

# How To Save Counter-Strike

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That *Counter-Strike* is a phenomenon in the digital gaming realm is an understatement. Built and released as a “mod” by some fan gamers in 2000, free to download for anyone who owned *Half-Life* (the computer game, by Valve, that it is a modification of), it has gone on to dominate the online action gaming scene around the world. “CS” is responsible for millions of Internet-minutes logged each month, is played in LAN centres worldwide, and is even now played professionally.

However, there are indications today that *Counter-Strike* has reached a standstill. Gamers seem to be moving on to other titles. It may be that *Counter-Strike*, once the undisputed king of online action games, has reached its zenith and is now on its way out.

What was it that made it so popular? Is it dying out now, and if so, why? And what, if anything, can be done to re-energize this amazingly dynamic and fun computer game?

Why did CS become such a phenomenon? It is hard to say. My own thinking centres on four things...

The first reason: CS is a game about the point of conflict today. Here and now. It is a game that pits terrorists versus counter-terrorists. This is *the* conflict of our time – it is what is on everybody’s mind. The immediacy and timeliness of this subject demands attention especially from young people – particularly young men, who are always focussed on the frontline of the moment; the new frontiers of the here-and-now, which they imagine they may have some hand in pushing forward.

However, other games have tackled the counter-terrorism subject – in particular Tom Clancy’s *Rainbow Six* series (including its follow-up titles: *Rogue Spear*, *Ghost Recon*, and now *Rainbow Six-Three*). So why *Counter-Strike*?

This perhaps leads to the second reason: *Counter-Strike* retains a sense of fun. It is not quite as deadly serious – and thus as unsightly – as the *Rainbow Six* series. In “RS”, the focus is on meticulous planning, and a highly realistic representation of combat. For one, the weapons are slightly more deadly than *Counter-Strike*’s already deadly weapons (another thing that drives the need for military-like efficiency in planning in RS). *Counter-Strike*, on the other hand, takes a slightly relaxed attitude to realism – which stems from its origin as a game developed by amateurs (I use the term “amateur” in its positive sense here: an amateur is somebody who pursues things primarily for the love of them, rather than money).

The *Half-Life* technology was another enhancement to the fun – a more stable engine than its chief competitor (and inspirer) *Rainbow Six* – the *Half-Life* engine made CS more fluid and fun to play. (The *Rainbow Six* developers have since given up on their original technology, and now merely licence the *Unreal* engine for new versions of their franchise.)

CS also has a money system in it – where winning teams earn more to buy powerful weapons for the next round of play, losing teams earn less. This money element makes absolutely no sense as a strict counter-terrorism simulation – but it adds an element of “poetry”, if you will, to the game, symbolizing and depicting the sense of the ebb-and-flow of fortune that a force, or a team, can experience. That is, it creates an additional game on top of the game – where the nominal game is shooting the enemy, but the “overgame” is a symbolic one: one where the team that loses some rounds (engagements) must “dig down” to get out of a losing streak; and the winning team must maintain its vigilance, and not descend into the complacency that traditionally gives the underdog a foothold. The money element makes CS more like a statement on the cycle of winning-and-losing in any competitive field – more like a sport than a combat simulation.

If CS had been developed by professional game designers, it probably would have wound up more like *Rainbow Six* – a hardcore, and thus somewhat ugly, counter-terrorism simulator. Instead CS is a game that evolved out of fun and group consensus more than it was designed out of the group mind of a small team of focussed professionals. As a result, there is an undercurrent of lightness all through it – and, for all its realism (which is considerable) it remains almost more of a “cops-and-robbers” kids’ shoot-‘em-up than a prosaic, strictly accurate (and thus somewhat grey) representation of counter-insurgency combat.

The many *Counter-Strike* maps which have been made by fans bear testament to this: in particular those maps which make the player the size of a toy soldier – running around the floor of a rec-room, dodging toy cars and strategically-placed mousetraps – or which put him inside the world of *Star Wars*, or even into the *Pac Man* maze. These seem to remind us that this game is as much about popular culture’s toys, boardgames and videogames as it is about terrorism versus counter-terrorism.

The third reason: *Counter-Strike* is a game with international appeal. This probably stems from the multicultural background of the chief amateur designers: Gooseman and Cliffe (Minh Le and Jess Cliffe, respectively). Jess Cliffe is American. Minh Le came from Vietnam to Canada, where he now lives in Vancouver. In *Counter-Strike*, there are eight countries – and eight cultures – represented in the available avatars. On the counter-terrorist side there is a British, American, French and German character; on the terrorist side, a Latin-American (or Spanish), Swedish, Russian and Arab character. The counter-terrorists are from real counter-terrorism units (e.g. the Brit is from the SAS), but the terrorists are from fictional terrorist organizations (which further allows for a modicum of humour – in particular the Swedish terrorist[?]). This range of choice must explain some of the international appeal of this game – the fact players from different nations have a wider choice of what culture or nationality their “alter-ego” can adopt in the game. (I have read an account of a gamer from the west encountering *Counter-Strike* at a LAN centre in Kuwait, where he said that everybody joined the terrorist side as fast as possible upon start-up, choosing the Arab skin; those unable to become terrorist resigned to being counter-terrorist [you still need cops to play cops-and-robbers].) If the game had originated out of the mind of some Los Angeles-based professional developer, no doubt it would be about US Army Rangers or Delta Force or something like this. (Not that I have a problem with them, its just that the rest of the world needs heroes too.)

The fourth and final reason I feel CS is popular?: *Counter-Strike* is a simple game. It is simple in the sense of what its objectives are to win. It is not like some games today which, in clamouring to please their audiences, give gamers a plethora of different ways to play: capture-the-flag, assault, deathmatch, team-deathmatch, respawning can be turned on or off (if on, it can be set for longer or shorter delay), various modules can be turned on to do things such as vary gravity, vary the appearance of players based on game events, and on and on and on. No. *Counter-Strike* is played in essentially one classic way: attack-defend. One side is attacking, the other defending. (If the counter-terrorists must attack, as stipulated by the map in play, they are trying to rescue the hostages; if the terrorists must attack, they are trying to plant a bomb. The opposing team is trying to stop them.) When a player “dies” he is out until the next round. Yes, it is possible to alter the game on individual servers (i.e. set gravity to low, for instance) – and there are some strict team-deathmatch maps made by fans (e.g. the “Speedball” maps) – but by and large, players stick to the main game type mentioned above. *Counter-Strike* knows itself.

Because *Counter-Strike* is clear and relatively simple in what it is, the focus then becomes not on the technology of the game (which today is obsolete), or on modifying the play in a multitude of ways so players can “do what they want” (which, by its nature, blurs the game’s identity). Rather, they now focus on the play of the game. As I have said elsewhere, the game becomes a “canvas” on which players may “paint” their moves – on which they can advance their play, safe in the knowledge of the consistency of the “field” under their feet. Where would hockey be if every second year somebody came out with a modification to the layout of the rink?, or if on this particular evening of play, the referees impulsively decided there would be two goals per side instead of one. Where would football be if, at the whim of the NFL commissioners, obstacles were added – or removed – from the field; or if the field itself were made out of sand this year, or long grass and shrubs the next? No. A Wayne Gretzky, Michael Jordan, Babe Ruth, Joe Montana does not become a star if the game shifts under his feet. He does so by taking a game farther than anyone has ever taken it! However, the game must remain a constant in the equation. If the game shifts, his achievement is lost, for it cannot be measured. The same is true with *Counter-Strike*. The static nature and consistency of the game allows its players to focus on developing their play – their techniques, teamwork, strategy. The limited scope of *Counter-Strike*’s objectives – again, a result of its amateur designers’ lack of trying to please everybody under the sun – has proven to be in its favour.

So, in essence, *Counter-Strike* is probably the phenomenon it is because it possesses the classic elements of great games – in keeping with all the great games of human civilization.

An examination of the above qualities reveals this. Even the first quality I state – the fact that CS is a game about the point of conflict today – is in line with the meaning of many great games of history. Think of not only chess (of course), but baseball and football. These are all wargames (originally) that

were about the conflicts of their time. Baseball is a metaphoric game about counter-insurgency patrolling in a pre-industrial age – about getting to the next base (fortress) before the scattered insurgents can come together to tag you (ambush you). That it was invented around 1800 seems only to reinforce this point. (There is an ambush scene in the film version of *The Last of the Mohicans* that might illustrate what it meant for a commander – and his army – to be “tagged” between bases.) Football is about classic pre-industrial battle: where the objective (symbolized by the ball) was always to drive the enemy from the field – physically and psychologically – where, scattered, your cavalry can then pursue his fleeing mass and “mop him up”. In the case of either of these games, they lost their trappings as symbolic wargames and became more about their own internal reality – more about themselves. Thus baseball became the baseball we all know and love.

Mankind has always managed to make games out of its struggles and chores. Warfare, in particular, has always been grist for that mill – has especially been, when you consider the need for games to train “players” how to win, given the deadly consequences of losing. Why, in a digital age, would we not follow suit? – using the digital tools we have to create great games in this classic sense (with a spirit of fun, however dark their subject matter), about the conflicts of our time?

This must at least partly explain why CS is *the* game when it comes to the new world of professional digital-gaming competition – which all the great gamers strive to master and dominate.

*Counter-Strike* has become, almost purely by accident (like all the great games did as well), a true sport.

...Or at least it could be a true sport.

The thing is *Counter-Strike* is not being treated like a sport – at least not on any level becoming of the popularity it has gained, or the potential the game has. It continues to be treated like just another computer game, albeit it is a popular one, and you can compete professionally at it. Because of this, like all other computer games, sooner or later it is going to fade into obscurity, as new titles capture the interest of the gaming public. In fact, there are signs already that it is beginning to fade.

Why is this happening?

The main reason is probably due to the accidental nature of *Counter-Strike*'s popularity. It is a phenomenon. As a phenomenon, those in control of it – who made it – are not entire certain of what to do with it. Furthermore, those who made it are not necessarily the best suited to guiding it to its highest potential.

*Counter-Strike* was basically made by Valve, and Valve controls and owns it. Valve is the developer of *Half-Life*, a truly pioneering first-person shooter released in 1998. True, a small team of amateurs came up with the original version of CS, but the fact is that the game evolved through a long “beta” period, which lasted more than a year before it finally went retail. During this beta phase, its popularity was established, and it was built to a state-of-the-art computer game by a professional team lead by Valve. Gooseman and Cliffe were bought out in the process (Cliffe currently works for Valve). Valve controls *Counter-Strike*.

The problem with this situation is that Valve is a software developer. There is nothing wrong with being a software developer per se; it is just that it is what Valve is *not* that is what *Counter-Strike* needs now. As a software developer, Valve has no experience with how to direct or understand mass communications, or how to focus the cultural impact of this game. Quite frankly, Valve is not in the position to understand what to do with the phenomenal success of *Counter-Strike*.

This was also true with Marconi. The inventor of radio never understood how to best apply his invention – which he saw as a technology to disseminate dry information (for instance, for military and governmental purposes, such as for ship communications). It wasn't until the advent of entertainment radio – something Marconi certainly could not understand, and even sneered at – that radio technology exploded into the mainstream.

Valve is fated to not understand what to do with *Counter-Strike*, because being what it is, its thinking will always lie within the box of software development. There is nothing wrong with this, per se – it is just that Valve has come to the end of its capabilities. All organizations have limits.

One of the things Valve attempted to do to harness the popularity of CS was to code into the game a spectator mode – so that users could log onto the game (using their own version of *Counter-Strike* installed on their machine) through the Internet and watch a game underway. Needless to say, this is an

incredibly limited way to broadcast what could otherwise be a professional tournament to a mass audience, and it hasn't really been much of a "killer app".

Valve's thinking is also stuck within the software development paradigm when it comes to earning incoming from its product. That is, it knows and fully understands only one means: selling software through an end-user license (often packaged in the form of a box with a CD-ROM inside). The problem is *Counter-Strike* has just about come to the end of its "product cycle", so to speak, in this regard. What kind of growth can Valve get out of a game that is installed on perhaps 90% of all gamers' computers? How many more units can you sell? Obviously not a lot more. When you consider also that Valve may realize many gamers do not want to move on to other games, *including maybe their own!*, well, the question begs itself: *How do they make money from this immensely popular game?* They've already sold it to them; now they are essentially supplementing gamers' incomes through WON (the World Opponents Network, which administers Internet play of *Counter-Strike*) by organizing online play at no expense to the players.

You'll also notice that a *Counter-Strike* movie hasn't come out yet – another potential quick source of income. Well, why would it? From a filmmaker's perspective the game is essentially generic. It possesses no true characters to speak of; the sets are all prosaic real-world settings (dusty villages in Third World backwaters, abandoned industrial sites, military complexes); it has no intrinsic story or plot. *Counter-Strike*, when viewed through the standard prism of Hollywood thinking, doesn't have much to "own" and franchise (at least not without a really creative take on it).

Recently, again working within the box of software development, Valve has been pushing LAN centres around the world to purchase "commercial licenses" of *Counter-Strike* (much more expensive than the ordinary retail one any gamer gets when he buys a copy of CS). The argument is that since CS is installed in virtually all LAN computers that support gaming (which is a *lot*), and since these LAN centres are thus making money off the game, they should pay extra for it. Well, that's fine – but what is happening instead is Valve is starting to alienate these LAN centres, many of which are small, struggling operations. By doing this, Valve may actually be driving the game out of the locale where the tremendous word-of-mouth for the original CS was largely built. Many of these LAN places have responded by simply uninstalling the game – their gamers moving on to other popular titles such as *Battlefield 1942* or *Call of Duty*.

Valve is perilously close to alienating its audience, and thus killing the goose that laid the golden egg, so to speak. It is a cliché in the business world that too much growth too fast can kill a company – or a venture – no matter how good the underlying premise or product. Yes, four years (the age of CS) is a long time in computer gaming terms – but in real-world business terms, four years is nothing. And with the slowing down of growth in computer technology (Intel is no longer going to focus on megahertz speed when marketing new chips) and digital game production (now starting to get saturated), the digital gaming world may be wise to start thinking in longer terms about its product. Valve is a relatively young company. However much experience and talent it has in coding software this doesn't give it knowledge of how to cope with the success of something like *Counter-Strike*, with all the intangibles and complexities intrinsic to that equation. If anything, it makes it less qualified.

Valve is in danger of killing *Counter-Strike*.

How can Valve pull back from this precipice?

The first thing it needs to do is stop thinking about the game within the box of software development. However, since it is a software developer what does this mean? It means that Valve has to realize one thing: it cannot take *Counter-Strike* to the next step alone. CS is too big for it to guide solely. CS is too big for any one organization to guide.

If Valve wants to see *Counter-Strike* go to this next level – which is to expand into a mainstream sport (or something like it) – it is going to have to surrender some control over the direction of the game. What CS needs is some guidance and fostering from a force that understands better the dimensions of gaming more in line with culture and mythology, less about technology. It needs direction from a force which can better organize the game on the human, sporting and cultural levels – and not only unite the gaming public behind it, but also open it up to the larger public as well.

One of the things Valve can do – and this is something of a plug – is to give permission to me to release *SERVICES: The Counter-Strike Documentary*, which I made in 2001 and recut in 2003. (Yes, this is a plug, but not a shameless one: I made that documentary purely in a spark of inspiration [I believe] for

the love of the game, with no thought of how I would sell it – which, in hindsight, is partly why it's taken so long to get out there.) *SERVICES* attempts to convey to a mainstream audience – to people who know nothing about CS, or action gaming for that matter – the underlying essence of this great game, and to advance our dialogue about it. This documentary has been under the nose of Valve, through its agent, for about three years now, but has basically gone unnoticed by it due to mix-ups with its agent, and the fact that Valve is busy with other things (some of which are described above). *SERVICES* can act as a linchpin to break *Counter-Strike* (and digital gaming in general) into the open, revealing new ways to see it and new markets for it – though these ways and markets may be so new they are unrecognizable by today's game developers, journalists and players.

Above all, Valve has to stop looking at *Counter-Strike* as merely a game – a product to sell licenses of – and start recognizing it for what it is: a social and cultural movement. We all know that when football was invented it was not the selling of football equipment that formed the bulk of its income potential, or led to its explosion as one of the most popular sports on the planet. No, that game is intertwined with a whole host of cultural mythologies that burrow deep into the collective ethos of its players and audience. Likewise the selling of software – however much improved – is not going to be what takes *Counter-Strike* out of the LAN centres and the small-time tournaments where it is now toward something much larger.

*Counter-Strike* is a phenomenon for this day and age, and it needs to be treated as such. It needs to be let out of its cage. Otherwise, it will merely fade into obscurity.