to say, Hold on a minute! Let’s check that baby (honour, integrity) before that bathwater (shame, criticism, rejection) gets thrown out! It seems to speak to a craving for structure once again. For a world that has clear rules, and the sanity that comes with them; where merit counts as much as charm; where everybody gets a chance (and everybody does, in the world of computer games), not because they can attract attention or know people, but because it’s the right thing to give a person a chance. (Northrop Frey reminds us that literature – and the world of the imagination, and also reason [the bedrock of justice] – is dependant on the ability of others to *hear you out first*; to suspend judgement until the end of your story. This is something seemingly long dead in a world kowtowing to the rules of elevator pitches and “grabbing them on the first page”. Thank God for the computer game in such a world! – a form that waits to see what you have. I have often wondered if the attention deficit disorder of today’s youth is, rather, a speed-of-thought deficit disorder of yesterday’s adults. My own experience with youth in the fast-paced strategic world of computer games is they can become quite coherent and focused. Maybe their parents are just slow.) A world where personality is dominant is a world where merit holds a secondary position. You hire people today first because you relate to them,

second because they're good – not the other way around, as in the military or a sports team where everybody is first given an equal shot; a try-out.

But, along with all of this – which computer games seem to give us – comes the “violence”. Why the violence? This question of course, arises out of the spirit of the original “Chill out, Dude!” of the 1950s and 60s. Why do these games seem to live and breathe on depictions of violence? The MTV folks – inheritors of the Dionysian institutions that emerged from that first rock-and-roll impulse – can't figure this one out, it seems.

Well, I think the conclusion can be drawn from the above. The violence of computers games is not like the violence of, say, movies. In a movie, the hero is rarely killed. In a computer wargame like CS, the hero – that is, you; the player – is killed, usually more than half the time. This doesn't speak to a hunger for violence as much as dissatisfaction with stasis – which must be the natural outcome of a culture of “me-ism”, acceptance and materialism. You want to lay yourself on the line in a computer violence game. You are tired of “Mommy” and her sometimes devouring spider-web of self-esteem and self-acceptance (to borrow a phrase from the psychologist Frances Wickes), the safety and celebration she sometimes hypnotizes you (and herself) with – sometimes well-intentioned, but sometimes misanthropic, and very often steeped in misandry – eternally trying to “empower” you (unless part of a group she doesn't like). It gets kind of icky after awhile, like you're in a giant crib. Rather you crave once more for “Daddy” and his high-standards, and the necessarily difficult-to-earn acceptance they entail (though hopefully, this time round, without the unnecessary cruelty and rigidity that once came with it). You are tired of people being “supportive” and part of an “us” (with the subtle, unspoken price that that always carries) – rather, you want to be separate from them once again; to prove something; to them; to yourself. You want to take a break from relating and being, and want once more to talk ideals, meaning and doing. You want to act. You want to earn something. You are tired of the ultimate muddy greyness of “you're okay, I'm okay” – you want the clean white and black of winning or losing. With winning comes triumph; with losing comes peace, grief, closure. It is clean, not icky. But with pure being often comes *blah*: suspense, anxiety, nothingness, inertia – anti-movement; anti-creativity.

Psychologists – who have always heavily emphasized being (though some are taking issue with this now) – might say this desire to escape being is a desire to annihilate the self. Freud, unable to explain the basically suicidal behaviour of soldiers on the frontline of World War One (whose behaviour did not gel at all with his original theories), called it the Death Drive. Self-hatred is a good enough term. But, as Eric Hoffer tells us in his study of mass movements (and computer games can definitely be seen as a mass movement) – which are largely driven by self-hating actors – the dynamic of self-hatred here is, on its flip-side, a dynamic seeking to recreate the world anew. It is, again, dissatisfaction with what IS, hunger for what IS NOT. (Paul Tillich, the German theologian and professor, drew the dichotomy in religious terms, dividing the line between the morale and the ontological – or, the emphasis on “what ought to be”, versus the emphasis on “be”.) This dissatisfaction – this hunger for *what is not* – encompasses fanaticism, addiction and obsession. There is a definite addictive/obsessive drive among computer violence gamers – possibly even self-destructiveness (in the sense that many are throwing their youth away playing games). But you need these drives to win at something. Artists – great artists – have always tapped into them to create; have always hovered around self-destructiveness, insanity, addiction, et cetera. Dissatisfaction with what is here and visible; hunger for what is beyond the horizon. Van Gogh went psychotic, Gauguin seems to have been schizophrenic, Mozart maddened his contemporaries and died poor, Poe was alcoholic, Sylvia Plath committed suicide. Degas said, “A painter paints a picture with the same feeling as that with which a criminal commits a crime.” The Ancient Greeks called creativity the “divine madness”. Picasso said, “Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction.”

Of course, not every run-of-the-mill computer gamer is a Picasso. But there is a definite connection between what they are doing and the hunger to create. Every computer game is a set of tools to create a story for oneself. It is NOT the older style of storytelling: a passive viewing of somebody else's story (however active a listener one may be). Computer games are storymaking engines. The player is a storymaker. He is creating in playing – however transient his creation may be. (To me, this is the key to unlocking the potential of games as a positive force in our society.)

So maybe there is an inherent misunderstanding based on the way we have framed the question – the way we look at violence in games or art (to bring this wide looping argument back). There must be some relationship between creativity and violence – a relationship like a moth's dancing with the flame: fraught with peril lest one go too far. Every visionary creative person has danced this dance to create the new. So too does any ordinary person intensely unsatisfied with a stifling life situation – to create a new life for themselves (think of the pioneers who risked all, and sometimes paid that price, to settle new lands). Sometimes, in this intense dynamic, participants lose their bearings, and their urge to dismantle the present status quo just becomes destructive. But sometimes – as with the Punk Rock movement in the late 1970s – this dismantling is refreshing, and leads instantly to new worlds, new outlets, new lands to settle. We need the disturbing aspects of human nature – we need self-hatred and the

fanaticism, the obsession, the fascination with the darker aspects of life, and all that – because with it comes “other-esteem”. The matter is now reframed. Perhaps then self-esteem also equates, to some extent, to “other-hatred” – or at least “other-indifference” (which is almost worse). This would explain why things stagnate when people satisfied with the status quo get into power (which is, eternally, *always*: they *always stagnate!*): they are too busy being rich and successful and happy to want anything to change. (And sometimes, frankly, they don’t understand how things got to be so good for them to begin with – the way the world works is still mysterious, even to [especially to?] the successful; so the thought of change terrifies them.)

(This might also explain why mainstream entertainment people today might disdain working with those labeled as “difficult” – even though the most visionary creative people have always been difficult. No wonder what the status quo produces is so bland – what do we expect? It’s so much easier to make it. The self-criticism and other-focus that vision entails (real vision – not today’s watered-down interpretation of the word: planning) is necessarily a focus away from the interpersonal emphasis and the self. That’s why it’s called vision. It is other-focused. A real vision is, classically, a dreamlike thing, seen out in the night or the desert – usually life-changing, and a little scary. If it ain’t, it ain’t visionary. So visionaries through time have tended to be difficult, because visions are too bloody intense for your average person. But we seem to forget – as Carl Jung reminds us – that we need them. All I would say is: if as person in the entertainment industry doesn’t want to work with visionary people because they’re sometimes difficult, then *he ain’t doing his job, dude!*)

But this began with the premise that the teamwork and whatnot intrinsic to violence-oriented multiplayer digital games speak to a yearning for an older form of structure. Here it needs to be said that violent computer games are not a full-circle return to old-school militarism or patriarchal structure.

For one, they aren’t really violent. They are, basically, safe. They *look* violent – and to people whose only experience of real violence is what they see on TV and movies, that means they *are* violent. But that is an erroneous outlook; a weak-mindedness of those who trust their senses more than their imagination. *Counter-Strike* and computer wargames are mock-violent. Nobody gets hurt playing a computer wargame (though pride and ego might). And any symbolic violence a player dishes out is always moderated by the fact one is a victim as often as a perpetrator. (The exception to this is certain single-player games such as *Postal 2*, which are essentially murder-simulators – and legitimately disturbing. I don’t trust those games; and they remain, thankfully, on the fringe of digital violence gaming. That, to me, is the moth getting caught in the flame...)

For another – and this is a truth of violence in other forms of visual art as well (such as movies) – there is symbolism in the violence of these games; a metaphoric quality. We use violence in ordinary language all the time, to convey the seriousness of a situation with the limited means of words. We say “somebody is going to war” with someone, when we really mean they are having a verbal dispute with them, or a lawsuit, or whatever. We say somebody is “kicking ass”, when they are just criticizing or pointing out some lack of integrity in ordinary life, such as at work or in school. The use of pseudo-violent language reinforces the intensity of the emotions involved; the gravity of the situation. Violence on the motion picture screen often has the same metaphoric quality. Why can we identify with *The Godfather*? Few of us have contact with real gangsters. Why? Because our feelings when that family member gets betrayed and killed in the movie may be reminiscent of the intensity of our feelings over a falling out with someone close, or a destructive argument; perhaps a betrayal at their hand or of them which is serious if not violent. The violence is perhaps a painting of those feelings in the dramatic form to relay the intensity of conflict within the limitations of the art form. We are safe watching a movie. We are safe playing a game. How do you – an artist or game designer – get past the basic safety to convey to the audience or user the sense of danger, the levels of violence and intensity involved? By amplifying the events, the story, the dialogue, the images. Classic mythmaking uses this technique too. When Prometheus gets his liver eaten every day by a vulture (it growing back every night), we understand this gory image symbolizes the intense inner struggle of the creative person – we don’t damn it because it is, superficially, a violent image. It means something. Depictions of violence can have coherent meaning behind them. In reality, true violence and true danger cannot be fully communicated by any screen depiction. Not really. When you are close to true violence – including the potential for true violence – it is hyper-electric; like a cold shock of water. It’s fucking scary, on a level that you cannot understand unless you’ve brushed up against it. When you fear for your life, there is no room for high meaning. I’m arguing that the hunger for the mock-violence of the game is a hunger for a symbolic language of conflict; that there is a subtext to the depiction of violence that points out a truer, deeper meaning that is not equitable with the cold reality of actual violence. The violence of *Counter-Strike* probably is closer in spirit to the rough-handling in a hockey game than the violence of any real counter-terrorist gunfight (which is what it supposedly is about).

Also, *Counter-Strike* and computer violence games cut across the Dionysian-Apollonian dichotomy drawn above – which may help explain their popularity. They can integrate these two realms. Indeed, *Counter-Strike* rocks! (The MTV folks aren't totally off in looking so intently at it.) These games possess the safety necessary for a player to feel he can participate as an alter-ego in a make-believe adventure world – instead of bowing to some measure needed to be safe on others' terms (which includes avoidance of the “weirdness” of adopting alternate personas). It has always been a role of art and sports – and it is especially for games – to provide a safe outlet for the stuff of heroic dream and myth. We as a society have cut across these formerly divided realms, too. The highly structured, semi-militaristic, classically conservative model of functioning tends to be anti-creative and heavy-handed – suspicious of new and agile ideas, imaginative approaches to problems; often ultimately anti-strategic, anti-effective. Effective warriors today (I'm talking about real soldiers) have left behind many old rigid dogmas as semi-suicidal. We obeyed those wacko rules at places like the Somme, where they left millions dead and their stupidity revealed utterly. (This is a whole other story, by the way.) Now we have these wargames, which invite an artistic appraisal of strategy – because they enable us to simulate conflict in real time far beyond anything before. They are four-dimensional canvasses. Where yesterday's soldiers, military-thinkers and politicians could reside with misplaced confidence in theories and doctrines completely disconnected from reality (as happened so many times in the past) – because of their stupid mistrust of the imaginative, the creative and the new; the spooky (to them) *what-if* questioning needed to simulate something – this bad thinking is instantly revealed in the mock war of a game such as *Counter-Strike*. It is also revealed when the shit hits the fan in a for-real war. (For this reason today's civilians should probably play wargames more often – because most seem to have little connection to reality when it comes to understanding the cause and effect dynamics of war and conflict; even while they sit on the sidelines, arrogantly deciding *they know it all!*) The master samurai Musashi was an artist as much as a warrior; and truly great warriors all possess that streak. Similarly there is an artistic side to *Counter-Strike* and its cousins that attracts participants who are not necessarily warlike folks – and really there is a kind of toy soldier fun to games that is very me-friendly (even if it possesses a dark humour alien to those focused on desire, acceptance and self-centredness – erm... self-esteem). Wargames are genuinely fun, folks!

But it isn't enough to say that computer violence games are a hunger for a creative outlet. For one, they lead to nothing tangible – at least nothing within the way we currently frame “something” is. They seem to just scare the non-self-hating among us; those satisfied with their lives without needing this fantasy. What do we make of the violence in games? How do we integrate it into a constructive dynamic?

Well, this is the question for the MTV folks to ponder. I have sort of answered it by speaking of the mock-violence as a martial art. I think that that is a constructive way to view it – and it is not entirely disconnected from reality. (I remember playing for money once in a LAN-joint and one of the attendants, with the quiet demeanor of a trainer, pointing at my body and saying here was the place to aim for the kill – a moment utterly reminiscent from true martial arts training I had had.) I also speak of it possessing a kind of artistic palette; a symbolic language with a theatrical flair we can understand from classic myth, or old-fashioned fairy tales (which have been made far safer – wimpier – in today's politically-correct world than their original authors intended). If you wait, a really great Moment may appear – one that deserves mythologizing along the lines of sports legend. Plus there's a dark humour to the violence of games that maybe pokes fun at the inevitability of death – and somehow draws on a meaning of life only death gives us; and during hard times as well. (The trenches of World War One were permeated with this kind of humour; and it seemed the more brutal the circumstances, the louder the troops laughed.) There's also a need to relate to others through a language of action and doing, rather than of stasis and being (and “me-ness”) – a language of forgetting self, rather than of knowing self; of relating indirectly through the act (a masculine manner of relating), rather than directly (the feminine way). The urge to action has been made vulgar and crude – because of the mistakes made in the past. Maybe today it shouldn't be seen so; or maybe this provides it a forbidden fruit quality. There's a relationship between action and creativity. The poet Archibald Macleish said: “The poet's labor [is] not to wait until the cry gathers of itself in his own throat.” Think behind that when you see those wacko loner high school kids – who played violent computer games – going on their shooting rampages. Is that a cry gathered in the throat? Why is it spoken through real violence? I don't know. Because the speaker is trapped, perhaps? In a world where the “difficulty” and general weirdness of the introverted possibly poetic is shut into the darkness – disowned in favour of the straightforward and safe extroverted prosaic? (When something is disowned – like the internal-poetic-symbolic [as I am arguing here] – the wise men tell us that it runs amok. Have you noticed that storytellers now speak of their output more in business terms more than art terms? The words “franchise” and “brand” pops up now more than “adventure”, “dream” or “myth”? Where is the outlet for the inner vision that exists simply for its own expression?) Maybe because the need to make the world safe and “non-violent” is also a need to make the world suffocating and devoid of real, dynamic creativity; a need to stop mistakes from happening so much so that negligence is promoted;

that action of all types – good or ill – is stifled by those with, for example, committee mentality. Until some of us, craving the self-expression of action, literally crack from the strain of having to stand still. (That crushing pressure may also come from an unwillingness or inability to engage in the passive-aggressive political games the clever use to ventilate while maintaining the illusion of “peace”.) Sensory deprivation – which also necessitates the deprivation of open expression – drives people mad. God may have put a lot of us here to chill out, dudes – but not all of us. Maybe the hunger for violence-oriented computer games today is just a tip of a psycho-social iceberg, highlighting an un-lived inner life – that can only exist in a world of opportunity and danger – longed for desperately, but unattainable; like the wild lands of uncharted territory. Think of the end of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* – where the knightly heroes are indignantly arrested by very modern police for causing a disturbance in their attempt to reclaim the Grail; and the actual film – symbolic of our technologized, industrialized lives – visibly runs out of the projector, acknowledging the machine-like nature of the very story we are watching (and our circumstances: where we now need a camera to see the heroic – it’s so rare today). This is an ugly image of the efficient modern world’s soul-crushing claim over the human hero impulse – over the person who acts. Because to this world – comfortable, docile, cow-like, afraid of sudden movement and pervaded with misandry – the hero’s masculine, poetic, even quixotic sense of *action* is deemed much too dangerous to be left unshackled. It must be imprisoned – even in the pretend world of a game. That image, to me, is far more chilling than a hundred-thousand hours of “violence” in the make-believe world of *Counter-Strike*. That we may live in a world of technologized, efficient, safe grayness – intolerant of heroes anymore. What does that say?

So it is fun to now see MTV and the rock-and-roll world look, mystifyingly, at a generation of young folks now a little tired of their product and their outlook; tired of being constantly told they’re okay, we’re okay, everyone’s okay ...and Chill out, Dude! Perhaps those young folks hunger once more for the self-criticism of sport, of winning-and-losing, of achieving or not achieving based on merit and teamwork. To dream of themselves once more, with wide-eyed fascination, as the heroes and participants; no longer merely audience-members in the group love-in of the rock concert. It amuses me to hear now that some folks in the rock-and-roll world are demonizing these games – and the scary (because new) outlook they present – with the same kind of fearful fretting that their parents and grandparents once used to dismiss rock-and-roll.