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A Late Night with Left4Dead Scrutinizing Online Social Play as a Socio-Technical Assemblage

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ABSTRACT

Videogames are a medium of ever-growing importance in our digitalized societies. Some statistical surveys indicate that as much as 97% of US youths, both male and female, engage in digital play, and 72% of US households overall. The multiple and heterogeneous practices of gaming are meaningful in a number of ways – they serve as agents of socialization, as arenas for interactions, as stratification devices that facilitate hierarchical relationships, and much more. Therefore, it is imperative to understand the societal impact of both videogames and the practices surrounding them. The following thesis aims to contribute to such an endeavor by applying concepts from the field of STS (Science & Technology Studies) to one instance of online social play. Through the investigation of both its material and social frameworks, and their joint significance in the co-construction of meanings and practices, I try to facilitate a more comprehensive appreciation of online encounters of digital play as complex, heterogeneous networks.

Through the lens of analytically symmetrical network-approaches from ANT and feminist STS, I undertook a qualitative study of the gaming practices of a specific community playing the online first person shooter Left4Dead over the course of a year. Using Artifact Analysis and Grounded Theory, I found that the materiality provided by the technologies involved facilitates specific power structures and forms of identification. It also fundamentally shaped the specific gaming experience performed by the participants. The processes of assigning status and authority to individuals are tightly interwoven with the logic provided by the game, while certain technological properties are utilized deliberately to enact the primacy of some players over others. To be able to take part in the game, within this community, thus means to accept steep hierarchies, and participation demands a willful submission to such structures.

While this is in no way enforced by the technologies at hand, it is contingently enabled and facilitated by them, and put into practice by the involved individuals. Thus, I argue that it is necessary to include both the material and the social aspects of practices to make possible a profound understanding of the subject matter of online social play.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Videospiele sind ein Medium von zunehmender Bedeutung in heutigen digitalisierten Gesellschaften. Einige statistische Erhebungen deuten darauf hin, dass mitunter 97% aller US-amerikanischen Jugendlichen Videospiele spielen, und 72% aller US-Haushalte. Die unterschiedlichen und heterogenen Praxen des digitalen Spielens sind ob einer Vielzahl an Gründen von Bedeutung: Sie fungieren als Träger der Sozialisation für jüngere wie ältere Generationen, bieten Räume für soziale Interaktionen, haben eine stratifizierende Wirkung die hierarchische Beziehungen fördert, schließen immer auch an nicht-virtuelle Kontexte an, und vieles mehr. Daher ist es von zentraler Bedeutung die Wirkungsweise und die weitläufigen gesellschaftlichen Effekte dieses verhältnismäßig jungen (und sich kontinuierlich verändernden) Mediums zu verstehen. Die folgende Masterarbeit versucht, sich einem solchen Unterfangen anzuschließen, indem sie Konzepte aus dem sozialwissenschaftlichen Feld der Science & Technology Studies (STS) auf einen bestimmte Fall des virtuellen Spielens in einem spezifischen Online-Kontext anwendet. Durch die Analyse sowohl der materiellen als auch der sozialen Aspekte des regelmäßigen Spiels einer semi-institutionalisierten online Community, und deren gemeinsamer Bedeutung in der Co-Konstruktion von Sinn, Praxis, und Materialität, versuche ich ein tiefer gehendes Verständnis von spielerischen online Begegnungen als komplexe, heterogene Netzwerke zu fördern.

Mit Hilfe der Perspektiven der analytisch symmetrischen Netzwerk-Ansätze von ANT (Actor-Network-Theory) und feministischer STS führte ich eine qualitative Studie der Spiele-Praxen einer bestimmten online Community durch, die den online Ego-Shooter Left4Dead über ein Jahr hinweg regelmäßig gemeinsam spielte. Durch die Methoden der Artefaktanalyse und der Grounded Theory fand ich heraus, dass die Materialität der eingesetzten Technologien sowohl bestimmte Machtstrukturen, als auch spezifische Formen der Identifikation ermöglichen, sowie die konkrete Spiele-Erfahrung, wie sie von den Spielenden performiert wird, grundlegend beeinflussen. Die Mechanismen, mit denen Individuen Status und Autorität zuerkannt werden, sind eng mit der Spielelogik verbunden, während bestimmte Eigenschaften der involvierten Technologien willentlich stratifizierend eingesetzt werden. Um am Spiel teilnehmen zu können, und um Teil der Community sein zu dürfen, müssen sich die Spielenden den so entstehenden Hierarchien unterwerfen.

Während all dies in keiner Weise zwingender Bestandteil dieser technologisierten sozialen Beziehungen ist, so wird es doch durch diese bedingt ermöglicht, und von den Teilnehmenden praktisch umgesetzt. Daher schließe ich, dass es notwendig ist sowohl materielle als auch soziale Aspekte von Praxen zu begutachten, um ein umfassendes Verständnis von sozialem Online-Spiel zu ermöglichen.

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1 INTRODUCTION

“Following the failure of a wide range of attempts to solve the crystal structure of M-PMV retroviral protease by molecular replacement, we challenged players of the protein folding game Foldit to produce accurate models of the protein. Remarkably, Foldit players were able to generate models of sufficient quality for successful molecular replacement and subsequent structure determination. The refined structure provides new insights for the design of antiretroviral drugs.”

[Khabit et al. 2011: 1175]

I was largely socialized in a do-it-yourself/fix-it-yourself stance to technologies of all kinds, and computers made no exception. My brothers and I were (without any apparent gender-related biases) allowed to tinker with (almost) everything my stepfather brought home. After he show-and-told us how to handle the stuff, we could also count on a subsequent decrease in supervision, so I felt both trusted and responsible when using ‘grown-up toys’. Computers specifically were some kind of intriguing puzzle to me, both with regards to software (e.g. early on, when we still had to work with DOS, we had to learn by heart a variety of codes to maneuver through a gaunt virtual environment) and hardware (e.g. when looking into the tower and changing parts, or building a PC entirely from scratch). Looking back, two aspects of my relationship to these technologies intrigue me: First of all, although I was always granted the same rights as my brothers in handling them, I also knew this kind of access was exceptional for a girl; it was something I treasured and was proud of, something unusual. Later on, I was one of the few girls in IT-class, and I went to considerable efforts to understand the structure of the apparatus, the architecture of its operating system, to know both where bugs come from and how to get rid of them, or at least how to find these things out. Secondly, toying around with the computer was seldom a self-sufficient practice, but was part of getting where I wanted to be. Most of the times, that was playing a videogame. Digital games were one of the reasons I kept coming back to computers, a long time before they also became part of a work-routine and a medium for extensive ‘infotainment’-practices. These games aided me in understanding the workings of other software, while encouraging me to learn to read (early games were seldom voiced and thus often depended on text). In addition to that, my parents bought games that incorporated subject matters from school, such as Math and History, some of which I played with delight. (Likewise, my youngest brother was impelled to learn English, as it is the main language of many online contexts, and especially of online multiplayer games).

With the advent of the Internet and particularly ‘Web 2.0’, but also through our school’s exceptional IT-infrastructure, I started hanging out in online communities, and with growing bandwidths I also got into more sophisticated forms of (online) videogaming. As a result, I learned about both material and social contingencies of online social play, such as the Internet’s server-system and the user-modification of games (i.e. the possibility to influence and modify the software one is using without ‘breaking’ it). Thus, playing videogames was both a highly enabling as well as a highly educational practice during my adolescence, keeping me interested and engaged in technologies that are by now fundamental to most current societies. Attending school or university, as well as a great many vocations depend on basic skills in the handling of ICTs (information & communication technologies) – writing and handing in papers, doing research, and communicating with one’s colleagues is ever less thinkable without the use of virtual means. In addition to these basic necessities, videogames have started to structurally

influence other aspects of digital life. In recent years ‘gamification’ has become a concept of increasing importance in both educational and business contexts. Although there is as of yet little scholarly work to be found on the term, a first attempt at defining the concept was undertaken by Deterding et al. [2011], specifying it as “*the use of game design elements in non-game contexts*” that is deeply entangled with a “ludification of culture” [p. 10] (emphasis in the original)¹. Because of this phenomenon, the distinctions between what qualifies as a videogame and what does not in online spaces are ever harder to pin down, as elements core to virtual gameplay are picked up and utilized in other arenas of everyday life. To name a few examples: The mobile app “Pain Squad” was implemented by The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto to make pain research on young cancer patients easier and more enjoyable to the affected children. It entails a narrative reframing of patients’ daily self-reports on pain, and incentives in the form of a “graduation structure” that unlocks rankings for consistent reporting. All of this serves to create usable data for the medical personnel while trying to minimize the strain on a vulnerable population.² On the other end of the spectrum, ‘gamification’ is increasingly marketed at and taken up by businesses to better engage their customers, aiming towards mainly economic ends.³ Providers such as Badgeville offer software to “[enable] the world’s most innovative businesses to measure and influence user behavior”, which is done for instance through achievements-systems for using content or visiting websites.⁴ On the other hand, videogames themselves are repurposed in new ways to achieve certain goals outside of a purely ludic engagement, similarly to the earlier mentioned educational software. For example the online multiplayer puzzle game Foldit enlists its players to form teams and competitively analyze the structure of proteins by folding them. In 2011, this led to several “sufficient” models of the structure of a retroviral protein, making it valuable to a possible design of HIV-medication. This was achieved in just 3 weeks, after years of unsuccessful modeling-attempts by scientists in the field. [Khatib et al. 2011] Thus, the wider societal relevance of videogames and online gaming is ever growing, even when leaving aside the enormous economic impact of the gaming-industry itself. Furthermore, as gaming has become a more and more substantial pastime in recent decades⁵, its impact as an interactive medium needs to be studied and understood in its specificity, just as TV, radio, and print have been investigated. As Consalvo et al. [2009] put it: “[...] if games are a significant portion of the media diet, they need to be understood as important systems of symbols which might have a broad social impact” [ibid: 816]. Because of all these reasons, videogames make an object of study of fundamental value.

1 Although this definition is somewhat problematic in its naturalization of the understanding of ‘games’, and failing to explicate any boundaries to ‘non-games’, it is for now still a useful working definition.

2 <http://www.campaignpage.ca/sickkidsapp/> (Access: 27.05.2013)

3 <http://enterprise-gamification.com/index.php/en/facts> (Access: 27.05.2013)

4 <http://badgeville.com/about> (Access: 27.05.2013)

5 The Pew Internet & American Life Project found that, in 2008, 97% of American teens ages 12-17 engaged in some kind of digital play, including 99% of boys and 94% of girls in this age-group. See <http://www.pewinternet.org/Press-Releases/2008/Major-new-study-shatters-stereotypes-about-teens-and-video-games.aspx> (Access: 15.06.2013) According to the ESA (the US-based Entertainment Software Association), in 2010, 72% of all US-American households “play video games”. See http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2011.pdf (Access: 27.05.2013) In 2011, women made up about 47% of US game players. In total, consumers spent about \$16.54 billion on videogames (not including gaming hardware and accessories). Of the top-selling videogames of 2011, within the Top 8 were 4 First Person Shooters (namely Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3, Battlefield 3, Call of Duty: Black Ops, and Gears of War 3). See http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2012.pdf (Access: 27.05.2013)

In the early years of the (commercialized) Internet, throughout the 1980s and 90s, there has been a lot of optimistic work in academia regarding the possibilities opened up by new developments in the ICTs. Because of their seemingly decentralized character they were at times argued to be an inherently 'democratic' media, based "on networks rather than hierarchy" [Wajcman 2010: 147]. Similarly, the apparent anonymity provided by the Internet was emphasized as a resource, particularly within feminist STS (Science & Technology Studies) literature, which was thought to enable users of all kinds to transcend their bodies, and with it the embodied bases for inequalities and marginalization – i.e. gender, race/ethnicity, disability, and so on. [For an overview on these academic arguments see Wajcman 2010; for one of the key texts on the transcending of social dichotomies through cyborg identities see Haraway 1991] These hopes, however, seemed increasingly misguided and reductionist, as phenomena such as 'the gender gap on the Internet' and the 'digital divide' or 'digital inequality' took form in academic discourse in the 90s. These concepts described biases regarding both the general access to the Internet, as well as differences in the actual use of ICTs – according not only to gender, but to age, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and other categories as well. While these differences were shown to be much more complex and intersectional than often assumed, and consistently changing over time, there still remain both perceived and measurable distinctions in the use of ICTs between various demographics, although these two are not necessarily congruent. The explanations offered for these phenomena vary, although economic factors, infrastructural access, and socialization feature as key themes in most social scientific research. [See for instance Morahan-Martin 1998, Ono & Zavodny 2003, DiMaggio et al. 2004, Hargittai & Shafer 2006, Tsai & Tsai 2010].

What makes many STS-approaches stand out regarding their proposed explanations is their emphasis on analytical symmetry when looking at any social phenomena that include technological artifacts (which, depending on the definition of technology, may well be all social phenomena). According to feminist STS, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), co-constructionist, and co-productionist approaches, it is not enough to look at either a technology or its design/ers or its user/s as agents of configuration in order to understand an object of inquiry. Its contingent materialities and meanings only become accessible in their complexities and multiple interdependencies when conceptualizing it as a socio-technical assemblage⁶, made up of human and non-human actors, all of which become meaningful and develop identities exclusively *in relation* to the networks they are part of. Thus, to understand the significance videogames can develop within a specific community, in practice, it is necessary to look at both the material structures provided by the software and the hardware of a game (as it was constructed, both intentionally and unintentionally, by its designers), as well as the social practices and meanings built in conversation with this materiality. Only in this contingent, and mostly hierarchical, dialog can either become who and what they are.

6 Callon [2007] argues for the use of the French term "agencement", rather than assemblage, to describe the "combination of heterogeneous elements that have been carefully adjusted [to] one another" [ibid: 319]. Agencement to Callon entails many more meanings than assemblage, such as the conceptualization of all elements (and the whole assemblage) as *agents*, the construction of their meanings inherent to the agencement itself, and the fierce rejection of a fundamental divide between human agents and things. While I see all these assumptions as important and consequential, I refrain from using the term mainly because I do not know French, and thus cannot truly grasp its delicacy.

This is, after a long prelude, the context in which I place my research endeavor, which tackles the digital gaming practices of an online community ‘in the making’, through a lens strongly informed by STS network-approaches. My investigation focuses on one specific online multiplayer game, called Left4Dead, and one specific community organized around a so-called livestream that broadcasts their play to an open audience. Thus, the community in question consists of both players and spectators, who are engaged in complex and varying ways with their performance(s) of online social play. In the following, I will first give an extensive account of the **state of the art** of videogame research. I discuss a multiplicity of perspectives and focal points that show the fundamental significance of virtual play in digitalized societies, and the ways this subject matter might be tackled both theoretically and methodologically. This also serves as a first introduction to the field to facilitate a better understanding of my research interest. Then comes a discussion of the **theoretical framework and sensitizing concepts** that informed my research and are essential to understand the benefits of the specific perspective I chose. The next segment of my thesis finally describes my **research interest** in greater detail, followed by the **methodologies** employed to carry out my investigation. After this, I review my **empirical analysis** at length. As the analysis was conducted in a largely two-fold (if circular) process, the discussion of my findings is similarly structured: First, I investigate the **structures and mechanics** provided by the videogame Left4Dead. As I will show, this is a fundamental necessity to understand the social practices and meanings developed by the community *in dialog* with the materiality of the game. Then, I explore the **dynamics of play** from the livestream’s perspective, which coincides with the perspective of one specific player and is shared with a large and actively involved audience. Finally, the **conclusion** revisits my theoretical framework in more explicit terms to wrap up the thesis, and show the far-reaching benefits of a research approach to videogaming informed by STS.

2 STATE OF THE ART

The study of videogames is necessarily a rather young field in the social sciences, given that as a medium they are a relatively recent development. Grueninger et al. [2008] locate as milestones in the rise of the videogame industry the first gaming boom in the 1970s (after which followed two crashes in the gaming markets) and the advent of the gaming computer in the first half of the 1990s. Bryce & Rutter [2002a] see the introduction of CDs as storage-devices into gaming in the mid-1990s as a fundamental step shaping modern, 3-dimensional first person shooter (FPS) games, and name the game Quake, released in 1996, as the first FPS title to support online multiplayer gaming. This indicates that much of the literature on videogaming is still ‘fresh’, while profound theorizations on the medium can mainly be found in adaptations of other media theories [as e.g. argued by Consalvo et al. 2009]. However, in recent decades both journals entailing videogames as a theme (e.g. Convergence, Feminist Media Studies, New Media Society) and dedicated journals (e.g. Game Studies, Games and Culture), as well as dedicated issues (e.g. Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society [October & December 2012]) have appeared, all of which focus on the medium from a variety of perspectives. While the field of videogames itself is vast and heterogeneous, stretching different platforms, time-frames, spaces, and modes of engagement, there are some commonalities, as well as distinguishing aspects. These I will discuss in the following, focusing specifically on content, power structures, and social stratification, as these are of central significance to my own work:

2.1 DEFINING GAME AND PLAY

As a basis for any research done on videogames it is essential to define both the notions of ‘game’ and the related idea of ‘play’. In this, I will rely predominantly on Malaby [2007], who discusses and criticizes traditional approaches to the definition of games, and proposes a different framing. Thus, there are usually 3 intrinsic features attributed to games, which serve to make them discernible from what is commonly referred to as ‘real life’⁷. They therefore need to be: 1) *Separable* from everyday life and especially from work; 2) *safe* as in consequence free and nonproductive; and 3) *pleasurable* as in ‘fun’, which is normatively positive [ibid: 96]. While Malaby acknowledges that these 3 characteristics might certainly be part of games, he stresses that they are not necessarily so, as might be illustrated for instance with ‘games’ such as playing poker for money (maybe even for a living), or with the very real possibility of getting hurt while playing soccer. Furthermore, he stresses that the concept of separability of game and work or ‘real life’, of the nonproductive from the productive, is a concept of Western modernity – it is an ideological division which serves a purpose in processes of social stratification. Malaby therefore suggests another definition of games, putting them as fundamentally social practices. This entails an acknowledgement of their contingency – that they are always open to transformation, both in how they are played (regarding the generation of new practices) and in how

7 The division between play and ‘real life’ is similar to the division between ‘real life’ and ‘virtual life’, and likewise problematic. What defines virtuality is fluent and subject to boundary work, and not definitively distinguishable from other aspects of human life. Online-interactions do not necessarily stay online, and are often designed to impinge on everyday life – to connect people, implement specific channels of communication, or enable shopping from home, to just name a few.

they are interpreted (regarding their role in the construction of meanings). This also means that games are not reducible to their rules, but are dynamic and have what Malaby calls a “recursive quality” [ibid: 103], even when displaying a relative stability over a period of time. Likewise, play should not be thought of as a kind of distinct human activity, but rather as a mode of human experience, as a way of engaging the world.

Malaby makes out 4 types of contingency that he deems relevant to understand games, which he indicates may vary for different types of games. Still, he stresses not to use any categorizations of games too rigidly, and to be aware of possible hybrids (which are only to be expected in a theoretical framework that stresses contingency): 1) *Stochastic contingency* is about the randomness of a game beyond a gamer’s control, such as the haphazardness in tossing dice or shuffling cards. 2) *Social contingency* derives from uncertainties and insecurities regarding other players’ knowledge and intentions in the context of social play. This entails necessary differences in information, and access to said information. 3) *Performative contingency* is about the acting out of intentions and its ever-present danger of failing. 4) *Semiotic contingency* covers the always somehow unpredictable meanings generated through interpretations of the execution and outcomes of games (both ‘intended’ outcomes, such as determining a winner of a game, and ‘unintended’ ones, such as the building of alliances and loyalties between players). All of these contingencies are significant in the analysis of my instance of online social play. To name a few examples: The game Left4Dead provides players semi-randomly with equipment and/or bodies to interact with the world. Players only have a limited insight into the gameplay of others, and are provided with (vastly) differing information according to which team they are on. Because of the complexity of the game, the ‘competent’ enactment of actions such as attacks or the use of items is always a risky one; even proficient players cannot be certain of always succeeding in their intentions. And the interpretations of failure and success are always contingent on the specific situation in which they take place, as will be discussed in great length in the empirical part of this thesis.

Malaby closes his argument by emphasizing the necessity to be open to different meanings generated through gaming, which necessarily vary across communities, localities, contexts, and time, as games are essentially cultural products. Predefining practices, intentions, and meanings when examining games, gaming, or gamers can only hurt a research endeavor.

2.2 GAME CONTENT

Categorizing the content of games is a difficult task, as their goals, agents, and design vary greatly. While games like Tetris have a comparatively simplistic structure with limited options of player-manipulation, games from the genre of RPG (role playing game) such as World of Warcraft (WoW) have multiple and complex factors of customization, leaving players the ability to create their own humanoid avatars, roam a vast world that emulates a ‘real’, 3-dimensional environment, and choose their goals and purposes from a variety of both pre-given and user-generated options. WoW even leaves players the ability to specifically *not* choose an objective to fulfill within the logic of the game, and instead entertain oneself outside of these frameworks, but still within the spaces of this virtual world. Because

the object of my research entails a game with humanoid players, set in a 3D world, it is important to understand the implications of such an environment in the larger scheme of things. When videogames try to emulate reality, the design-choices often include well-known imagery from both 'real life' and other media, as well as common narrative tropes, such as heroes and villains, comic relief characters and thugs, and tragic past experiences to fuel a player's motivation. In this, Leonard [2006] urges us to see videogames "as something more than entertainment, but instead as cultural projects saturated with racialized, gendered, sexualized, and national meaning" [ibid: 83]. videogames do not just reduce characters by using stock images of race, gender, or age, but they express dominant ideas about such categories and thus contribute to what is perceived as commonsensical modes of thinking about them. With this in mind, I will now discuss both content and narratives of videogames more elaborately.

There exist a lot of both qualitative and quantitative studies on the content of games with humanoid agents, who may be divided into PCs (player characters) and NPCs (non-player characters). One of the few representative quantitative studies was undertaken by Consalvo et al. [2009], who made a comprehensive content analysis of videogame character demographics with the aim to establish a demographic baseline. Their research is a broad endeavor to systematize videogame characters while taking into account the actual distribution of games. Looking at a total of 4966 human characters (and leaving out all nonhuman ones) from games issued between Mar 2005 and Feb 2006, they coded them according to their status as primary (playable) or secondary (non-playable) characters, as well as to their gender, race and age⁸. The authors then compared this data to the US national census to examine how the social worlds created within computer games may differ from the everyday realities of the people playing them (in one of their major markets). Their conclusion is that women, (most) US-minorities, and old as well as very young people are heavily underrepresented, while white young adult men are massively overrepresented in videogames. Furthermore, the underrepresented groups are much more likely to appear only in non-active, secondary roles. The authors also note that female characters tend to be sexualized in games, while especially black and Latino populations tend to be negatively stereotyped and put in mainly antagonistic roles, showing violent behavior, belonging to gangs or mafia-style organizations, and so on⁹. With reference to several media impact theories, Consalvo et al. stress that different portrayals of specific groups affect identification, perceived visibility, self-image, and so on of the individuals engaging with a medium. Thus, the content of videogames has very real consequences, at least for the ones performatively engaging with them.

When delving deeper into the content of digital games, one might investigate the specificities of character-construction, and thus map the intricacies of categories like race, gender, age, or dis/ability. For instance, Downs & Smith [2010] investigated sexual representations in the 20 top-selling

⁸ In this context, it is important to note that especially race, but arguably also age and gender, are not at all clear cut categories, even if everyday discourse may suggest otherwise. As was discussed by Bowker & Star [2000], as well as Anderson [2006], the construction and naturalization of social categories is a contingent and ever-ongoing process, and a continuous social effort. What makes someone 'white enough to be white', what it means to be 'old', and how femininity is defined, changes according to social, spatial, and historical contexts, and is never decided upon once and for all.

⁹ This is a tendency discussed also by Leonard [2006]. The data on black characters is slightly less skewed in relation to other minorities because they are featured heavily in sports-games, which often include real athletes and are thus more representative by design.

videogames of 2003 of three major consoles, with a focus on gender. They found that female characters made up only 14% of all characters with a clearly assignable gender, and even less when looking at primary (playable) characters, namely 12%. The authors also learned that 41% of female characters wear sexually revealing clothing, with only 11% of male ones. Even stronger is the divide with regards to nudity, with 43% of female characters designed partially or fully nude, as opposed to only 4% of male characters. Thus, women are severely underrepresented in videogames, and when they are included tend to be much more sexualized than men, which underlines the prevalence of sexual objectification

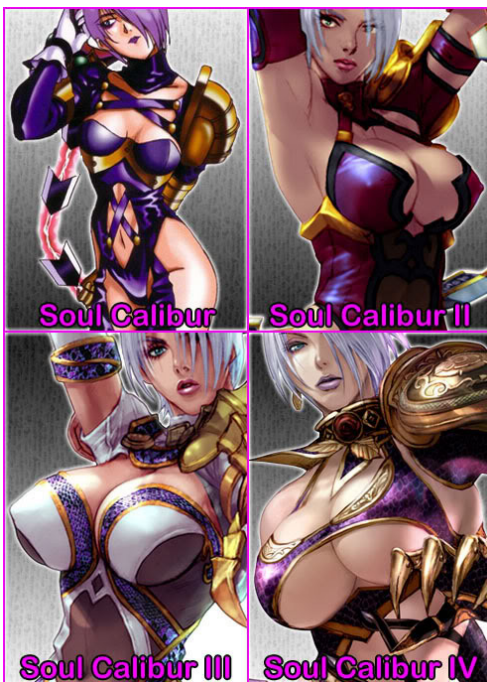


Figure 1: Design evolution of the character Ivy from the videogame series Soul Calibur. While her clothes did not always become skimpier, her breasts consistently grew larger.

of women, and specific gender roles more broadly, in this medium. Even videogames designed specifically for children fit into such a framework of gender-socialization, albeit in a more ‘innocent’, as in less sexualized and/or violent, way. Harvey [2011] for instance discusses how online videogames aimed at children and young people already inscribe certain essentialized assumptions about gender and its performance into their games, e.g. by focusing on nurturing pets in games for girls and emphasizing competition in games for boys. Through this, specific constraints and demands are placed upon children’s online play, which takes place not just along gendered lines, but also according to class, ethnicity, and social stratification (although all of these may be both reified and challenged in practice). As Harvey puts it, “design is not neutral [and] values are intrinsically embodied [...] in the rules that orient play” [ibid: 305]. Similarly, Bryce & Rutter [2002b] discuss how, while the content of videogames is usually constructed as ‘male’, there have been attempts to market games specifically designed to be ‘female’. These tend to reproduce stereotypical gender

representations by making games for girls ‘pink’. Through this, they make visible a deterministic view on gaming texts that leaves gamers as passive recipients of gaming content. The authors suggest a different interpretation, emphasizing that ‘readers’ of games who take an oppositional stance to their ‘texts’ can still be able to enjoy them. Thus, one may also look at the specific performative impact and subversive potential of digital games, as Schleiner [2001] for instance did in investigating the game Tomb Raider, which focuses mainly on “fighting off attackers, exploring ‘undiscovered’ spaces and solving puzzles” [ibid: 222]. She, too, concentrates on gender and gender roles, indicating that the female character of Lara Croft may allow for a variety of subject positions and different ways of identification: Lara is a “Female Frankenstein Monster”, mixing aspects of automaton, techno-puppet, and Barbie-like fetishized object for the male gaze. At the same time, Schleiner notes that through a female heroine, male gamers are drawn into identification with a female avatar, liquefying and breaking down gender roles, and making accessible multiple on- and offline subject positions. Most importantly, however, Schleiner sees a potential for Lara Croft to be a positive female role model for women and girls. As a violent, capable, and sexy woman, Lara allows for some slippage between binary gender categories,

which diverge from the path of games designed specifically for girls (such as Barbie Fashion Designer) and games that allow female characters only to be trophies waiting at the end of the game (such as Princess Peach in the Super Mario Games). Furthermore, the game itself serves as a motivation to develop actual skills through gameplay, including computer and technology literacy, but also puzzle solving, strategizing, and the like. Thus, having a female subject of identification might be beneficial in drawing in girls and women.

Finally, specific genres as a whole are often ascribed to a specific gender, although this may occur on a number of lines: The distinction between 'hardcore' and 'casual', or 'violent/competitive' and 'social' games are fundamentally tied to gender performances, for instance [e.g. Hayes 2005 and Thornham 2008]. At the same time, the very structure and content of a game may be defined as male or female, with far-reaching consequences: Kontour [2012] for example suggests that the genre of FPS in general, and military shooters in particular, serve as disciplinary tools in the construction and performance of certain kinds of masculinities. Working with Foucault's concept of governmentality, Kontour argues that these microlevel masculinities are closely entwined with a wider national, hegemonic, macrolevel masculine identity, which is constantly threatened and thus needs to be maintained and reaffirmed continuously by militaristic means. In this framework, FPS games emphasize "common traits of military masculinity" such as "stoicism, loyalty, teamwork, self-sacrifice, controlled aggression, bravery, pride in one's physical prowess, heteronormativity, homosociability, and a commitment to assigned tasks" [ibid: 354]. These themes are furthermore often borrowed from other media and their instantiations of popcultural tropes, especially with regards to their "fixation on the heroic protagonist" [ibid: 356]. Specific to FPS, however, is their imperative of engaged players to *perform* such traits identified as masculine, and to construct their identities in dialog with the possibilities offered by the logic of each game, regardless of their own gender. To succeed in the game, according to the logic of the game (i.e. to win and get good statistics), thus means to affirm its construction of masculinity. Furthermore, because of the omnipresent surveillance within FPS spaces, where players may monitor the general gameplay as well as the success of their colleagues, social inclusion hinges on the affirmation and proficient performance of the game's logic:

"[T]he game determines the parameters of being 'good at' the game, and being good at the game is what grants players social status; [...] gaming performance is inimically tied to masculine performance, in which at the end of the day being a good player is a demonstration not only of gaming proficiency but also of *masculine* proficiency (regardless of the actual gender of the player)." [ibid: 358; emphasis in the original]

2.2.1 GAME NARRATIVE

Researchers might also look at the significance of videogame narrative, both with regards to player engagement with a game, and in their connection to wider societal discourses. Bryce & Rutter [2002a] for instance argue that FPS games increasingly integrated the "production and aesthetic techniques of cinema to create a sense of narrative and spectacle" [ibid: 20]. At the same time, aspects of spectacle tend to be privileged over narrative because of the interactive nature and action-orientation of FPSs, with narrative being utilized mainly to enrich the playing experience: "In spectacular media narrative

offers a brief rationale on which to hang visceral pleasures rather than as the driving engine of the text” [ibid]. Tulloch [2009] on the other hand finds a strong narrative in the FPS game BioShock. He argues that dystopic themes taken up in videogame narrations can be seen as an expression of zeitgeist, or “the anxieties and concerns of contemporary society, and the configurations of power that we are all subject to” [ibid: 1]. In this, they have both critical and subversive potential, while they confront the interacting player with the structural limitations of the game, and the misplaced belief in free will when engaging in sternly directed forms of play. At the same time, game narratives have strong ties to design practices, as Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum [2012] explore in their close reading of the game Mass Effect 2. Similarly to Tulloch, the authors bring up the potential contradiction between narrative engagement and interactivity itself, as interactivity presupposes choice, while choice interferes with the stringency of a narrative. In Mass Effect 2, however, they see one example of how interactivity and narrative can be successfully integrated. As fundamental to this integration they make out 4 game-aspects: 1) The *storyworld*, which forms the basis of time and space in which the narration is embedded. 2) The *characters*, which need to be designed with consistency and depth. 3) *Emotions*, which serve to engage players with both characters and storylines, and are carried for instance by dialogs, environmental design, and music. 4) And *narrativized interfaces*, which serve to integrate player decisions into the narrative flow of a game, ideally in an intuitive way. The authors conclude that their ways of engaging with the game, including their narrative-carrying decisions, differed according to 3 factors: The character class of the main character, their ethical trajectory, and their gender. While the first two have significant impact on the structures of the game – what can and can’t be done, and how the story might progress – the last one, gender, influenced the authors mainly because of

“the nuanced performances of the voice actors playing [the protagonist]. In our various playings of the game, we explored a number of permutations of character gender, personality, and class abilities, which had implications for our perception of the narrative, and our experience of the game’s combat.” [ibid: 396]

In this, the authors emphasize that the design of a gamer’s avatar does impinge on their experience when playing a game, as well as their decisions and attitudes while playing, even when the broader narrative arc may not be altered. Although theirs is a very limited study, conducted on one offline single-player game, it still gives insight into the significance of design-choices of both avatars and game-worlds, which will be important to my empirical analysis.

2.3 ACCESS, CONTROL & PARTICIPATION

While the last chapter showed that the content of videogames is gendered in a variety of ways, the same is true for videogaming in practice. There is, however, an important distinction to be made between how gaming is *assumed* to be a gendered activity, and how gendering is *actually performed* in situ. Some persistent, recurring assumptions found both in academic and in wider societal discourses are that ‘the boys’ play much more, and much more sincerely or *hardcore*, than ‘the girls’. Girls and women who do game are associated most of all with so-called casual games as well as games that predominantly feature what is labeled friendship and social abilities, while boys and men tend to be associated with games emphasizing aggressive or violent as well as highly competitive content. In reality, however, the

number of people playing videogames continually rises through all demographic backgrounds, as was discussed earlier. On the other hand, the practices and meaning-making processes between gamers seem to diverge to a degree, as individuals have to position themselves against said stereotypes. [see e.g. Horrell & Schott 2000, Bryce & Rutter 2002b, Hayes 2005, Thornham 2008, Harvey 2011] In the following I am going to discuss differences in access and control to games and gaming technology, which are fundamental in structuring engagement with videogames, especially along gendered lines.

For women or so-called 'girl gamers', access to gaming platforms is often restricted, regardless of whether they own a platform themselves or not. On the one hand, gaming might deliberately come second to other activities, and especially (domestic) chores, and thus fits into an existing nexus of domestic power and the societal stratification of leisure-activities. On the other hand, however, access might be regulated actively by specific individuals of women's social environments. Brothers, boyfriends, husbands, fathers, and even sons often govern the realm of gaming. Horrell & Schott [2000] for instance observed several channels that allow for the exertion of control: Through technologies such as the controller needed to interact with the game, for instance by hiding or removing it; by oral means, openly forbidding their respective sisters, girlfriends, wives, and mothers to use the gaming devices; or in situated practices by taking control of a game while framing it as 'helping'. Through all of this, a narrative of (technological) expertise and mastery on the side of men is reiterated, while the abilities of women are downplayed. In addition to regulating access to the technology itself, the authors found various other forms of sabotage performed by male players on their female colleagues, such as not letting girls and women play 'difficult' parts of games themselves, taking over the controller while framing it as 'playing together', or withholding important information – allowing only incomplete software (i.e., demo-versions) or ripping pages from guides. Through all of this, a division between women as watchers and men as doers is socially reiterated, while a positive association between masculinity and technology is performatively reinforced.

All of this hints at the significance of private households, both with and without familial units, in performing stratified gaming practices and thus configuring their userbase. Looking at families as agents of socialization first, the essential role of parents in structuring (meanings surrounding) digital play and general technological competence needs to be discussed. Even in cases where all members of a family engage with ICTs as well as videogames, there may still be fundamental differences in how such engagement is framed, as Harvey [2011] found in her investigation of children's gaming practices. In her sample, fathers were still (11 years after Horrell & Schott's study) constructed as experts of the domain and mothers as incompetent, (re)inscribing stereotypes of masculine proficiency and feminine inadequacy. Furthermore, the engagement with computers beyond the sole use of singular software was "something to be cultivated in sons and/or admired in fathers, and not as the domain of daughters or mothers" [ibid: 311], which again corresponds with notions of masculine 'hard mastery' of technology. Girls displaying technological competence were discursively framed as either exceptional, inferior, or abnormal, while their mothers tended to reject any ascription of expertise or proficiency, emphasizing that gaming was a leisure activity secondary to their duties as mothers. Thus, interest in videogames seems to interfere with subjectivities of 'good mothers', and becomes somewhat antithetical to their

self-conception, while it does not have the same effect on 'good fathers'. But even outside of families, in shared flats with collectively owned or accessible gaming platforms, gaming practices as well as their surrounding discursive performances are gendered on a basic level. Thornham [2008] for instance found that in such household consisting of peers, when it comes to situations of social gaming (with more than one person present), gender roles are not only reaffirmed but actively constructed. Being male is thus made into the default setting of any gamer, and is performatively connected to notions of proficiency and expertise. Meanwhile, being female often entails performances of incompetence and the negation of competitive aspects of gaming. Through this, Thornham argues, women invite the intervention of other (male) players in their gameplay, e.g. by giving instructions. They also make the gaming experience a more social one, while downplaying their own achievements is an essential part of the gender-performance of her sample's female gamers. Femininity means not being allowed to exceed, and exceeding entails losing part of this identity. For men, the gender-performance includes the adherence to 'normal and logical' social gaming, which is opposed to 'perverted, excessive, and geek' solo gaming that threatens heteronormative masculinity. According to this binary division, men cannot take too intense a pleasure in gaming itself, but need to derive it from its functionality in creating a group experience. While many individuals in Thornham's sample did, indeed, engage in solo gaming more or less often, the discursive construction of such practices was as something highly shameful, and especially so for men. Thus, the author concludes that videogames become a social device that provides a safe environment in which male gamers can bond without the danger of perversion, while they can assert their masculinity by remaining in power over the technology (instead of being carried away by it emotionally).

These deliberations also hint at the division of private and public spaces, and the related timeframes, that structure videogaming as a practice. While girls' and women's access to digital play is restricted in private, it is even more so in public spaces, such as arcades, gaming competitions, and LAN-parties, but also traditional playgrounds. Bryce & Rutter [2002b] argue that such environments therefore become predominately male spaces, where women are relegated to the periphery, constraining women's access to videogames even before they have contact with their content. It also facilitates hostility and offensive behavior towards female gamers by established male ones, which might take the form of belittling, patronizing, or objectification¹⁰. The tendency to exclude women often leads to discouragement and expectations of rejection, and subsequent 'voluntary' refraining from engaging with games. Thus, similarly to gaming spaces, gaming technologies themselves can be considered as gendered male and incorporating masculine cultures. Nevertheless, the development of women's gaming communities and networks may be seen as signs of resistance and opposition to these social structures of accessibility, as well as dominant gender stereotypes, even if these are not necessarily spectacular acts of opposition. Such strategies, while being legitimate answers to a strongly stratified field, have their own pitfalls, and don't necessarily play out in a specific way. Gray [2012] for instance

¹⁰ This is a phenomenon best observable at public events such as conventions or gaming competitions, where women might experience terrible forms of harassment. See for instance <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/02/us/sexual-harassment-in-online-gaming-stirs-anger.html> and <http://kotaku.com/the-creepy-side-of-e3-513484271> (Access: 2013.06.19)

looks at the intersecting oppressions US Women of Color may encounter when playing Xbox Live, the online feature of Microsoft's gaming console Xbox 360. Their online experiences are significantly shaped by the harassment they are subjected to whenever they disclose their gender and ethnic background, be it voluntarily or involuntarily, by simply voice-communicating. Gray uses the term "linguistic profiling" [ibid: 416] to refer to the use of auditory cues to extrapolate details about a player's background, resulting in acts of racism, sexism, and often homophobia. This kind of negative player interaction is supported by the infrastructure of the online gaming spaces, and the given "hegemony of play" [ibid: 414] perpetuates an exclusion of communities that parallels 'real life' discrimination. Gray concludes that "clan membership is imperative to women in Xbox Live to ensure a positive gaming experience" [ibid: 418] – the construction of highly policed online-spaces facilitates pleasure in gaming. Although Women of Color might all experience some kind of discriminatory profiling, their reactions to this differ: Some women in Gray's sample refuse to play against men, while others train until they beat them. The latter strategy allows for a reframing of trash-talk as the actions of sore losers, although this move also puts the burden of reducing discrimination on the victims. Finally, Gray notes that some men accept women on Xbox Live as long as they take on a subordinate role, which parallels their earlier discussed secondary role in the content of videogames. Gray argues that these issues need to be addressed by the stakeholders – Microsoft and the gaming industry in general – because both games and gaming spaces need to change *structurally* to facilitate a more welcoming environment for women in general, and Women of Color in specific.

2.4 PLEASURES & MOTIVATIONS

Researchers found a variety of reasons for and interests in playing videogames. As a starting point I want to mention a prototypical, psychologically oriented mixed methods study about motivational engagement and videogaming conducted by Hoffman & Nadelson [2010]. The authors build on a solid methodological core, but mostly ignore the demographics of their sample, and fail to critically discuss their own gendered and socially stratified assumptions. As a consequence, they extrapolate their data on (mostly) white middle class university students to all gamers, everywhere, while implicitly adhering to the imagined standard of a young, white, male gamer. The authors conclude that the reasons to engage in gaming are multiple, though generally "players participate in video gaming to fulfill recreational, social, and esteem needs" [ibid: 265]. Thus, engagement with videogames is mainly tied to the social experience of gaming on the one hand, and the interplay between control and challenge of the game on the other. Furthermore, positive gaming experiences typically result in "feelings of satisfaction, accomplishment, and contentment" [ibid: 266] on the side of the gamer.

A key factor structuring engagement left out by this study, however, is social desirability, against which all gamers have to construct themselves: As discussed earlier, the discursive performances around games are inherently gendered and highly policed through expectations and assumptions issued towards play/ers, shaping the way women and men respectively talk about and play games. Thornham [2008] for example argues that while men are urged to express pleasure in gaming mainly in terms of group experiences, women can claim a more 'irrational' enjoyment found in gaming itself. Still, the women

actively involved other people in their turns of play, and both genders downplayed their actual solo gaming practices. Thus, in Thornham's sample there was a strong rejection of 'geek gaming', which is in no way universal. Taylor [2003] for instance examines the "multiple pleasures" women derive from playing the MMORPG¹¹ EverQuest, which is often played in a 'geek' way – by individuals who are physically alone (but connect with other players online). Taylor criticizes studies that (re)inscribe stereotypes about gendered gaming preferences, where women typically prefer casual games and games that focus on 'friendship' and 'community', while men prefer hardcore games that feature violence and competition. Taylor counters that women's pleasures are far more complex than that, and in many ways overlap with men's. EverQuest for instance demands communication and "people management" [ibid: 25] from all its players, regardless of gender, in order to succeed in the game. The author found the women in her Ethnographic study do derive pleasure from several other sources, including mastery and status. These might originate from killing powerful and dangerous creatures, obtaining rare artifacts, exceeding in certain skills which might be valuable to a group/party/guild, as well as leveling swiftly in relation to other people on the server. All of these accomplishments are tied to authority and legitimacy within the game, and might even be transferred to other contexts, as players engage with one another in multiple on- and offline spaces. Taylor also notes a playful, but gender-specific presentation of skills and accomplishments, as some women combine symbols of femininity or even sexualization with (masculine) representations of power and capability. Such moves may be interpreted as empowering moves of appropriation that transform more traditional gender-performances.

Finally, it is important to note that all groups engaging in digital gaming practices are to a degree heterogeneous, and preferences and performances are patterned by a variety of factors, such as general socialization, access, (lack of) experience, knowledge of genres, available time and responsibilities interfering with leisure activities, and so on. Hayes [2005] for instance criticizes that the heterogeneity of both female and male gamers as a group is often ignored, in order to make a global distinction between the genders. She discusses 3 common assertions regarding gender differences in gaming, and whether they hold up to scrutiny: 1) Men want to win, while women want to do something socially beneficial when gaming. She counters that women's status among peers is generally not elevated by beating a game, while men's tends to be. 2) Men accept punishment for errors while women want to be forgiven. She argues that women often have higher uncertainty about their odds of success, as many don't have as much gaming experience. 3) Men prefer learning through expository explanation, while women want to observe model gameplay. Hayes emphasizes that women often lack concrete images of gameplay, again because of less experience, and hence benefit from such observations. Thus, the author calls for a more complex and diverse conceptualization of the relationship between gender and gaming, taking into account both the variety of motivations of female gamers as well as the social context that provides gaming as an activity with meaning and structures of interpretation. Age is another category shedding light on the heterogeneity of gamers, as Grueninger et al. [2009] discuss in their study on 'older' German gamers, aged 35 to 73. This age-group is significant in that most people in

¹¹ A Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game, which is an online multiplayer game that supports thousands of players at once, and is similar to the earlier described World of Warcraft.

this category did not grow up with digital games in their homes. Thus, their gaming careers may differ from the industry's current target audience. The authors found that for many of these gamers a central motivation to engage with games, or even program some themselves, was to better understand the underlying technology when it was first brought into their homes. Such early playful use often led to a career in IT, which underlines the earlier discussed educational and performative value of gaming as a part of technological literacy. Others were introduced to games as part of their job, or by their (grand) children. In the latter case, gaming often functions as a bonding practice between generations, and interviewees noted how their (grand)children express pride because of their unlikely ICT literacy and mental fitness. At the same time, the older gamers reflected on their comparatively diminished interest in high-level performances and competition while gaming, and emphasized this as a difference to younger generations. All of them displayed specific expectation patterns such as “fun, entertainment, intellectual challenges, [or] experimentation” [ibid: 40] that were tightly connected to their specific genre preferences, but competition was seldom one of them. This might partly be tied to a certain pressure to not take games too seriously, as gaming is in itself seen as a non age-appropriate practice in need of explanation, that is mostly tolerated but seldom understood by the gamers' peers. Adult gamers also tend to experience heightened time constraints and obligations significantly structuring their leisure time, against which gaming competes, although these can be gendered, too, as was discussed in earlier chapters.

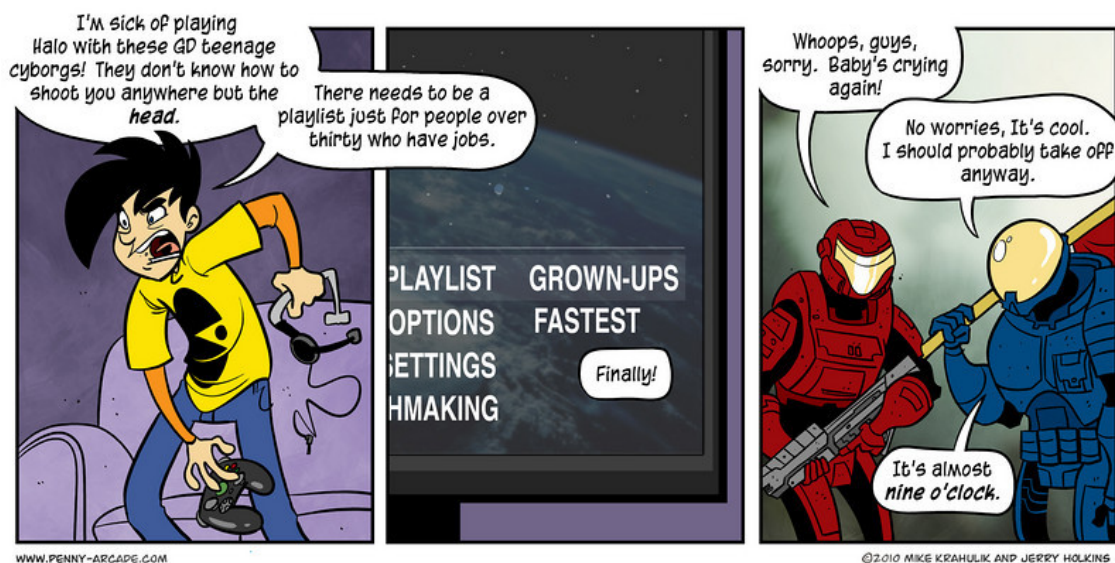


Figure 2: The web-comic Penny Arcade makes light of varying gaming practices and 'real life' responsibilities between different groups of gamers.

Coming to an end, I want to reiterate how gaming communities are heterogeneous and socially stratified according to a variety of categories. This is linked to both game contents, gaming practices, and the structures of time and space surrounding digital play as a situated social activity, governing access and control, but also impinging on pleasures and motivations of engaging individuals. In the following, I am going to discuss my specific theoretical framework that aims to add to the above findings.

3 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION & SENSITIZING CONCEPTS

As already indicated above, my research is grounded firmly in a co-constructionist approach to society and technology. The two are seen as inseparably intertwined, coming into being only through their relationality with one another, and forming rather one multi-headed monstrosity than being really separate entities. This conceptualization is informed by a variety of stances within the field of STS, which will be discussed more in-depth in the following:

3.1 NETWORKS OF POWER

“[ANT] says that, in the last instance, there is no difference in kind, no great divide, between the powerful and the wretched. But then it says that there is no such thing as the last instance. And since there is no last instance, in practice there are real differences between the powerful and the wretched, differences in the methods and material that they deploy to generate themselves. [...] How is it [...], that the centre may come to speak for and profit from, the efforts of what has been turned into a periphery?”

[Law 1992: 8]

While most of the language I use in this thesis stems from ANT, a lot of approaches within the field of STS deal with science, technology, and society as composed of complex, heterogeneous networks. For them, these networks are made up of multiple human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic actors/agents, who relate to and shape one another in structurally asymmetrical (and thus hierarchical) ways. Therefore, agency becomes more than an inherently human capability, and is (re)conceptualized as the stubbornness of materiality, institutions, ideas, and so on. According to Law [1992], the patterns of the networks we are part of structure our ways of being as well as our identities: “[...] analytically, what counts as a person is an effect generated by a network of heterogeneous, interacting, materials” [ibid: 4]. On the other hand, all actors involved, be they human or nonhuman, have “preferences” regarding the way they want to interact, through which they structure the networks they are part of. All of them have agency, even if this agency is unequal and might function on quite different levels. Without any such actor, the networks it is part of would not exist; when it withdraws, refuses to work, or breaks, the networks break down, too. Therefore, Law argues, “order is an effect generated by heterogeneous means” [ibid: 3], engineered by the diverse actors who are (part of) a network. This heterogeneity has a paradoxical consequence within ANT, namely that *analytically*, no basic ontological difference can be assumed between what is called ‘people’ and what is called ‘objects’ (or ‘animals’ or ‘plants’, for that matter). Even more, the boundaries between humans, animals, and objects are subject to continuous negotiation and change, within and through their networks. Both the nature and the very existence of the participants of a network (of its actors) are product of the network itself. As Law puts it,

“social agents are never located in bodies and bodies alone, but rather [...] an actor is a patterned network of heterogeneous relations, or an effect produced by such a network. [...] an actor is also, always, a network” [ibid: 4].

Similarly, Haraway argues in her feminist STS framework that

“bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their *boundaries* materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; ‘objects’ do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects.” [Haraway 1991: 201; emphasis in the original]

For Haraway, being someone always means “to become with many” [Haraway 2008: 4] – be they

human or non-human, organic or inorganic.

When networks stabilize, they seemingly disappear to us, producing actors that seem single, independent agents. Law [1992] calls this phenomenon of simplification *punctualisation*, which is an always precarious process that reduces endless complexity into workable, but contingent singularities. Similarly, Law describes 'social structures' as sites of struggles and resistances between social orders with often profound differences in power. They are "a relational effect that recursively generates and reproduces itself" [ibid: 5]. In social orders, there is no equality, as there are no univocal agreements. *Translation*, then, describes the processes of ordering struggles and transformations, which result in that one thing (e.g. an actor) may stand for another (e.g. a network)¹². Translation is always "contingent, local and variable" [ibid: 6], which means it is limited, it is contextual, and it could always be otherwise. Law identifies four factors that influence the stability of such translations, and thus the stability of a network: 1) *Durability* is the ordering of materials through *time*. The longer a material lasts time-wise within a network, the longer it can maintain its relations to other materials, and thus contribute to a network's overall stability. Durability is, like everything in ANT, a relational effect, and is enabled only through interactions between the agents of a network. 2) *Mobility* is the ordering of materials through *space*, and how agents might act from a distance. Mobility describes the patterning of materials as part of centers or peripheries, but it is also about processes of communication, of transmitting what Latour [1995] calls "immutable mobiles". 3) *Calculability* is the ability to anticipate the responses and reactions of translated materials, inherent to the translation itself. This makes translations more effective and increases the robustness of networks. 4) The *Scope* of the ordering of a translation, finally, determines its range within and beyond a network or a location.

Law argues that a variety of such strategies of translation co-exist, interact, and struggle against one another within and beyond networks, while they are part of how asymmetries of power come into being. For ANT power is an effect of networks; objects are interactional effects, not causes of interactions; agencies and structures are not inherently different from one another; and societies reproduce themselves because they are materially heterogeneous. While all actors within a network thus depend on one another for their very being, they are not all created equal – networks always allocate worth and significance asymmetrically. According to Akrich [1992], the co-dependence of the different actors of a network furthermore means that once networks are set, they have a stabilizing and naturalizing effect on the ensemble of elements, their positions, uses, functions and roles, and through this become naturalized themselves. If one of the elements of a network breaks away, it can mean the end of the whole network, but it most certainly leads to a transformation of it. This Akrich calls *irregularities*, which make socio-technical networks easier to study: Through their denaturalizing effect, both the appropriation of actors and social space that takes place within and through networks becomes accessible. Similarly, the initial implementation of technical objects into new social environments necessitates the reconfiguration of networks, making them temporarily more precarious, and subsequently easier to investigate.

12 In Bruno Latour's words, translation (or displacement, or delegation, or shifting) is the „transformation of a major effort into a minor one" [Latour 1992: 154].

To delve deeper into the stubbornness of nonhuman agents, Latour [1992] argues that material objects contain *prescriptions* – behaviors imposed onto human users by the nonhuman artifacts they interact with, although Akrich [1992] rather describes them as ways of interesting and persuading human actors to play a certain (designated) role within (changed or changing) networks or contexts, which can be mediated through certain measures that go along with the implementation of new technologies. To both, they always include asymmetries in their design, through (intentionally or unintentionally) in-built selections of what can and what can't be done when interacting with them. Thus, artifacts have a disciplining effect on the human actors they interact with, and call for specific kinds of skilled human users¹³. This configuration of human actors by nonhuman ones is however in no way straightforward, and the difference between the prescribed/intended users/uses of a technology and the ultimate actual users/uses might be substantial. Still, not every object is suited for a use/r in the same way – the use to which an object is brought depends on the interactions and setups of the networks it is part of. Latour [1992] uses the term *circumscription* to describe both the material spatial limitations within which artifacts are set, as well as their predefined entry points – its interfaces, which facilitate the configuration of their users. Akrich [1992] explores the design of artifacts and how they might relate to their use/r/s. She introduces the concept of *scripts* or *scenarios* to describe 'texts' which are inscribed into a technical object by its designers, both intentionally and unintentionally. These texts leave objects with ends and intended uses, and, concerning the (future) users, with predictions regarding their use in situ. Thus, they inscribe into the objects a set of assumptions concerning the attributes of the actors at which a technology aims (including factors like contexts and environments). *De-scription*, then, describes the 'analysis' of the script of an object, often in the context of the process of appropriation between the intended/imagined user, and the 'real' user (who themselves only come into being in interaction with the technical object). Akrich states that the (intended) script of an object can most of the time be assumed to be a major element shaping the way in which technological objects are used; thus, the script is often followed, at least to some extent.

Akrich also discusses how moral delegation and social control can be exerted through technologies, as she argues how (a set of) devices can be installed (or at least encouraged) by designers to control (or influence) the moral behavior of their users, making certain kinds of use impossible or hindering them, or allowing for surveillance and/or sanctions of users (social as well as technological). However, she states that what is constructed as permissible and what isn't is always subject to negotiation between artifacts and users.

3.2 STANDARDIZATION & COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Another essential concept informing my research is Bowker & Star's [2000] work on sorting-practices. They stress the importance of covering systems of classification and standardization as well as the

¹³ While excluding a variety of others. This is explicitly acknowledged and then dropped by Latour: "[...] provided you [...] agree to ignore the few sectors of the population that are discriminated against, the hydraulic groom does its job well [...]" [Latour 1992: 159]. This decision is in itself a power-move that fails to take advantage of the opportunity of a much deeper analysis. Susan Leigh Star [1991] takes exactly this passage as an impulse for an ANT-analysis of those who are neither users nor non-users of networks, but fall out of their scope.

infrastructure of a context when following a research interest of any kind, as these are ubiquitous, inescapable, and fundamental in structuring social relations. Consequently, their analysis is key when trying to understand social realities – material or otherwise: 1) *Classifications* are “*spatial, temporal or spatio-temporal segmentation[s] of the world*” [ibid: 10; emphasis in the original]. As a conceptual ideal type, they are ascribed three properties: They work on consistent and unique principles of classification; their categories are mutually exclusive; and they are exhaustive, i.e. they completely cover the worlds they organize. However, no system of classification can ever fully meet these demands, as they are always situated in time and space, and accordingly employed and interpreted in locally specific ways. At the same time, they are often *perceived* as universal, as spanning multiple or ‘all’ contexts. 2) *Standards* are explications of classifications, in that they are sets of “agreed-upon rules for the production of [...] objects” [ibid: 13]. They have reach in space and time, as they span multiple contexts and have a certain stability, which in part is their explicit purpose – they translate data from one site to another (and are therefore related to the earlier mentioned immutable mobiles). Standards might be enforced by legal bodies. They also have what Bowker & Star call “significant inertia” – while they are hard to instate, they “can be difficult and expensive to change” [ibid: 14]. Similarly to classifications, standards are always idealized and can only be approximated locally, which entails context-specific negotiations between members of communities of practice (see below). 3) *Infrastructures* are tools developed in historical processes. As orders reached through negotiated compromises, they are made for a wide variety of users throughout diverse contexts, and interlink “routines of work practice, technology, and wider scale organizational and technical resources” [ibid: 34]. Infrastructures are embedded in social structures; have stability over space and time; are essential in that they must be incorporated when acquiring membership to a community; are entangled with the rules and values of communities; are materializations of standards; are grown from a historical base, from which they inherit both strengths and weaknesses; and they become visible upon breakdown (much like ANT’s actor-networks). Akin to standards, infrastructures have significant inertia, resulting in them being only slowly transformed, modified, or replaced.

To approach my object of research in a methodologically sound way, I need to have a concept of the theoretical and methodological unit on which I base my inquiry. Because I am looking at a community that doesn’t exist as a coherent, easily distinguishable, and clear-cut body (as communities seldom do), the criteria used to distinguish people who are ‘in’ from people who are ‘out’ of this heterogeneous, fragmented field – who is at the center and who is at the periphery – need to entail the contingencies of these processes of inclusion and exclusion. To this end, I want to use the concept of ‘communities of practice’ for my research. According to Bowker & Star, communities of practice interpret and enact certain relevant classifications and standards in a locally specific way, privileging some actors and practices over others, and thus drawing boundaries along which people are included and excluded. The authors define a community of practice as a “unit of analysis that cuts across formal organizations, institutions [...], and other forms of association such as social movements. It is, put simply, a set of relations among people doing things together [...]. The activities with their stuff, their routines, and exceptions are what constitute the community structure” [ibid: 294]. In this theoretical framework,

communities are the product of relations – between people, artifacts, institutions, activities, etc. – which are the basis from which categories arise. These categories are both historically constructed, locally situated, and in constant negotiation, being “continually remade and refreshed” [ibid: 285]. At the same time, they are black-boxed, so they seem natural, self-evident and commonsensical, while they are actually the result of constant work, of a continuous effort to (re)create and stabilize or (re)negotiate and transform them. Membership to a community of practice is thus connected to and depending on the familiarity one feels with the classifications used in these contexts, to being comfortable with the actors involved – the artifacts, language, people, activities, everything that is treated as consequential by community members – and to the ease with which one relates to them.

To relate this to my object of inquiry, playing videogames seems easy enough, with ubiquitous points of entry and widespread use. However, videogaming requires knowledge of a variety of classification systems: Of how to access, interact with, and use the necessary (standardized) technological infrastructure, i.e. electricity, devices for displaying, input and output, software, and so on; of how to act within the game; and, in (online) multiplayer gaming, of how to interact with other people involved, i.e. other gamers, onlookers, moderators, administrators, and the like. All of this is done with locally specific solutions for integrating and interpreting categories that in one way or the other transcend the specific context (no-one and nothing exists in just one context). Thus, participating in online multiplayer gaming requires a lot of naturalized knowledge of classifications and standards. To this, we also have to add the question of relations of power which are represented in what Bowker & Star call “*the practical politics of classifying and standardizing*” [ibid: 44; emphasis in the original], i.e. who gets to decide what will be visible or invisible within a system, which points of view are valorized and which are silenced, and how this is decided. These politics are inevitable, and they materialize in performances and bodies, artifacts and infrastructure. To this end, the authors stress that “some person’s infrastructure may be another’s barrier” [ibid: 34].

In a similar vein, Barnes [2001] discusses in-depth what it actually means if practices are assumed to be ‘shared’, and to which aspects we have to be sensitized when looking at shared practices. He uses a conceptualization of social systems as “ongoing, self-reproducing arrays of shared practices” [Barnes: 25], and argues that these social systems, as well as the structured dispositions they are tied to, are of central interest to social scientist when explaining social and cultural phenomena. To Barnes, a key purpose of theories in the social sciences is “to specify what distinguishes members of a culture or a collective from outsiders, and on what basis they sustain orderly activities and relationships amongst themselves [sic]” [ibid]. With respect to this issue, practices can be seen as indicators of order and (dis)agreement with a visible and tangible basis that is accessible to an outside researcher more directly than ideas, beliefs, or theories might be. Furthermore, such accounts assume a subject which is granted agency, that takes part in (re)constituting the system (of shared practices) it is a part of, by drawing upon it as a shared resource.

Barnes describes three distinct kinds of practices to illustrate different kinds of communities. Their features indicate the multiple contingencies of communities of practice, all of which are important to my object of research: 1) Vegetarism as a practice shows that communities don’t need to be centralized

or institutionalized, and don't necessarily need (elected) representatives or networks to be called communities. Furthermore, activities that count people in or out cannot be exhaustively substantiated into abstract principles, but they are nevertheless routinely recognized as coherent social activity all the same. 2) Acupuncture in Western medical contexts illustrates how practices change according to the theoretical and cultural framework in which they are performed. Barnes argues that acupuncture transformed fundamentally when it travelled from Eastern to Western medicine. 3) A company of cavalry shows how practices have to be conducted in accordance with others to be realized and recognized as such. This is also the central reason for their contingency. In the wake of these examples, Barnes proposes the definition of practices as "socially recognized forms of activity, done on the basis of what members learn from others, and capable of being done well or badly, correctly or incorrectly" [ibid: 27].

Barnes stresses that as practice theorists we have to recognize four principles, to assess the scope of our theoretical framework realistically: 1) That theory and practice cannot be separated; 2) that external practices and internal states of individuals cannot be distinguished to the last instance; 3) that reference to practices alone is not enough to describe social life adequately, as individuals orient their actions to one another according to, among others, theoretical perspectives; and 4) that practices cannot be given as explanans for themselves, i.e. their production and reproduction cannot be explained through self-reference – the argument that they are done because they always have been done is fallacious.

Shared practices cannot be treated as singular entities or unitary objects; they are contingent, vary according to context, and are often made up of different individual capacities, skills and competences that have to be coordinated with one another, requiring constant adjustment and modification in relation to others to constitute what can then be interpreted as the (reasonably) coherent practices of an (apparently) homogenous community. Barnes stresses that "[p]ractice at the collective level is not a simple summation of practices at the individual level (habits). Shared practice is, as the ethnomethodologists say, a collective accomplishment" [ibid: 31]. This is true even for the most basic of routines, which are usually called individual habits, such as taking the bus to work – it calls for continuous adjustments to the ever changing given conditions which are, in essence, the sum and result of the contingent practices of other people. Even practices seemingly accomplished solo, such as brewing coffee or practicing vegetarianism, are bound to instances of interaction with others; they are accomplishments reached through learning, and call for ongoing adjustments to keep an acquired status as a 'competent member' of the coffee-brewing community¹⁴. Barnes describes this as one source of change in shared practices – we have to be sensitive as to what other practitioners are doing. Thus, practices can also be categorized as being enacted well or badly (which is a standard to which 'habits' cannot be held), demarcating their profoundly social nature.

Last but not least, to engage in activity as a social category always entails enactments of competence

14 Just think of the abundance of different ways to brew coffee, the different machineries and products involved, and how you might adjust the way you brew your coffee when you do it for others (I, for instance, drink instant coffee whenever I'm too lazy to cook 'proper' one; at the same time, I'm rather embarrassed to serve it to others, and usually give them the choice between waiting for 'real' coffee – from freshly grinded beans, using my moka pot – or taking the 'fake' one).

or power, as Barnes stresses. Thus, membership to a group can be assessed in terms of possessing the power to perform as and within a set of competent members. For Barnes, social power is “powers or capacities collectively constituted and visibly expressed in the ongoing practice of the membership. In the most profound sense, it is shared practice” [ibid: 35].

At the end of this segment, I want to bring up a concept related, but adding to the “community of practice”, namely Anderson’s [2006] “imagined communities”. Although Anderson’s work is mainly a reflection on nationalism, his extensive and multi-faceted discussion has important consequences for our general understanding of communities. At the beginning, he puts the assertion that the nation as a concept is always an imagined one:

“It is *imagined* because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. [...] In fact, all communities [...] are imagined [...] [and] are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.” [ibid: 6, emphasis in the original]

Nationalism is thus a mechanism of *constructing* nations, and in a highly specific way at that, rather than an expression of the collective self-consciousness of an existing, clear-cut body of people. Still, an integral part of each imagined community are its limitations, its boundaries, the idea that there is a ‘them’ against which an ‘us’ can be positioned. Thus, the concept of community always entails an ideology of comradeship, of equality even in a highly stratified and unequal union. On the other hand, imagined communities build a common identity by assigning multiple differing ‘identity categories’ within its unit – think, for instance, how the concept of motherhood was tightly interwoven with the ‘racial corpus’ of the Third Reich. Therefore, difference is not only possible but essential to the unity of an imagined community. Finally, Anderson describes a variety of common objects and technologies that facilitate this concept of ‘us’, such as a streamlined history that works to legitimize one’s existence, or (with regards to nations) objects of power such as censuses and maps, legal documents and official languages, and so on, that are less an expression of ‘real’ national topography, and more a tool of bringing them into existence.

3.3 TACIT KNOWLEDGE

Collins [2001] conceptualization of tacit knowledge is the last sensitizing concept fundamentally shaping my research. He suggests three approaches to thinking about tacit knowledges, all of which shed light on aspects of membership to the community I am interested in:

The first approach is the *motor-skills metaphor*, which refers to *embodied abilities* necessary to engage in a specific practice, and can only to some extent be communicated verbally. To give an example, one can be told how to use a keyboard and a mouse to engage with a virtual environment, but however precise such a description might be, it can never be enough to master these technologies at the first try. This is in part because not all of these skills have some kind of verbalization, or they might have names (such as ‘aim’ or ‘accuracy’) that are themselves abstractions that aren’t connected to physical/motoric descriptions per se. The other reason lies in the necessity to ‘internalize’ and ‘embody’ such skills through practice and repetition. Such practice and repetition always includes, at least to some extent,

social supervision and alignment with culturally specific ways of doing things, as well as the enactment of practices within social settings, where they have to be adjusted to other people participating in such and similar practices.

The second approach Collins calls the *rules-regress model*, which refers to specific knowledges one needs to have to know how to follow *rationalizable rules*, and again is dependent on knowledge of the specific context within which a rule is applied. Thus, the same game might be played with different rules/a different logic according to specific settings. Collins names as one location of this kind of knowledge traditions, and argues that while these can be implicit, and thus bound to local and embodied learning, they might well become explicit, and thus verbally transferable.

The last, and Collins' favorite, approach is the *forms of life approach*, which refers to differing 'forms of life', or knowledge cultures, between different groups, i.e. that specific communities take specific things for granted, and are most of the time not aware of the social basis of their certainties. Such certainties can only be acquired through participation within said communities, while "common socialization will lead to common solutions to problems" [ibid: 119]. Such communities are also the place where the formation of new knowledges, new ways of seeing and doing things, takes place. Improvisation, for instance, is something that can only be accomplished by competent members of a group, as it is a matter "of making departures from [the behavioral repertoire] to a degree that must be consistent with quintessentially unspoken convention" [ibid: 125]. Collins thus is an outspoken solicitor for acknowledging the social (and material) embedding of all human knowledge.

Coming to an end, the effort of this chapter was directed at laying the theoretical foundation for my research enquiry. The methodological consequences of the above are that, in the last instance, I have to derive all theorizations, all attempts to explain a field, from within the field itself, in dialog with competent members of the community. It means that I have to be tuned to the significance of materiality both in the sense of embodiment and nonhuman agency. Quite pragmatically, I can and have to decide on a focus and a perspective in the form of a research question, and thus limit the scope of my thesis. At the same time, the principle of contingency has to remain upright. Thus, I need to remain open to 'folk theories' and 'localized meanings' of my object of research, and its fundamental agency enabled by the processual nature of all social stability. All my analytical work needs to be positioned vis-à-vis the contingent shared practices, meanings, 'folk theories' and 'folk methodologies' of the community which define who is who, and whether they are (competently and correctly) participating in the game.

4 RESEARCH INTEREST

The subject of this thesis is one specific instantiation of online social play, analyzed through the conceptual lens of a socio-technical assemblage, a network of multiple, heterogeneous human and nonhuman actors. I looked at one group of people playing the online multiplayer first person shooter (FPS) game Left4Dead over the course of the year 2012. They do so in the context of a livestream called “Late Night with Cry and Russ”, which is issued online on a weekly basis. The ever growing audience may watch both live and past broadcasts, which are available at an online platform for videogame broadcasts called TwitchTV. The questions I followed throughout my inquiry were as follows:

- How are materiality, social practices, and meanings co-constructed in this instance of online social play?
- What/who are the relevant agents of this socio-technical assemblage?
- What kind of power-structures and hierarchies are enabled or even facilitated by the entanglements of materiality and meaning?
- What kinds of categorization practices are undertaken in this context, and how do they relate to the structurality of the software used?
- How are individuals included and excluded from participation, and on what basis? How are center and periphery of the community patterned?

To answer these questions, I did a twofold analysis: First, I looked at the materiality of the game itself, analyzing its structures and its meanings both in a wider societal context, and to the group in specific. Second, I analyzed videofiles of the livestream, and the social practices displayed and enacted in the context of playing the game. Because of the pivotal understanding of online social play as a socio-technical assemblage, these two analytical foci are highly interconnected and inseparably entwined, leading to a lot of recurring themes throughout my thesis. At the same time, the analytical division of these perspectives on the practice of gaming makes a deeper understanding of the multifaceted patterning of the field of research possible, and demonstrates the far-reaching consequences of my theoretical framework.

In the following, I will first describe the methodologies employed to realize my research endeavor. Then I will describe at greater length than above the theoretical framework and sensitizing concepts that led my gaze on and my specific interpretations of my object of inquiry. Afterwards, I will discuss the current state of the art of videogame research as it relates to my research interest. Then follows the extensive two-part empirical analysis, which first focuses on the structures provided by the game, and then describes the social practices and meanings arising in dialog with it. Finally, I conclude with a return to the research questions, a discussion of the possible impact of my research, and some thought on where future endeavors might lead.

5 METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions stated above, a fundamentally qualitative methodology is needed. Although the basic assumptions and the specific objects of research vary greatly, most methods within the qualitative paradigm of social scientific research share an interpretative approach to understanding sociality. In this, they acknowledge the localized, temporary, and situational nature of social phenomena, making contextualization a key move in any qualitative research. Quantitative research approaches necessarily entail standardizations and reductions in the operationalization of research questions and the construction of measurable variables. When the main research instrument is the postulation and verification/falsification of theories and hypotheses, localized meanings are neglected by design. In contrast to this, qualitative approaches employ theories rather as sensitizing concepts that guide and focus a researcher's attention, making it possible to take seriously the localized meanings, knowledges, and practices generated in the field of inquiry. Instead of aspiring to a much-criticized 'objective' representation of social 'reality' according to quantifiable dimensions, here the subjectivities of both inquirer and inquired are turned into resources enabling a comprehensive and profound understanding of sociality¹⁵. The aim of qualitative research is to grasp the object of inquiry in its multiplicity and complexity, with the specific methods chosen and adjusted specifically to do it justice, rather than forcefully adjusting a field to fit a research design. [Flick 2005]

While the data material in qualitative research varies greatly according to the methods employed, it can be anything from video material to policy documents to observation protocols to narrative interviews. There are differing rules for the selection, creation, and appropriation of data as well as its analysis, all of which need to be adjusted according to both the research question and the field of interest. As my object of inquiry is fundamentally tied to a virtual space within an audiovisual medium, using video recordings makes a lot of sense: They make visible the embodied view of a player, while showing not just the auditory, but the material interactions between the participants of a game, both of which are pivotal to answering my research questions. To this end, I first went through the broadcasting history of the livestream, searching out all instances of the group playing *Left4Dead* in 2012 that were still available. I downloaded the videos, which entailed 21 in total, and watched them repeatedly while making systematic notes. Furthermore, because a lot of research methods rely on a textual basis to facilitate an in-depth analysis, I transcribed the conversations of 4 instances of gameplay in their entirety: 2 at the very beginning, one from midway through, and one from the end of the year. To choose these broadcasts I used a theoretical sampling, trying to not only cover the whole scope of a year in broadcast, but different game-modes, participants, and difficulties encountered while playing the game. I also transcribed one instance of the group playing *Team Fortress 2* (TF2), which is a game similar to *Left4Dead* that itself features regularly on the stream, to help carve out the specificities of *Left4Dead*. While the contrast with TF2 was an essential part guiding my analysis, because of the restrictions of this thesis and the overall high complexity of both games the description of TF2 will be held at an absolute minimum. Finally, I transcribed key moments from other broadcasts when needed,

¹⁵ For an extensive critique of concepts of objectivity, and a proposed reinterpretation of the phrase in a more resilient framework, see for instance Fox Keller 1989, Haraway 1991 & 1997, and Harding 1993.

to add to my later analysis.

Video data, according to Lueger [2010], is essentially processual in nature, and constitutes a narrative enactment that creates an impression of reality. Although in this phase of my analysis my research interest lay less in the videos themselves and more in the gameplay they recorded, both video data and videogames may be analyzed using Artifact Analysis. Artifact Analysis works with 5 basic operations intended to systematically break apart the object of research, and slowly rebuild it by adding layers of meaning: 1) The *filtering of the context of research* is aimed at making explicit, and thus rendering to some degree extractable, the context of incurrence of the data material – how was the data created, what does it make accessible, what meaning does it have within the field of research, in what ways is it selective, with what aim was it created and why was it chosen, what is its significance within the research process, and so forth. 2) The *descriptive analysis* is a sequential strategy of dissociation and de-contextualization, breaking up the direct complex of meaning and thus undermining potentially self-referential explanatory structures. This analytical operation focuses on the material context making up the artifact, its symbolic meanings, its internal differentiation (primary and secondary aspects, actors involved, foreground and background, different components, etc.), and the conditions integral for its existence. 3) The *(re)construction of the meanings* associated with the artifact in a *daily/routine context* aims at the functions, practices as well as the common knowledge and associations needed for and connected with interacting with the artifact. This entails the context of its use – i.e. where it makes sense and where it is common and ‘normal’ – the interpretation of this context, and its cultural meaning. 4) The *distanced structural analysis* operates at a more abstract level and focuses on the context of the production of the artifact, including the way it was produced, the reasons why it was produced, and what the necessary conditions for its production were. Both functions and impacts of the artifact are of relevance, including again the relevant actors involved, leading to the question of handling – who handles the artifact, in what frequency, and how is it handled differently by different groups of people? Then, again, the question of the contextual use of the artifact comes into play – what are the accepted and unacceptable forms to use it, which processes are linked to the artifact and how do they structure it, and so on. 5) Finally, the *comparative analysis* works through contrasting the artifact with other, similar ones, and aims at rendering relevant differences – differences that matter – visible. At the same time, this step also allows for a reiteration of the reflection of the internal differentiation of the artifact, contrasting the various parts with one another, and thus carving out the specific social, functional, and temporal connections and uses an artifact combines within itself. Last but not least, the different contexts of use of such an artifact can be compared and contrasted, to make its specific properties and associated meanings more accessible. Because my artifact in this instance of analysis was not the videogame as a hollow shell, but the videogame *in use* by a specific group, the specific interpretations of my field of research itself fundamentally informed my interpretations throughout the process.

To analyze the transcripts I employed Grounded Theory according to Strübing’s [2008] manual. Grounded Theory is a time-tested method mainly focused on textual data, and fit to systematically tackle even large bodies of text. While its phases of data collection, data analysis, and construction of ‘grounded theories’ are circular by design (as with most qualitative research), its basic operation is the

constant comparative method of relating data to one another, making visible both their distinctions and similarities. This is achieved in 3 phases of intense involvement with the data called coding, with the intended outcome of constructing theoretical conceptualizations *out of* the empirical data. While these three phases of coding are roughly chronologically structured, a back-and-forth between them is not only expected but encouraged within a circular research design: 1) *Open coding* aims at breaking apart the material to carve out individual phenomena and their properties. 2) *Axial coding* then looks at connections and interrelations between phenomena, connecting them with larger, more complex concepts of which the initial codes may represent aspects and dimensions. 3) *Selective coding* finally refines these core categories by actively looking for supporting and contradicting material, as well as potentially missed or overlooked aspects within the data. During the whole process, specific questions are addressed at the data material, scrutinizing the *causes, contexts, intervening conditions, actions and strategies* of the involved actors, and the *consequences* of the constructed phenomena. In this, Grounded Theory is very similar to Artifact Analysis, even if their respective methodologies may be distinct. The end-result of an analysis using Grounded Theory are categories of meaning fundamentally grounded in the research material, instead of theories brought into the material from the outside to ‘test’ within the material.

5.1 ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to these two methods, my analysis of the conversations and interactions between participants of the livestream was informed by the methodologies of Conversation Analysis [Liddicoat 2011] and Membership Categorization Analysis [Stokoe 2012], sensitizing me to concepts of turn-taking, sequentiality, and contextually relevant categorizations in social interactions. Both of these approaches spring from the conceptual framework of Ethnomethodology, which proposes a practical answer to contextualized questions of membership and belonging. Coulter [2001], in reference to Harvey Sacks, describes how every person holds an infinite array of “equally but alternatively correct identification categories” [ibid: 43], making them identifiable according to an infinite number of categories (such as ‘a woman’, ‘a daughter’, ‘an employee’, ‘a gamer’, and so on). However, these categories are contingent, in that they are “relevantly correct categorizations” [ibid] only in context – no category may account for every possible case of membership categorization. Categories are only unambiguously relevant if and when they occasion specific courses of action/activities, i.e. if they take effect within a specific context. Relevant categories also hint at relevant identities, which are entailed in the performance of a practice. Furthermore, certain claims made by individuals, such as representing or speaking for a group, need to be legitimized by both the group itself, as well as the outside environment at which such claims are directed. Thus, legitimacy (and power) needs to be enacted, it needs to be recognized by the community. Lynch [2001] stresses the Ethnomethodological principle that all social phenomena, from the smallest to the largest, need to be seen as

“situated accomplishments by the parties whose local practices ‘assemble’ the recurrent scenes of action that make up a stable society. [...] When treated in this way, social order becomes an array of practical, self-organizing and selfinvestigating phenomena.” [ibid: 140]

Semantically, Ethnomethodology refers to “folk investigations of the principles or procedures of a

practice” [ibid: 141]. Thus, like Grounded Theory, Ethnomethodology urges us to derive our theories from a field (regardless of the data material they might be grounded on) by taking into account the analytical work done by the relevant actors themselves. Thus, the methodological work of Ethnomethodology is actually to *recover* the endogenous analytical work done in the social production of coordinated action. This means for instance that within the enacting of a game the rules that govern it are always already reflected, and need to be taken seriously by the researcher. Games, just like any other social practices, are contingently produced phenomena that entail contingently relevant actions, and which are constituted in an embodied and concerted way. From within this framework also derives the definition of what can be seen as a transgression, as the parties involved count on one another “to ‘behave’ in stable and reliable ways” [ibid: 143]¹⁶. Thus, all relevant categories become relevant exactly by being locally performed as such, and researchers have to give sufficient proof that any category they propose is indeed contingently relevant with regards to the production of the practice under scrutiny.

Lynch argues that both methods and methodologies can be found in ‘folk’ form, as is exemplified for instance by instruction manuals¹⁷, which exist for all kinds of practices. What makes for the contingency of social practices, and what distinguishes competent members of a community from those who are not, is the capability of individuals to take rules out of the context in which they were initially developed and to which they ‘belong’, and to aptly (re)appropriate them to other settings. Key to such transitions are situated judgments, which again mark both competence and legitimate authority of individuals. While folk methods and methodologies thus “play a constitutive role in the production of social phenomena” [ibid: 155], this concept also blurs the line between subjects and objects of scientific inquiry, granting not only agency but expertise to the individuals under scrutiny.

Finally, it is important to reflect on the specific arena my object of research is situated in. As with all things digital, many if not all private information given by the members of the community of the livestream are essentially unverifiable to me. Thus, I have to be aware of the performative nature of how individuals construct themselves – they play a second order game, on top of the first order play of Left4Dead. While the performance of specific identities is not a phenomenon in and of itself exclusive to the virtual realm¹⁸, the absence of specific visual cues, the possibly large geographical distance, and the asymmetry of the technologies utilized to create the experience of the community all contribute to a socio-technical arena different from other encounters of everyday life. This underlines the fundamental necessity to be aware of and understand the material peculiarities of this context, which is reflected in my decision to first analyze extensively the technological framework constructed and utilized by the community at hand, which will be the endeavor of the next segment.

16 Harold Garfinkel’s breaching experiments aim exactly at making such expectancies explicit, by consciously and knowingly transgressing. Incidentally, the moral tenability of such ‘experiments’ is highly questionable.

17 In the context of my field of research, wikis play an important role for individuals to inform themselves, for instance about properties of a game. Wikis are crowd-sourced collections of information which are mostly openly available on the Internet, and can thus be seen as one instantiation of what Lynch calls instruction manuals.

18 Rosenthal [1995] for instance used the concept of “Präsentationsinteresse” in her analysis of interviews, which refers to the specific performance of identity bound to the contingencies of a specific narrative interview, and needs to be distinguished from a general “thematic field”, which refers to the contentual red thread pervading and organizing a narration.

6 EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The following chapters of my thesis focus on my empirical work, and are divided into two main sections. As already mentioned, my main research interest lies in looking at online social play as a socio-technical assemblage, taking a specific game played by a specific community as a basis for my research. The game is called “Left4Dead2” and is played in the context of a livestream called “Late Night with Cry and Russ”.

In the following, I will first take an in-depth look at the material basis that the game provides. Left4Dead2 is the successor to Left4Dead¹⁹, and by now features all the levels of the first game in addition to those of the second. The game is set in the USA during a zombie-apocalypse, where society has crumbled due to an undefined *Infection*, which turned most of the population into mindless but highly aggressive individuals, called *the Infected*. These individuals are attracted to loud and especially high noises, as well as (to some degree) sources of light. They attack everyone who is not infected, who in the context of the game are mostly *the Survivors* – the possibly immune protagonists of the game. In this setting, players can control one of four Survivor-characters who try to get to safety as a group, and rely heavily on one another to stay alive in the course of it. While all four characters are intended to be controlled by different players, in lack of such the computer or AI (Artificial Intelligence) fills in automatically, controlling the other Survivors to make it possible for a single player to complete the objective and get to safety. The game is played in the form of so-called *Campaigns*, which form a closed unit of one story-arc, accompanying the Survivors from being stranded to getting to safety. Each Campaign is divided into several *Chapters* which allow for short breaks and a save-point from which to proceed should the Survivors die.

The genre L4D belongs to is called an online multiplayer first person shooter (FPS). These games are meant to be played online and with more than one person, and are thus called multiplayer, as opposed to single-player, games. They are either played by accessing a so-called server, which is a computer running the game, or by one player hosting, which means that they run the game for everyone else while playing it themselves. Most of the time using a server to play the game is a necessity due to both the bandwidth of the internet connection and the processing power of the computer required to run the game smoothly for more than one person (although this also depends on how many players join a game at once). In addition to that, servers sometimes change both the properties and the objectives of the games they host, although it is possible for players to exclude or choose such servers deliberately.

FPSs make up a considerable share of the videogame market – as indicated above, of the 8 top-selling games of 2011, 4 fell into this genre (all of them military shooters). Generally speaking, FPSs are games set in 3D environments, with players being put into these settings in 3D bodies. These bodies are called avatars, and they are their main means of acting and interacting with the game, and within it with one another. The world of L4D is structured in so-called *Campaigns*, which feature a succession of environments segmented into *Chapters* that together form both a (mostly) linear path and a story-arc

¹⁹ Left4Dead was released in November 2008, while Left4Dead2 was released in November 2009, although both of them have been updated and adapted multiple times since their initial release. In the following, when writing L4D, I am talking about the franchise (i.e. both games), while L4D1 indicates only the first game and L4D2 only the second one.

for the Survivor-characters to complete, with a grand final confrontation at the end. Between Chapters the games are saved, so that players who die do not have to restart the whole Campaign. To play L4D, people have to install an additional software called *Steam*, which distributes games and manages them within player-accounts. Through this software, members of the *Steam-Community* can befriend one another and organize their online social play, aside from their individual offline play. Most people use nicknames or gamertags on Steam, which work to make them both (to some degree) anonymous *and* identifiable to others. Steam is a major tool in contacting other players, and is integrated on a very basic level into L4D, as will be shown later.

Both the Survivor-characters and the Infected work with specific forms of stereotyping. The Infected are divided into three types: 1) Common Infected are regular people infected with the “Green Flu”, as they were described above. 2) Uncommon Infected are environment-specific Infected with additional characteristics pertaining to their surroundings, such as clowns, people in hazmat-suits, or police-officers in riot-gear. They can only be found in specific Campaigns where their outfits make sense. 3) Special Infected are individuals *mutated* by the Infection, giving them additional abilities and powers, most of which are interpretable in the frameworks of disease and epidemics. There are 8 types of Special Infected overall, 2 of which are called *boss-characters*: The Witch and the Tank. All of this will be discussed in greater depth later on.

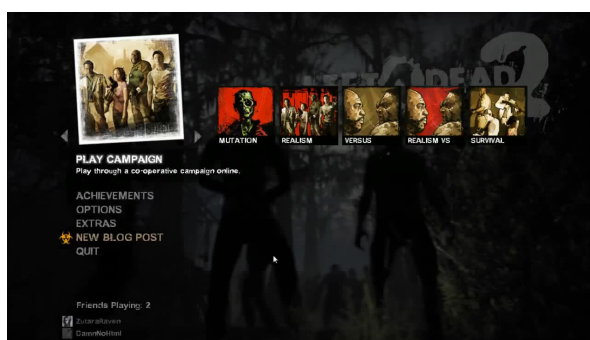
The second part of my analysis focuses on the specific social frameworks arising from the game, by means of a livestream. This stream, called “Late Night with Cry and Russ”, is produced by a group of people broadcasting while playing a variety of games, with L4D being one of them. They air on a weekly basis and have a comparatively large audience that can participate in the games to some degree. This makes them an ideal example of the complex sociality that may arise from the materiality of online social gameplay. But more on that later.²⁰

While the following analysis might at times seem tedious to some readers, I ask you to bear with me, as the structures provided by the game are fundamental in understanding the social relations, meanings, and practices following in their wake, as well as their contingencies, possibilities and necessities.

20 In the following sections, dialog-quotes from the game or the livestream are indicated by double-quotes “ in the text body and by an indent in their own paragraphs. Origin is indicated in square brackets at the end of a quote, as are notes by the author []. *Italics* indicate a raised voice and screaming, while colons : indicate elongation of the previous letter (a::: means an elongated ‘a’-sound). Breaks in the flow of talking are indicated by semicolons, shorter pauses by a full stop . and longer ones in parentheses (1 sec). Full stops at the end of sentences are used when the voice goes down. Regular members of the stream have been assigned letters, with A being Cry, B being Scott, C being Snake, D being Russ, E being Raven, and F being BattleStar. Everyone else is indicated by their Steam-nickname. Written in-game messages are indicated by full nickname and (types) at the beginning, similar to how they are seen on screen, while voice-communication utilizing the game’s own software is indicated by (ptt) (abbreviation of push-to-talk). Nicknames I only heard read-out and never saw typed are indicated in square brackets [], as are transcribed passages I’m not entirely sure about.

6.1 STRUCTURES AND MECHANICS: DRAMATURGICAL ANALYSIS OF A GAME

This section of my thesis deals with the videogame Left4Dead2, which serves as a material basis for the social relations arising in dialog with it. It is one of the settings of the livestream, the analysis of which forms the second part of my empirical research, and as such facilitates highly specific forms of (inter)action. Coming from an ANT background, it is important to stress that technologies never pre-determine their use, while they are also not arbitrarily usable in a purely social constructivist way. Rather, they are reconfigured and assembled in a cooperation between human and nonhuman actors. Thus, it is important to understand the game in its materiality, complexity, and contingency, to see what can and cannot be done when navigating through its spaces and places, and to look into what kind of dynamics are facilitated by its conditions. The following analysis is composed in a roughly chronological order of game-play. For the purpose of readability, I will focus on the game-options chosen by the group I am examining. While a comprehensive analysis of all available options could be highly interesting and useful to understand the entire scope of experiences a videogame might offer, it would leave no room for looking at the consequences of the choices taken by the group, i.e. the social environment the players create when engaging with the materiality of the software. Thus, in some respects the analysis will remain more superficial, to make possible a more profound interpretation of other aspects.



Figures 3 + 4: The opening menus of Left4Dead2 and Team Fortress 2 respectively.

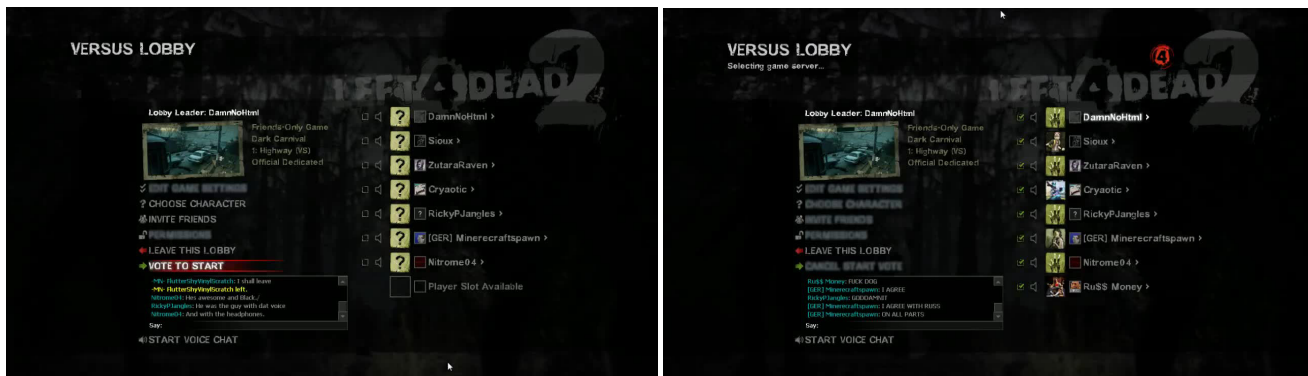
6.1.1 STARTING UP LEFT4DEAD

When starting up L4D2, the player is directed to a main menu from which the properties of the game may be manipulated, and game-modes may be chosen. While I am not going to delve into the options provided by the game, it is important to note that users need to be highly knowledgeable when navigating through the spaces of this virtual environment. Although it is structured similarly to other games (see for instance the above comparison with the opening menu of TF2), players still need to identify tags and equate them with specific courses of action to find their way to actual gameplay. Thus, to engage with and be part of a gaming community, a variety of skills are essential, both in the forms of tacit and explicit knowledges (as described earlier).

The menu of L4D2 already sets the overall tone of the game: It looks dark and gritty, because it is set in a (semi-)earnest post-apocalyptic scenario – both the characters and the environments are designed to emulate reality. The Survivor-characters are supposed to represent ‘everyday Americans’, thrown into an unexpected and dire situation impossible to have prior experiences with. Thus, their abilities

are acquired out of the necessities posed by their environments, and consequently do not differ from one another. All of this is logically tied to the demands of the story, and L4D gives its characters a fleshed-out history, story-arcs, and complex interrelations. This has far-reaching consequences for the dynamics of play, which will be discussed more in-depth later on.

There are several ways to enter a game in L4D, although usually players join already existing ones. L4D allows to limit the access to a game to individuals on a friends-list, or individuals in a so-called *Steam-Group*, which offers a mechanic for the self-organization of members of the Steam-Community, and is usually utilized by the community of the livestream. When any of them join a game, they mostly proceed to the so-called *Lobby*.



Figures 5 + 6: The Lobby before and after starting the game.

6.1.2 THE LOBBY

When creating/joining a Lobby, one enters a hierarchically structured space suitable for preparations and negotiations of varying forms, as well as for waiting (for people to join, for a whole party to be formed, for agreements to be made, for a server to be found, and so on): One person is the so-called *Lobby Leader*, who can edit settings such as game mode, Campaign, and access to the game, and may *kick* players from the Lobby. Although they structurally need no consent from other players, it is seen as courteous to ask them before changing anything, as they joined a game expecting certain settings, and might leave when changes occur in an unsolicited/unwarranted way. Thus, willfully leaving a Lobby can also be a kind of sanctioning of specific actions occurring within this space.

On the right side of the Lobby-screen, there is a list of players currently in the game, as well as representations of possible open slots. All in all, they make a list of 8 open or filled slots, with the Lobby Leader on top and the other players underneath in the chronological order they joined. As with all other menus of that sort, the players are identified by their profile pictures and nicknames. To their left there is an additional icon signifying which character a person has chosen (and will be playing as soon as the game starts). This is either Random (a question mark), one of the 4 Survivors (chosen by name, but signified with a picture), or a random Infected. This distinction between an actual Survivor and a random Infected also serves to strengthen player-identification with the characters, and weakens identification with the Infected. In the end there have to be 4 people on each team, so when there are already 4 Survivors in the Lobby, the others are automatically assigned Infected. Structuring

teams might be a matter of negotiation, for which the Lobby is also a (arguably) suitable space. Some structures of this space facilitate such negotiations, as for instance a chat-window on the left bottom of the screen does. Here, all people currently in the Lobby can communicate with one another in written form, while it also automatically documents the comings and goings of players. When a Lobby Leader starts a game, all players automatically proceed to the loading-screen for the Campaign.



Figure 7: The loading-screen of the Campaign “Blood Harvest”.

6.1.3 THE LOADING SCREEN

The loading-screens are specific for each Campaign, and serve again to set a certain tone. They always show a movie-style ‘poster’ of the four Survivor-characters, including the stylized title of the Campaign and a corresponding tagline, such as “Death Toll. Hell Came to Earth. These Four are Gonna send it Back.” or “Dark Carnival. You Must Be This Tall... TO DIE!”. All of this shows both an intricate knowledge of the genre the game is set in, and a certain commitment to a tongue-in-cheek (re)framing of the setting as both gruesome *and* fun concurrently. It also hints at the game’s tendency to simultaneously emphasize realism and gore. Gore has been central to the zombie movie-genre since George Romero’s 1968 classic “Night of the Living Dead”, and was continued and expanded in movies such as Sam Raimi’s “Evil Dead” series and Peter Jackson’s “Braindead”. While often including some kind of social commentary, zombie-movies focus heavily on the physical destruction of bodies, both living and dead. This is in turn referenced in the Left4Dead series of games, where Infected can lose limbs, spill their guts, and have their heads explode when being shot. Survivor-characters on the other hand do not die gruesomely, but stay completely intact even as a corpse. One reason for this might be that they can be revived with certain items and therefore *need* to remain intact, but it also sets them apart from the Infected visually, suggesting an Othering of the infected bodies. For them, dying horribly it is not only allowed, but it is a source of pleasure to the player. The Infected are mindless aggressors who in all certainty have no future, while the playable Survivors are ‘actual people’ with back-stories, personalities, and a past, who are fighting for a future and are worth protecting – they have the leading roles in these ‘movies’, and are the only ones depicted on the ‘poster’. This interpretation is further

supported by the fact that there are no children or pregnant women among the Infected, and while drama in general is an important part of the genre itself, it is conspicuously absent within the game. The Survivors are extremely capable and confident people with no-one ever being close to a mental breakdown, even though some of the shattered environments they navigate through are their hometowns and they have to assume nigh all of their relatives dead or infected. Thus, there is (almost) nothing happening within the game to suggest that the Infected are too much like 'people'. This was even once noted by a participant of the livestream:

A: do you wanna know something depressing? all of these zombies, had like a life, before this. like, these like lawyers,-

B: except, except the clowns

[on 2012.03.25]

The Common Infected are also mostly held in gray-scale and strongly reduced tones, while the Survivors are held in actual color. The successful Othering of the Infected serves to reduce the moral ambiguity of their killing, which might otherwise to some be an obstacle to the enjoyment of the game (as I for instance experience with more realistic military shooters).



Figure 8: 'Poster' from the Campaign "Dead Center".



Figure 9: Promotional poster from the movie "Shaun of the Dead".

On the right bottom of the screen, there is a loading-bar informing the player on their progress of loading into the game. When several people load in simultaneously coming from a Lobby, they often have different loading-times. In such cases, the game itself delays a while for players to load before starting a round, which might lead to some players staying at the loading-screen with a full loading-bar. When players take too long to load in, the game might nevertheless start without them, and in the worst case they get kicked and have to go through a long process of re-joining. Thus, the loading-screens work to synchronize players and enable them to all start playing at the same time. This is a

fundamental difference to other games of the same genre, which often feature larger teams with less team-cohesion. It also places a different emphasis on cooperation than other games, and encourages players to stay together and look out for one another, because they are in it together from beginning to end. But more on this later.

6.1.4 GAME OBJECTIVES, LIFE-CYCLES & TEAM-COHESION

While both Survivors and Infected need to meet their objectives through team-work and coordination, the specific form this takes in-game often differs significantly. As mentioned earlier, all Survivor-characters have the same basic abilities – all can heal, all can use each available weapon, all operate with the same velocity. The Infected characters on the other hand all differ in their abilities and handling. But while players might prefer certain Special Infected, they cannot choose them freely, as Infected are assigned randomly. In the basic Versus Campaign-mode, the Survivor-team needs to ‘survive’ the Chapter while progressing linearly through its environment. At the same time, the Infected need to opportunistically hinder their progress and try to incapacitate or kill them as early on as possible. Each Chapter is played twice, with each team playing Survivors and Infected once, while the linear progress as Survivors is translated into points that serve as the basic measure for winning the game. Rounds end as soon as all Survivor-characters are either ‘safe’, or killed/incapacitated, and are thus no longer able to go on. L4D’s linearity is embedded into the game in a narrative way: The Survivors have an actual arc, starting in a desolate place and needing to get to safety, to fight their way out of the contaminated areas. Each mission ends with a challenging *Finale*, where they have to hold out until rescue arrives. This Finale is akin to a ‘boss-fight’, and if the Survivors win, i.e. survive, they are picked up to be brought to safety. They thus end each Campaign with something approximating closure. Even the non-Campaign game-modes Scavenge and Survival play into this trope: Survival is very close to the Finale, in that Survivors need to stay alive while wave after wave of zombies attack. Normally, there would be an end to this; here, however, the goal is not to survive, period, but to survive as long as possible, as death is inevitable – there’s no help coming after all. In Scavenge, the goal is to collect canisters of gasoline to power up cars or generators, which in the context of the story are needed to escape, but in this game-mode become an end in themselves – the team that collects more canisters before the time runs out or they are killed wins. This subtle, yet ever-present emphasis on story has several effects, which will be discussed more in-depth below.

Another aspect of the dynamics of play relates to the mechanics of living and dying: The Survivors in L4D are designed to live comparatively long, which in the context of the game means they are able to heal themselves (when carrying the necessary supplies), and can defend themselves with weapons dealing high amounts of damage. When they die, however, they die ‘for good’, unless they are reanimated with a defibrillator – their main objective, after all, is survival. The Infected on the other hand die and re-spawn²¹ continuously (with randomly assigned bodies). Their damage-dealing powers and health vary significantly, although all but two of them are designed to die rather quickly (in comparison with the Survivors). While the Infected mostly have more Health than the Survivors, who on top of that are

²¹ Spawning and re-spawning denotes the (re)appearance of (manipulable) objects and/or avatars within a virtual environment.

clearly in the minority, the Survivor's tools deal a lot more damage than most of the Infected, enabling them to kill more efficiently. The zombies on the other hand are feral beings, using their bodies as weapons and spitting, vomiting, pouncing, and pounding on Survivors. All of this sets Survivors and Infected apart on a basic level, and emulates a prototypical distinction between nature and technology: The Survivors use weapons and tools to keep themselves alive, while the 'animalistic' Infected cannot even open doors; they are, however, strong and wild enough to break through most of them, and through (certain) walls on top of that. The physicality of the Infected also makes their relationship to the Survivors an almost intimate one.

In L4D, enemies controlled by players are not the only active hazard to the Survivors – the Common Infected controlled by the AI attack and work to obstruct them even when all players on the Infected team happen to be dead simultaneously. This, too, somewhat changes the dynamics between the teams – the Survivors seldom have a moment of rest, while the Infected players might relax when dead and waiting for their re-spawn. Although the Common Infected don't deal a lot of damage, they are fast and highly aggressive. They can significantly hinder the progress of the Survivors, as they not only block their way but stop their movement when hitting them. They also regularly attack in hordes, which *swarm* players (surround them) and can become quite menacing.

Because the teams in L4D are very small, seasoned players can get a good overview on what their teammates are currently doing, their respective health-status, and the equipment they are carrying. Furthermore, they may open up a semi-transparent display by pressing the TAB-key, which shows general information on the game; the Survivor-team's current score; a list of players ordered according to teams; whom they are playing, what condition they are in, and what equipment they are carrying as Survivors; individual scores as Infected; and their *Pings*, which signifies the state of their connection

and how much latency each player experiences. The order of the Infected players on this list is determined by the damage they dealt to the Survivors, indicated in points, with the lowest on the list having dealt the most. Thus, for experienced players it is possible to get a good impression of how well a team is doing, and teams are much better off if they have at least one person keeping an eye on this. Such players also tend to know the maps well, and may advise their teammates on when to heal or use equipment, what equipment to pick up or leave behind, how to react to and proceed in menacing situations, and so on.

All of these things lead to a much higher team-cohesion and individual feelings of allegiance than can be experienced for instance in TF2, although it also entails stricter forms of policing and sanctioning of behavior. In L4D, players may be willfully *kicked* from the game through two channels: Through a majority-vote, in which case two of four players with one abstained or three of four



Figure 10: The TAB-menu depicting pings, equipment, points reached so far, etc.

players need to be in favor to kick a player. Or through a console-command, in case one player is hosting the game on their own computer, which gives them certain privileges. Usually, players are kicked for offenses such as cheating, spamming, or prolonged inactivity²². Because of the high team-cohesion in L4D, however, players who play badly (e.g. as Survivors: Leaving their team by running ahead or trailing behind, wasting resources, or shooting their teammates) might be sanctioned severely, as a team's victory fundamentally depends on all 4 players doing their part:

B: can I, kick, Joe?	[...]
A: [laughs]	A: oh God, Joe's gonna be so pissed-off
D: I'm not opposed to it	D: yupp, here come the messages. great.
A: [laughs]	A: I wasn't in charge of anything. as always.
B: Russ does not veto, Cry, do you veto, or no?	[...]
A: I'm, I'm, I'm so, I'm a neutral party in this. <i>oh my goodness you kicked Joe!</i>	B: sorry Joe, I didn't wanna get shot by you, and or abandoned completely [laughs]
B: dude I actually wanna play Left4Dead, and not just get shot by Joe	A: he's got a point

[on 2012.04.22]

Progress within the game happens usually very slowly, and tides may turn from one Chapter to another, but having a single inexperienced member on a team may cost it dearly, as they can be exploited easily. Singling out players can be both a road to victory and a mean exercise of power, which might lead to arguments, people being kicked or leaving out of frustration (more on that later).

6.1.5 STEREOTYPING AND IDENTIFYING (WITH) THE CHARACTERS: THE SURVIVORS

In L4D, Survivor-characters/avatars are only chosen once, in the Lobby, and are kept afterwards for the duration of the game. For some players it might even be important to keep specific characters whenever they play the game, although such preferences are not displayed by the people on the livestream. If players start out as Infected in a Versus game, they are assigned to Survivor-avatars randomly in each following round, and cannot claim one body for their own. Because the basic skills of all Survivor-characters are the same, a player's choice might hint at sympathies towards or identification with one avatar and/or their design – each of them has a name, a back-story, and what boils down to a quotable personality, expressed mainly through in-game dialog. The Survivors constantly talk to one another about both fixed and contingent aspects of what they experience. They reference the environments of the game, express emotions, relate memories, or wonder about what happened, just to name a few. This serves several purposes: It makes both the virtual world and the characters appear more 'real', giving them a history and substance beyond their visuals and game-mechanics, and tying them to one another. Through this, they also get a life and an identity outside of the player's direct influence, and transcend the present-day of the game which the player may witness and participate in. It makes the characters into more than sole projection surfaces, and makes it easier for the player to relate to both the world and its people – they feel more real, and their plights and troubles, their hopes and dreams make the imperative of survival a struggle with actual meaning, surpassing a player's pure ludic pleasure from 'beating the game'. Lastly, these conversations serve as content for waiting-periods, and

²² In my personal circle of friend, we have a high intolerance towards racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive behavior. For instance, we once discussed and then decided to kick someone because their nickname was "VaffenSS", but only after first explaining to them our reasons.

prepare players for what's to come, by making the characters talk about it.



Figures 11 + 12: 'Posters' from the Campaigns "No Mercy" (Left4Dead1) and "Swamp Fever" (Left4Dead2), depicting the respective Survivor-characters.

The other conversations are about contingent elements of the game, and relate directly to (tactical) game-play: Characters inform one another about items they find and/or whenever they take them, about Special Infected they hear, when they are healing, reloading their weapons, or otherwise occupied (and thus cannot defend themselves or help others momentarily), when they or another teammate needs help, and so on. They also automatically thank one another when helping each other out, and rebuke other players after they inflicted *Friendly Fire*. This serves again to make the characters seem more real and invested in what is happening *to them*, and not just to the player/s. They are capable individuals interested in surviving, who might even know more about staying alive in this post-apocalyptic scenario than the players do. They also stress the imperative of cooperative game-play, as they repeatedly involve their teammates in their situation, informing them on what the group, *as a team*, has to their disposal, and what they, *as a team*, need to do to stay alive. This ties into tactical game-play, as this game-mechanic allows for players to strategically adjust their performance to the contingencies of the game without necessarily having to communicate with the others directly. These conversations can also be activated intentionally: Either passively, by looking at an item long enough for the character to shout out and inform one's teammates on it, or by activating a number of specific pre-recorded dialog-options, roughly divided into "Orders" and "Questions and Answers". They appear on screen when pressing a specific key, and can be chosen by moving the mouse towards it. For each option there are a number of variations of dialog. Whether these mechanics are really used a lot for their intended purpose I cannot say – neither do I myself or my co-players use them, nor

have any of the people on the stream done so. However, they are sometimes ‘abused’ for so-called *spamming* – babbling continuously with no game-play related reason. This serves to both make other noises inaudible and thus hinder playing the game to its full extent, and to annoy other players with constantly repeating the same meaningless phrases over and over again. Finally, characters also react audibly when being hit (by Common Infected, for example), which works to not just tell other players, but to tell *oneself* when they receive damage (together with a variety of other indicators). Another interesting aspect of these in-game conversations by characters is that they are often repeated or adopted by players, both randomly and to actually communicate the same things the characters do, and often in the same voice and intonation:

D: holy shit, Whispering Oaks! [on 2012.10.28] [quotes Coach]

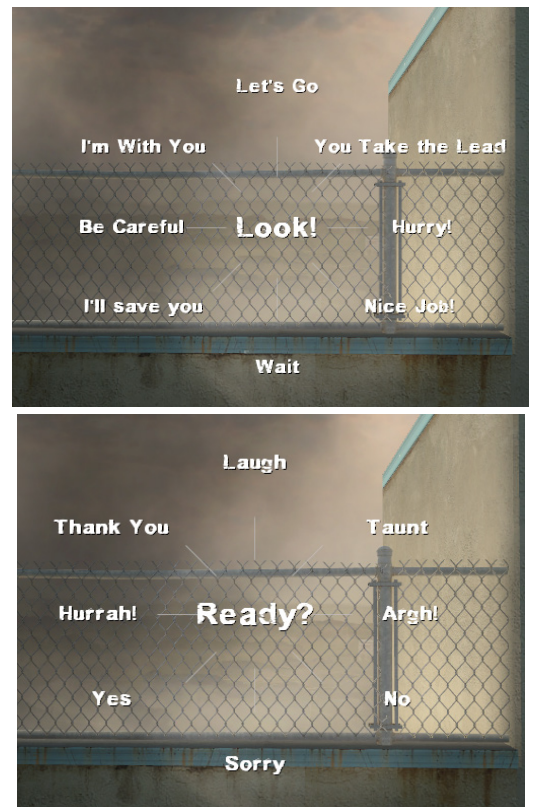
A: grabbing pills [on 2012.01.08] [quotes Louis]

B: y’all, y’all I’m hurt [on 2012.01.22] [quotes Ellis]

Stereotyping plays a significant role in the design of the characters in L4D: In L4D1 (which is freely available to players owning just the second part of the series), the 4 Survivors are:

1) Francis, The Biker. A heavily tattooed, white man wearing black leather, who is always grumpy. 2) Bill, The Vietnam Veteran. An older, gray-haired, white man in green combat gear who is always smoking a cigarette and has a generally responsible attitude. 3) Louis, The Office Worker who is also The Black Guy. A younger black man who worked in IT and still wears his ‘business-casual’ outfit, including a red tie. 4) Zoey, The Girl/Woman. A young, white, middle-class university student in trousers wearing flat shoes (which is somewhat remarkable in the context of videogames, as was discussed earlier). L4D2 is set in the southern United States, and accordingly adapts its stereotypes: The 4 Survivors are: 1) Nick, The Mafioso/Con-Artist. A shady-looking white guy in a white suit and blue shirt. 2) Ellis, The Redneck. A young, white, poor mechanic with a heavy Southern accent. 3) Coach, The Coach. A slightly overweight, older black man who used to play football and after injuring his knee became a high-school football coach. He is also a very religious person. 4) Rochelle, The (Sassy) Black Girl. A young, slim black woman in a short-sleeved t-shirt, who worked as a TV production assistant.

These characters are not just stereotypical in their visual design, but also in their back-stories, in-game dialog, and the way they interact with one another. Coach and Bill are conceptualized as the ‘natural leaders’ of their respective teams, thoughtful and responsible, but with a somewhat strained relationship to the ‘bad boys’ of the group. Nick and Francis are said bad boys, with a more or less explicit history of breaches with the law, who are always grumpy and rude. Ellis and Louis are talkative but unaggressive young guys, who serve as the ‘jokesters’ of the group, and might be the most easily relatable. Ellis furthermore fills the trope of the ‘poor, working-class Southerner’, while Louis is the



Figures 13 + 14: Pre-recorded conversation-options selectable by the player in Left4Dead2.

‘token minority’. Rochelle and Zoey are ‘the chick’ (and not much but), i.e. the ‘token female character’, whose basic function is to heighten diversity. This is referenced when in one Campaign they meet one another, and have this short exchange:

Zoey: Hello down there!

Rochelle: Oh, thank God! I thought I might be the last woman on Earth.

Zoey: Yeah...I know that feeling.

[in-game dialog, The Passing]²³

Although the female characters have no canonical love interest in their own groups, when they meet the other Survivors in the very same Campaign they immediately take a liking in someone from the other team: Ellis falls in love with Zoey, and Francis and Rochelle find out they have common interests (hating stuff). This works both to support a heteronormative framework, and to allude to love-centered sub-plots commonly found in end-time movies. At the same time, both women get to wear covering clothes, flat shoes, and trousers, and are in their abilities indistinguishable from their teammates, which is not often the case in videogames. Thus, each game has at least one older person (styled as an, albeit contested, leader of the group), one Person of Color (although in both cases they are black and not, for instance, Hispanic), one bad boy, and one woman. It’s also no coincidence that the second installment of the game, where “it all goes South”, features two People of Color – it fits the trope, and goes well with the environments of the second game, which are much more conscious of US-American history (as will be discussed later).

All these stereotypes are not just references to tropes that fit into the movie-theme described earlier, they also help players identify, and identify with, the avatars:

A: [my favortie] character? definitely Bill, just because, I mean, look at the guy! he’s freakin’ Bill. old guy characters are always cool. they will always be cool. [on 2012.02.12]

The Survivors represent characters that are well known from movies, TV, videogames, and other media, while simultaneously claiming some foundation in reality. They are designed to look real, their dialogs are written to sound real, and they interact with an environment that is constructed to feel real. L4D’s characters are ‘everyday normal tropes’, and through this they elicit sympathy or dislike. At the same time, the game subverts and plays with these tropes – Francis, for instance, hates everything but his leather west, and shows a lot of awareness towards clothing for a ‘tough guy’ (as does Nick).

Now I have to share a personal example of my relationship to two of the characters because it illustrates, to a degree, the complex interplay of common tropes, audiovisual design, and game mechanics, and their ties to issues transcending the context of the medium: When I started playing L4D2, I was highly prejudiced against ‘Rednecks’ , as my input on the southern US as I grew up stemmed mostly from television. I considered ‘them’, in a well-known essentialist perspective, uneducated, racist, misogynist, gun-toting, overly religious, and to a degree dangerous people (although I never quite accepted the ‘inbred’-stereotype)²⁴. When I initially encountered Ellis, I found him unappealing to say the least, but

²³ A gaming-buddy of mine regularly makes jokes along the line of “Don’t hurt Rochelle! We need her to repopulate the earth!”

²⁴ See for instance cartoon portrayals that play with these stereotypes, such as Cletus Spuckler on The Simpsons and Kenny McCormick’s family on South Park. On the other hand, there are more ‘serious’ movies like Mississippi Burning and The Jury, tackling specifically racism and religious bigotry in the South.

my brother liked him and thus continuously picked him. Through this avatar, he saved and protected me, and healed and took care of me, as this is a basic script of the game. I quickly started to like the character, as he somehow merged with my brother (it always feels wrong when someone else controls Ellis now), and through this, I fundamentally changed my view on whatever I considered 'Rednecks' and 'Southerners'. I started liking the accent, I found a basic appreciation for 'the South' as a cultural space that – of course! – transcends its stereotypes, and it made me more careful with regards to my own, long-established belief-systems. Thus, this stereotype had, paradoxically, a subversive power.

The other character I want to talk about is Coach. I usually play in a team of 4 friends, and for some reason no-one ever wanted to play Coach, while both I and a female friend of mine wanted to play Rochelle²⁵. In the end, she ceded and kindly took over Coach, but it never really 'stuck', and she didn't become affectionate with the character. In addition to that, when she wasn't around her slot often remained empty, leaving Coach to be controlled by the AI. And although the AI works reasonably well, it still is faulty – it can't use additional equipment aside from healing items, and it always heals itself much too soon, wasting valuable resources. In addition to that, it sometimes 'glitches' and does not react when zombies attack, or won't help when help is needed. Through this, the rest of the group started to dislike Coach immensely, making jokes at his expense and being quick to anger with him. Although he reflected the software controlling bots, it was less the programming we got angry with and more the character himself. Whenever my friend took over I felt bad for it, because she, too, merged with him, as my brother did with Ellis, but not enough to make him a sympathetic stereotype to me. So the sympathies towards a character are tied both to their design – which might be appealing or deterring – *and* the mechanics of teamwork – helping and healing and playing competently. These mechanics have a double-trajectory: When they work, they can elevate a character, when they don't, they might elicit aversion.

6.1.6 STEREOTYPING AND IDENTIFYING (WITH) THE CHARACTERS: THE SPECIAL INFECTED

While the Special Infected characters are not freely selectable, they, too, are highly stereotyped, albeit in a way designed to elicit disgust and aversion. They are not just people infected by the virus, but *mutated* by it, giving them new, over-exaggerated properties, that interestingly overlap with a lot of wider (US-)cultural imaginaries of diseased bodies: 1) The Boomer is a slow-walking, morbidly obese Infected with a reflux-problem. He gags all the time, and vomits a stinking bile on Survivors that works to both blind them for a short period of time, and attract a massive and ongoing horde attacking the *biled or boomed* individual/s. He wears sweatpants and a t-shirt that slid up his torso to expose his belly. Later, there was a female model added, whose clothes are ragged in a way to appear as if she was

²⁵ While I myself do not necessarily choose female characters in videogames, my friend told me she *always* prefers to play women. In games featuring character-customization she usually constructs herself female avatars, and she had to abandon her tries at male ones. To me, too, it is strange to play someone I cannot identify with, although this is not primarily connected to gender – in the first game, I immediately chose Louis and am perfectly content with him, while Rochelle was rather chosen through exclusion, as I didn't like any of the other characters *at all*. Thus, for both of us it is still important to play someone we can identify with at least to *some* degree. Otherwise, there is a constant feeling of dissociation that makes playing a game somewhat unpleasant and is a substantial impediment to immersion. This might be important in the greater scheme of things, as there is, at the end of the day, only *one* woman in each game to choose from, making women, and by extension maybe also female players, into a minority.



Figure 15: The Special Infected. From left to right: The Charger, the Hunter, the Spitter, the Jockey, the Tank, the Witch, the (male) Boomer, and the Smoker.

only wearing underwear, but otherwise handles the same as her male counterpart. When a Boomer is shot, they violently explode and cover Survivors in close proximity with bile. 2) The Charger is a big male Infected wearing an overall, who has a massively muscular right arm and a completely wasted, underdeveloped left arm (which is the basis for continuous jokes about masturbation among the players, as might have been the intention of the designers). He has a very small head and attacks with only the right side of his body, *charging* into people and then pounding them into the dirt repeatedly. 3) The Hunter is a small, athletic male Infected in a hoodie. His main attack is *pouncing* or jumping on people, to then mutilate them by clawing at their upper body. 4) The Jockey is a small, stunted, incredibly lean man in shorts that jumps on peoples shoulders and *rides* them. He is the only 'regular' Special Infected to retain control after initiating his attack, and can steer single Survivors away from the group or into hazards. 5) The Smoker is a tall man with a large mass of tumors on his neck and left shoulder. He transpires a huge odorous green cloud and coughs continuously, and when killed leaves behind a cloud of (second-hand) smoke that obscures the Survivor's vision and leaves them choking themselves (although the smoke does no actual damage). He has a long tongue which is his main means of attack, slinging it around Survivors to draw them close and strangle them. 6) The Spitter is a tall female Infected with saggy breasts in a saggy bra, an unshapely, flabby stomach, and short trousers that do nothing to cover the thong underneath. She leaks acid from hear mouth, and attacks by spitting a large puddle of it on the ground, burning Survivors who run through it. When killed, a smaller puddle of acid is left behind for a shorter period of time. 7) The Tank is the largest, strongest, and most resilient of all controllable Special Infected. He is a boss-Infected and only comes up in specific situations. He looks like a bodybuilder who massively abused steroids, his naked upper body making up the vast majority of his overall body-mass. His legs are small and his head even smaller, and his main purpose in live is to run around hitting people. Sometimes, he also throws rocks at them. 8) The last Special Infected is not actually controllable by players, as she is a passive one: The Witch is a small, lean woman or girl that sits on the floor or slowly walks around crying. She seems incredibly depressed and might elicit sympathy. However, when a Survivor comes too close to her, damages her (by shooting or hitting her), or shines his flashlight on her for too long a period of time, she is *startled* and starts to attack the

individual responsible. She incapacitates Survivors with one stroke of her long claws, and then keeps clawing them until she either kills them or is killed herself. When she manages to kill someone, she immediately turns and runs away, never to be seen again. The Witch has a pinkish skin-tone and wears ragged underwear, which also exposes her belly.

As might be apparent from this description, these models work with (somewhat mean) stereotypes and exaggerations of ‘embarrassing bodies’: The Boomer cannot keep down his bile, and his ugly and shameful belly is exposed for the world to see. The Spitter, too, does not cover her unsexy body, and even worse, she wears clothing that is associated with sexiness – a bra and a thong – which underlines her affront to societal norms and values of beauty. Furthermore, she spews acid, which is a common trope pertaining to women, a metaphor for speaking ill, or being outspokenly of a different opinion. This is further accentuated by the fact that she has a dislocated lower jaw, exposing a hole from which the acid is dribbling relentlessly, making it impossible for her to keep it contained.

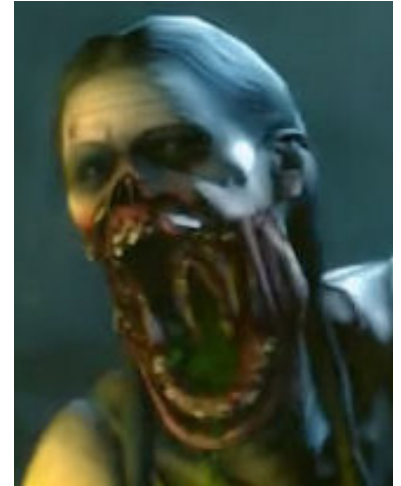


Figure 16: The head of the Spitter.

This very hole was by one player on the livestream described thusly: “I’m not joking, your throat looks like a vagina. I swear to God, that is disgusting. [...] that’s so gross. wow.” [on 2012.04.22]. It thus emulates two tropes at once: The toxic vagina and the ‘Vagina Dentata’, both horrendous, revolting, and dangerous to male genitals. In addition to that, the Spitter constantly bobs her head, which makes her look as if she was performing oral sex on a man. The Spitter, through her disgusting non-sexiness and the gaping genitalia embedded in her face, lives by tropes of poisonous female sexuality. The Tank meanwhile exaggerates working-class masculine ideals of huge muscular bodies to their final consequence, leaving a monster running on all fours, with tiny legs and an even tinier head, indicating stupidity and emphasizing the dichotomy between brains and brawn. And on the other end of the spectrum, the Jockey is a small, deformed man with a crooked torso and strong, lean limbs, a devious cripple that runs in a bent-over fashion and usurps control of a player’s movement by jumping their backs.

All these mutations give the Special Infected abilities to undermine or destroy the last remnants of (civilized, technologized) society, embodied by the healthy, stereotypically ‘normal’ Survivors. They are the last infected humanoids around who are more than mindless aggressors – they are *mindful* aggressors, able to strategize, which makes them far more malicious than the Common Infected. Their very sickness becomes their power to destroy society, and the nature of their mutation indicates that they themselves are (mostly) to blame for their inappropriate bodies (e.g. by smoking, overeating, or overtraining). But there are even more troubling implications in their design: The male Special Infected lend themselves perfectly to metaphors of male sexuality and sexualized aggression, which are often picked up and mirrored in the commentary made by the players during the game (more on that later). The Hunter jumps people and then sits on their lower torso while tearing them apart, which is visually close to sexual intimacy. The Smoker entangles people with his tongue, and thus “tongues” or “licks” them. The Charger and the Tank “pound” people, which is a colloquialism for penetrating someone



sexually, and hard. The Jockey “rides” people, which is again a term for being the active part in a penetrative sexual encounter. The obese man’s attack is constructed as an act of ejaculation, at least by the players of the livestream. And the Charger (implicitly) masturbates so much he has only one usable arm left. As one player on the stream puts it:

A: Money, why would you get close to me, look at this arm (1 sec) you know what I do with this arm. [on 2012.01.08.]

On the other hand, the female Special Infected are all examples of the objectification of female bodies: All of them are mainly in underwear, with exposed bellies and limbs, even if they are designed as highly undesirable.

All of them have less physical ways of attacking than their male counterparts (except for the Boomer, which is exactly the same, which begs the question: Are obese people thought of as inherently sex-less?). The Witch is completely passive until being engaged by a Survivor, and then gets into an (albeit deadly) catfight with whoever startled her. They all are examples of misguided sexualization, being either not allowed to be sexy because of their inappropriate bodies, or having a ‘sexiness’ that is creepy and highly problematic, as the Witch actually looks like a little girl. The figure of the woman crying as a means of emotional blackmail is implicated by the Witch often being called a “bitch” by the characters in their in-game dialogs, as in “Careful



Figures 17 + 18: Fan-art for Left4Dead, interpreting the attack of the Hunter in a oversexualized way. In both cases, they choose the only female character as a victim.

guys, I hear a bitch.” This statement embodies a stereotypical juxtaposition of ‘good guys’ (guys mainly refers to men, even if it may be used to include women) and ‘crazy, emotional bitches’ (unreasonable women, signified by startled witches), which is also a common trope of dysfunctional relationships. The seemingly unjustified transition from depressed to hysterically mad does nothing but emphasize this interpretation. Another aspect that makes the Witch highly problematic is a specific method of killing her without startling her, which is canonically called “crowning”: It is done by quickly approaching her and shooting her with a shotgun. To kill her in one try, all pellets of the shotgun need to hit her at once, killing her instantly. The fact that this is called crowning plays with a violent infantilization of the Witch, who is made into a princess that receives a deadly crown from her commoners. It implies immoderate demands and tyrannical subjugation by a female entity, who needs to be invasively neutralized.

On the other hand, and as discussed earlier with respect to the Survivor-characters, these models might have subversive possibilities, stemming from their actual embedding into the game-mechanics. It can be *fun* to vomit on people, it can be fun to be disgusting to them and strike discomfort in them, to be an ever-present menace that lurks in the shadows and is out there to hurt them. It may be pleasant to ambush them, outwit them, trick them into startling the dangerous Witch. And it has a cathartic effect when one actually becomes empowered by turning into the sick, feared, enemy body. This can be witnessed not just when players gleefully celebrate their successful attacks, but maybe even more

so when they accompany said attacks with loud noises:

D: well I'm gonna puke on all these guys *blu:::blublu blubblublu* [on 2012.04.01]

D: omnomnomnom o:::mnomnomnomnom [on 2012.01.22]

B: [as a Jockey] fucking dance baby

A: fu::ck you::: [laughs]

B: nts:nts:nts:nts: (2 sec) aw::: yea::h

[on 2012.01.22]

There even is some release in death, with the Boomer exploding violently, and the Spitter leaving behind an obstructive and harmful puddle of acid. This fun in mayhem is facilitated by a cumulative system of points that are awarded for all the damage a player deals the Survivors, resulting in a hierarchical list in the earlier described TAB-menu. Thus, the progress of the Survivor-team is not the only thing kept count on – individual statistics are kept on who is the most effective mutated body.

6.1.7 STEREOTYPING AND IDENTIFYING: THE MAPS

Just like the character-models of both Survivors and Infected play with delicately designed stereotypes, the maps players have to navigate through allude to a variety of different tropes. All in all, there are 13 official Campaigns to be played in Left4Dead2, with each being made up of 2 to 5 Chapters, although not all of them were available from the very beginning. I am going to exemplarily discuss some of the main Campaigns to make my point about the use of tropes, both as familiar settings and as narrative devices, although the scope of this thesis is regrettably not sufficient to discuss all of them. Details on the environments of the Campaigns can be learned mainly from three sources within the game: 1) As noted before, the in-game dialog by the characters reveals a lot about the surroundings. 2) There are notes and graffiti all over the maps, telling players details on how the Infection as a whole went down, what measures were taken to fight it, and how both individuals and governments reacted to it. 3) The developer's commentary, which discusses content and design choices taken during the production process of the game.

Although there are never any people seen aside from the Survivors (the few other non-infected characters are only heard, and seldom at that), the environmental design reveals that our Survivors are not the only ones who tried to fight their way out of the contaminated areas. An important indicator of this are the Safe-Rooms, which are safe places dividing the Campaigns into the shorter Chapters, and are filled not just with tools and equipment, but with last remnants of the fight for a civilized society. The design of the world constructs a feeling of present absentees, people who are still around, but never to be seen, which is integral to make the virtual environment feel like a real place with a history. On top of that, many of the graffiti emblazoned on the walls throughout the game make reference to tropes of a specific kind of everyday life presumably known to the players, such as heated discussions on the internet. Safe-Rooms are actually considered a safe space by the players, the ultimate goal of each Chapter:

KirbyKat (ptt): come o:::n! it's right the:re! [...] this wa:y! the house is right there! let us go in and have . chocolate bars [on 2012.02.05]

While the gameplay is largely the same, the biggest differences between L4D1 and L4D2 are in the

environments, as well as the detail with which the Survivor-characters are constructed *in relation* to these environments. The first game takes place mainly in Pennsylvania, in both cities and rural areas. Even though the map-design is thoughtfully selected and fashioned after actual places in the northern US, it assumes these places as somewhat default, without facilitating any deeper engagement with the cultural heritage they bear. Their main function seems to be to emulate tropes of the horror-genre at large, and the zombie-genre in specific:

No Mercy, the first Campaign, has the Survivors fight their way from an urban apartment-building to the roof of “Mercy Hospital”, where they hope to be picked up by a helicopter. They start out in medias res on top of on a roof, and have to pass through destroyed and often barricaded living quarters populated by the Infected. This serves as proof that society is no more, and that no-one was safe from its downfall. The Survivors proceed to a subway-station, which emulates former regularities of everyday life, such as daily communion. At the same time, navigating a broken subway-system is a common trope of post-apocalyptic and horror-movies, as they both elicit claustrophobia, and stand iconic for the breakdown of society. The Survivors then proceed through the sewers, which again is an oft-seen motif (most iconic for Austrians would be “The Third Man” and its chase scenes through the Viennese sewage system), that has an especially strong hold in videogame history (possibly starting with “Super Mario” the plumber). Sewers represent (literal and metaphorical) underground activity, being concealed from the world, and moving about without being seen. Because they spread underneath the whole city, they are a means to get around unnoticed, and are often portrayed as a safe space to hide from whatever awaits on the outside, facilitated by their maze-like qualities. However, this very vastness and labyrinthine built also constitutes a threat: People can get lost, in the darkness underground, and it is impossible to know what else lurks there. Paradoxically, they are both a safe and a dangerous space simultaneously. At the same time, leaving the sewers always elicits tension, as it is impossible to know what (if anything) awaits one on the outside. Finally, the Survivors arrive at a ruined Mercy Hospital, which serves as the final confirmation that cure is not possible – even the ones responsible for healing, with all the means to do so, where not saved from society’s downfall.

For the Survivors, rescue always comes in the form of a flying, swimming, or armored (military) vehicle, whisking them away from their terrible new reality (although it never lasts). Interestingly, the people responsible for the rescue are always contacted by technological means, mostly through radio messages, and use technologies to help the Survivors. Moreover, the people doing the rescuing themselves are never actually seen by the players, and always remain in their vehicles, which such seem to be driverless. This again stresses the earlier discussed metaphor of nature vs. technology, embodied by the feral, animalistic Infected on the one hand, and the artifacts of salvation on the other.

In **Death Toll**, the Survivors are farther out of the city, and make their way to a boathouse to be carried off by a fishing boat. The most iconic image of this Campaign, aside from broken highways and burned-out cars that illustrate the futility of trying to run away, is an encounter with a person within a church who presumably is a priest. The man, who barricaded himself successfully, perceives the Survivors as a threat to his own survival, and activates the church’s bells to attract a massive horde, intending to get the players killed. This scene plays with the trope of the fallen holy man, eliciting a feeling of all hope

being lost, which can be seen in parallel to Mercy Hospital. The church bells can be heard as knells, not only proclaiming death, but inviting it. Furthermore, this event might also be interpreted as a critique of Christian hypocrisy, with the preacher, in the most dire of hours, exchanging his oath with an attitude of ‘everyone for themselves’. It culminates in him using the bells to summon the mindless masses, parallel to his congregation, which follow the signal without thought or active decision-making, to come and do his bidding. The encounter ends with the man turning into a Special Infected, and subsequently being killed by the Survivors, ending his life the way of his parish’s.

The second game moves the plot south, starting in Savannah, Georgia and ending in New Orleans, Louisiana. This relocation serves not just as a new setting for the aforementioned tropes, but interestingly turns Left4Dead2 into somewhat of a character-study of the American South. It completely changes the feeling of the game: The environments become richer and more intricately constructed, using iconic imagery, tackling its history, and working with a whole different set of tropes not directly related to the horror-genre, but rather to the Southern States themselves. At turns, these still are rather offensive than benign or affectionate, but at the same time the level of detail invested in this endeavor leaves a feeling of earnestness and sincerity, as I hope to show below. To begin with, L4D2 takes up the musical themes encountered in the first game, and gives them a ‘Southern twist’, using banjos, brass, singing saws, and other instruments, in accordance with the environments the Campaigns are set in. Also, while L4D1 had a generally gloomy feeling and mainly dark environments, L4D2 often has bright sunlight, sometimes even blindingly so.



Figure 19: Scene from the Campaign “Cold Stream”, featuring blinding sunlight.

The first Campaign of L4D2, **Dead Center**, similarly to L4D1, starts out on the rooftop of a hotel. The building is burning at places, and there’s no-one to come to put out the fires – another reminder of the breakdown of society. Next, the Survivors arrive at a gun-store, which underlines the trope of the gun-toting Redneck. The owner of the shop is still barricaded in the back-alley, where he built himself a comfortable bunker²⁶. He agrees to help the Survivors through an otherwise impervious obstacle if they bring him the *one* thing that is missing inside his bunker: A coke. For this, the Survivors must break into a supermarket, triggering an alarm and a *Gauntlet Crescendo Event* with a never-ending horde, lasting until they deliver the coke and the store-owner bombs the obstacle with his rocket-launcher (which *of course* he has). Although all these references are tongue-in-cheek, they still serve as recognizable tropes making sure we know that this is the South and not, say, Pennsylvania. The Campaign ends in a shopping center where the Survivors have to collect fuel for a NASCAR race car on display in the main mall. Shopping malls are a common setting for zombie-themed media²⁷. They again represent a place where everyday life takes place, and where

26 This is a popular theme in US-American media, embodied for instance by National Geographic’s TV series “Doomsday Preppers”, which follows Americans who prepared for an ‘Armageddon’ of one kind or another: <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel/doomsday-preppers/> (Access: 06.05.2013)

27 For example, a big chunk of the game “Dead Rising 2” is set in a mall, as is the classic zombie-movie “Dawn of

people buy their basic means for living. On top of that, however, they are a monument to hedonistic lifestyles, temples of capitalism, where buying and consuming becomes an end in itself, rather than just a necessity to staying alive and comfortable. Furthermore, they are places where massive amounts of people come together. Their Infection is incidental – it is not just a threat to the survivors, but a play on the mindless, zombified hordes of consumers, begging the question how much the Infection actually changed them. Supermarkets, as the main food-providers in cities, develop a double-nature in the post-apocalypse: They are closed-off environments full of nourishment, possible safe-havens and final refuges, that can quickly turn into death-traps, and are not easily cleaned out from the residues of a crumbled society. However, while the mall plays with any possible Survivors' dependence on supermarkets as a source of basic necessities of life, our playable Survivors never actually eat or drink in-game, and spend no time looking for nourishment. This might be a break with the game's theme of realism, although the Survivors still talk about eating, and toilets are omnipresent in L4D's worlds. Thus, players may assume that food still plays a role for the characters. Finally, NASCAR is a racing sport with a fanbase stereotypically consisting of 'dumb, poor Rednecks'²⁸. To put such a racing car into the mall, and making Ellis a huge fan of NASCAR, is another nod to these tropes.

Swamp Fever takes place in the Louisiana bayous, an area of US wetlands, and deepest of the 'Deep South'. After being stranded, the Survivors have to navigate long strips of uninviting swamp, occasionally interrupted by outhouses, single huts, and small settlements made up of poor shacks, patched together from wood and tin, as well as rundown trailers, while banjo-music plays in the background. Here, the Survivors meet a special kind of Uncommon Infected, the "mud men", who developed out of the "Swamp People", former inhabitants of these run-down environments. They are, as their name indicates, men covered in mud, only wearing shorts and running on all fours. When they hit players, they cover them in sludge, obscuring their vision for a short period of time. This design-choice appropriates the (rather offensive) stereotype of the 'mud lovin' Redneck' – uneducated white Southerners that roll around in (and eat²⁹) dirt. The mud men's way of moving indicates that they are closer to animal than human – they are pre-historic, not wearing shirts nor shoes, and they attack from below, hidden in the murky waters of the wetlands (just like, strangely absent, alligators). It is, as always, a tongue-in-cheek allusion – they are mutations, after all, not 'real' Southerners. However, as with the Special Infected, it takes up well-known, offensive stereotypes and exaggerate them to the point of caricature. At the same time, the in-game dialog goes out of its way to establish the Cajun Swamp People as an exceptionally tough population who was used to survive on its own, and held out the longest against the Infection. As Rochelle puts it when passing through their settlement:

Rochelle: If anybody could survive this, it would be people who live like this. [in-game dialog, Swamp Fever]

The final act of the Campaign takes place at a big, white plantation house, which the Survivors reach after passing through a collection of slave quarters. Through this, the game again alludes to the stereotypical racism of 'the South', but also incorporates actual US history into the game. The design

28 A parody embodying all of this and more can be found in the 2010 South Park episode "Poor and Stupid".

29 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaDiT_TpEOk (Access: 24.04.2013)

of both the slave shacks and the plantation house is immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with the imagery, and the developers obviously went to great lengths to create environments that both look and feel real, emulating the architecture as well as the general topography of slave plantations. At the same time, these buildings are anachronistic – they are remnants of times past. In the context of the game, they are a commentary on ‘the South’ never arriving in the 20th century, let alone the 21st. On the other hand, they also make up the conclusion of a fairy tale-like story-arc, where the protagonists went through dangerous woods on long-forgotten paths to find themselves among the last remnants of a fallen society. The plantation looks beautiful after the swamp, it is the bringer of salvation, and it makes us easily forget the shacks outside. Furthermore, this environment might indicate the Infection as a great equalizer, as neither rich nor poor were spared – neither the swamp-people nor the plantation-owner (should there have still been one). Considering the position of the two PoC-members of the group, the basic escape-narrative of the game becomes a legitimate subject for debate when the group escapes to a plantation to get to safety. It can be read as either a cynical way to disregard the black characters own historical embeddedness, or it becomes an example of subversion and empowerment, showing the progress we, as a society, made, and making the plantation subject to the PoC-characters’ appropriation for their own rescue. In any case, it is an interesting imagery/imaginary to use.



Figures 20 + 21: Slave houses as seen in the game and on the Woodland Plantation in Louisiana.



Figures 22 + 23: Plantation house as seen in the game and on the Nottoway Plantation in Louisiana.

The final Campaign of L4D2 is called **The Parish** and takes place in a New Orleans overrun by zombies that is about to get carpet-bombed by the US military. While it is not a faithful recreation of the town itself, it goes to great lengths to incorporate its architecture, music, and overall culture into the Campaign. To discuss one such instance, one Chapter leads the Survivors through a graveyard looking very much like the Saint Louis Cemetery, while being far from a copy of it – the geographical structure



Figures 24 + 25: Graveyard as seen in the game and Saint Louis Cemetery in New Orleans.

of the cemetery changes between play-throughs, to make it harder for players to find their way, and keep them on their toes (or so the developers say in their commentary). While in fictional media graveyards are most often portrayed as dark and gloomy places, especially in the horror-genre, this one is well-lit and beautiful, and very much does its model justice. It would even look peaceful, were it not for the zombies all around³⁰.

Aside from all of these environments being well-known images related to US-American culture, they are the world the Survivor-characters themselves grew up in, and they let us know that: They relate to these environments, comment on them, tell stories and recall memories, especially during waiting-periods, in elevators, on ferries, and suchlike. And from the livestream it becomes clear that so do the

players – they quote the Survivors and repeat their statements, and start talking about what they see and experience themselves. They relate their own stories, share their own memories, express emotions in reaction to the setting, and exchange their interpretations on what they see. Even if they might not grasp all the intricacies of the highly constructed and designed environments they navigate through (as, I am sure, neither do I), it definitely has an impact on them, relating to things they know either from media or from real life, and co-shaping their actions within the game. While the players' most obvious reactions to the virtual world are related to strategic considerations or confusion over the geography, as people sometimes get lost on a map, there sometimes are instances of casual talk making other dimensions of relating to the environment explicit, which are often unrelated to actual gameplay:

A: there's swans (1 sec) do you remember that fucking a:, a:::, what's it called (1 sec) a:::, what, what, what are those, like, swan-love-things called in carnivals?

B: tunnel of love?

A: tunnel of love, yeah! the tunnel of love episode-

D: that's what this map is called, isn't it?

A: (1 sec) I don't know, I have no idea

B: I just remember Coach going *tunnel o' lo:::ve!*

C: yeah, that's what it is

[on 2012.10.28]

B: a:::ll the way to New O:rllea:::ns

A: I fucking love New Orleans (1.5 sec) I don't know I've never actually been there now that I think about it

[on 2012.02.22]

F: this is the masterbed. this is where the parents sleep

A: I wanna, I wanna sit here

B: best spot's right here

A: oh

F: but I wanna go in the bed with the stars on the ceiling

B: alright fine, we can go in here

F: no, this room, yeah. this, this is my room

A: that's on the wall, not the ceiling

[on 2012.08.12]

A: *fuck the bushes!* (1.5 sec) I'll never go near a bush again, this is bullshit! [...] I almost got mugged in real life by a guy in a bush it was weir:d [...] *I'm trying to::!* (1 sec) I'm afraid to go by the bushes, though (2 sec) I have a paranoia [on 2012.01.22]

30 When making screenshots for this thesis, it was exceptionally hard not to have too many mangled corpses in view, as each environment is riddled with Infected that attack players on sight.

A: dude, this is like the perfect place for a horror movie [on 2012.07.01]

6.1.8 ONE GAME, TWO PERSPECTIVES

After the loading-screen, the game introduces the players on the Survivor-team to the Campaign by utilizing an 'establishing shot', showing off parts of the environment which they will have to navigate through. During this animation, where players cannot interact with the virtual world, the game provides some general background-information on the game, delivered through in-game dialog. The shot each time ends behind the Survivor-avatars, and then zooms into their respective bodies, as if the player was entering them, ending in a first-person view of the Survivor's hand holding a pistol. Only then it becomes possible for the player to actually move on their own account, within the confinements of the virtual environment. This whole animation again stresses the

movie-metaphor. It underlines the linearity of the game, by showing the Survivors where they must go, as well as its focus on story, through the expository dialog spoken. Zooming into a body emulates tropes of ghosts entering and taking over bodies, and it actually draws a difference between the avatar and the player, giving the former a character, a story, an attitude independent of the latter. At the same time, the concurrence of the player and the avatar-character within the same body is never constructed as problematic, and as I have argued with regards to character-stereotyping, the opinions and attitudes of the avatar might even make them more relatable to the player. Their relationship is, in the end, a symbiotic, not a parasitic one. The animation furthermore works to give a visual cue as to when the exposition ends and the actual game-play starts, because possessing a body is a fundamental necessity for interacting with the environment and its objects. It both enables the player and makes them vulnerable to the world's hazards.

In a Versus game, it might be that the Survivors are attacked almost instantaneously after they get control of their bodies, because the Infected team does not actually go through the aforementioned animation – they just 'fade in', going from dark to bright, and 'are there', while the Survivors still wait for their turn. This works as a double-metaphor: First, it emphasizes that the Special Infected do not, in fact, have a story arc. They have no character development, no history, no beginning and no end. They are not the heroes, but the appendix to this tale. This interpretation is further supported by their utter commonness (even while they are called *Special* Infected) and replaceability – they might have special abilities, but when one dies, another of the same kind soon takes their place. Second, the fade-in makes the Infected into a continuous presence, always there and always waiting for an opportunity to attack. They are more part of the environment than the Survivors are, and they belong here better than they do.



Figures 26 + 27: Establishing shot and zoom-in of the Survivor-characters at the beginning of the Campaign Death Toll.

To Infected players, the world looks fundamentally different than to Survivors: While they fade in in the very same area as the Survivors, they initially are in a so-called *Ghost State* or *Spawn Mode*, where they are not yet spawned and thus are invisible to the Survivors. In this state, they cannot interact



Figures 28-30: The view from the Infected's perspective depicting the Ghost State, spawned, and dead, respectively.

with the world directly, but can already move about to find a strategic position to spawn. In Spawn Mode, the Infected's world is colored in shades of blue; after they spawned, it turns to shades of yellow, and stays that way after they die, until they re-enter spawn-mode. This color-coding makes it easier for Infected players to discern the phases of spawning and attacking, and alerts them when they enter spawn-mode after dying. Because re-spawn times can well take 20 seconds, players might lose track of time watching as the game proceeds, and a crass change in color works as a stimulus to get active again. Furthermore, in the Ghost State a big window in the middle of the screen informs the player on what kind of Infected they are, that they have to choose a *Spawn Location*, and whether they might spawn at the very spot they are standing on, at that very moment in time. The picture on the right shows such a sign saying "Can't spawn here. You can be seen by the Survivors". To be able to spawn, and thus get a material body with which to manipulate one's surroundings, the *Ghost* needs to be out of sight of the Survivors, and geographically not too close to them, which at times can become quite challenging, as for instance in wide, open areas. At the beginning of a Chapter, Infected are normally kept from spawning for a specific amount of time,

or as long as no Survivor leaves the so-called *Restricted Area*. However, in cases where this area is not physically closed off from the rest of the environment, such as a building would be, this spawn-block does not always work perfectly, and Survivors might be ambushed before they even get to equip themselves.

Generally speaking, Infected can move much more freely than Survivors can, having access to areas unreachable to non-Infected players. Such areas are signified by bright blue signs in the Ghost State, and bright yellow signs after spawning. This indicates that even though Infected players are invisible in Spawn Mode, the physicality of the virtual world still impinges on them: They cannot move through objects, but have to go around them. Sometimes, people get stuck in the scenery and need to *teleport* out of it by pressing E. When they get too far away from the Survivors, be they spawned or not, players can also press E to teleport to a random location closer to them, and will have to re-spawn there.

The color-schemes of the Infected (blue and yellow) are universal, with only two things standing out, which both work to their advantage: 1) All their team-mates who are either themselves still in the

Ghost State, or are out of the direct line of sight, are outlined in bright blue (*Glow*). Through this, players get a visual input on the position and proximity of their mates, as well as the kind of Infected they are/will spawn as (although this is sometimes hard to tell from just the outline). 2) The Survivors have a constant outline, regardless of a direct line of sight, that indicates not only their geographical position, but their overall health-status in green, yellow, or red. When they are bled, their Glows turn purple, regardless of health. In addition to that, Survivor-characters have their respective nicknames displayed in blue above their avatars' heads, while Infected players have their names displayed in red. Survivors on the other hand only see the names of their teammates, underlining again the differences between the two types of entity – for the Survivors, the Special Infected have no apparent individuality. Through these color-codings, Special Infected cannot really get lost on the map. While the Survivors have to go somewhere, the focus of the Infected are the Survivors themselves. They always know where to go, and when they lose sight of the enemy team, they can press E to teleport to their very location. While knowing the environment and the exact path the Survivors will have to take can be an additional advantage, it is not fundamental to winning the game.

When on Realism-mode, Survivors have no such visual information, but in the regular game-modes they, too, can see the outlines of their teammates whenever they are out of the direct line of sight, or when they are currently being attacked by Special Infected. This is an important feature to facilitate the physical cohesion of the team, as they can quickly find one another after being separated, and can get a good overview on the exact position of their respective co-players. It also gives a strong visual cue when they are being attacked, with the Survivors becoming outlined in yellow, and their attackers in bright red. This, however, is the only case in which a Special Infected will have a Glow to a Survivor – otherwise, they need to watch carefully and listen for musical cues and signature noises of the Infected. In addition to that, Survivor-players have Glows around weapons and equipment they might pick up, making them easier to discern from the environment. These, too, are deactivated on Realism-mode. That Infected players are missing such Glows entirely again underlines their fundamental inability to use technology. Thus, the Infected seem entirely removed from their former humanity, leaving them somewhat animalistic in nature, with fundamentally different and enhanced senses, but deprived of technology.

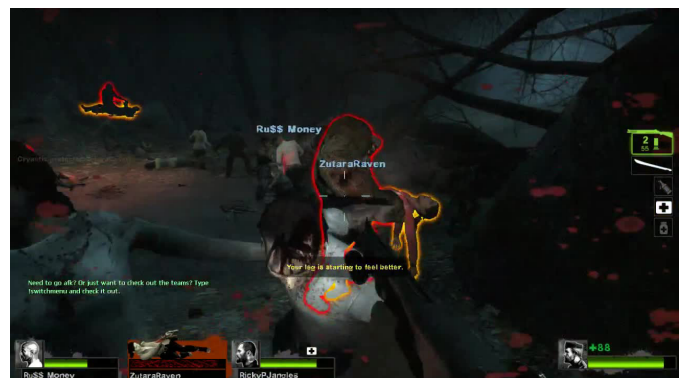


Figure 31: The Survivor's perspective, showing glows around grabbed characters and their HUD.

6.1.8.1 HUDS: THE SAME, BUT DIFFERENT

Both Infected and Survivors have a so-called HUD, a *Heads-Up Display*, on the bottom of the screen, telling them the respective status of their team members as well as their own. For Infected this means 3 signs telling them what kind of Infected each is, whether they have already spawned, how much health they have, and whether they are ready to attack. Underneath all of this is the nickname of the respective teammate, so the information can be matched properly. When an Infected teammate loses

health, the size and color of the bar changes, and when they are dead, the bar turns empty but for the time to re-spawn. On the right bottom of the screen there's a bigger, albeit similarly shaped, display of one's own status. They only differ in size and configuration, although there is an addition of one's current health-status in points. These displays first and foremost make it possible to coordinate attacks.

When a player dies, regardless of team-affiliation, the camera zooms out and gives them an outside-view of their bodies, as if they were violently thrown out of them. Their own display vanishes, while a sign appears on top of the screen, telling them "YOU ARE DEAD". After a while, the camera automatically switched to follow one of the players on the Survivor-team, and for Infected players sometimes one of

their own spawned teammates, in third person mode. Dead players cannot interfere directly, but can watch what is happening from all sides, and may use the time to advise or direct their teammates, and keep up to date on what is happening. For Infected players, this is important to be able to immediately join in after re-spawn. For them, directly under the "YOU ARE DEAD" sign another one soon appears, telling them "You will enter Spawn Mode in XX seconds".



Figure 32: A dead Survivor's perspective.

The Survivors' HUD, too, contains an icon signifying each teammate, a health-bar that changes color according to their health-status, and written underneath it the nickname of the respective player. In contrast to the Infected, however, when Survivors lose all their health they first become *incapacitated*, instead of outright dying. A *downed* teammate is signified by their display turning red with a grayscale picture of their lying avatar splayed above their health-bar. Incapacitated teammates run slowly out of health and need to be helped up again to survive. If a teammate indeed dies (more on that later) their icon turns red and their display as a whole becomes crossed-out. In addition to that, the Survivor HUD shows what equipment they each are carrying, should they carry anything at all. There are three types of equipment players can find throughout the Campaign:

1) Healing items come in the form of first aid kits, pills, adrenaline shots, and defibrillators. First aid kits, or medi-packs, can be either used on oneself or on a teammate. They give so-called *permanent health*, which is health that remains unless they take damage. They restore 80% of the received damage, and thus do not give a player back a full 100 Health Points (HP). Pills and shots give *temporary health*, which is health that slowly runs out, and is signified in the HUD in non-covering colors. Both can be shared among players, i.e. given from one to another. Administering these items takes varying amounts of time: Health-packs take the longest, leaving the one healing vulnerable to attacks, while it can be interrupted easily by even a Common Infected. Taking a shot takes much shorter, but still longer than taking pills. Although pills can be taken quite swiftly, there's still a delay long enough to down a player low in health. Thus, when to heal and which items to use is also a major strategic question. Defibrillators, finally, can only be used to revive dead teammates, giving them 50 points of permanent health.

2) Throwable items are either Molotov Cocktails, Pipe Bombs, or jars of Boomer Bile. Molotov Cocktails set fire to a large area of ground, as well as every Infected on it or running through it. Fire does not necessarily kill immediately, but it does continuous damage over time. Both the burning area and Survivors who accidentally set themselves on fire go out after a while, although Infected do not. Pipe Bombs are bombs that go off with a delay. As soon as they are thrown, they start blinking a red light and beeping loudly, which attracts Common Infected in its vicinity, and are thus practical to 'clean out' an area. Bile Bombs finally are jars full of Boomer Bile that can be thrown to tempt Common Infected away from the group. Throwing a Bile Jar always attracts a horde, which will attack the object or individual that was *biled*, even if this is another zombie. However, after the Bile wears off, the horde remains, and will attack any remaining Survivors. Thus, Bile Bombs need to be used with great care and foresight.

3) Special Ammunition comes in the form of Incendiary Ammunition and Explosive Rounds. They are carried instead of a health pack, and need to be deployed before they can be picked up by the Survivors, which takes a short amount of time. They contain one magazine-clip full of Special Ammo for each Survivor, to be used with whatever gun they are carrying at that very moment.

All of these items can be seen in the Survivor-HUD if carried. However, there are only three slots in total, which means that Survivor can carry either: 1) A health pack, a defibrillator, *or* Special Ammo; 2) pills *or* an adrenaline shot; 3) a Molotov Cocktail, a Pipe Bomb, *or* a Bile Bomb. Thus, decisions on what to pick up and what to leave behind have to be taken with care and foresight, and in accordance with what one's teammates are already carrying.

On the right bottom of the screen, Survivors see their own items specified in a vertical list. Aside from the three slots described above, Survivors have two additional, somewhat larger personal displays showing what weapons they are currently carrying, and how much ammunition they have left. One shows Primary Weapons, which are firearms with limited ammo capacity that need to be refilled with so-called *Ammo Stacks*. There are 11 firearms available in the game that vary in range, power, and handling, and are spawned randomly throughout the game. Generally speaking, they are divided into Level 1 and Level 2 (or Tier 1 and Tier 2) weapons, with the former being somewhat weaker than the latter. Tier 2 weapons usually only become available later in the game, while Level 1 firearms tend to be available from the very beginning. The other icon shows Secondary Weapons or Sidearms, which are either weaker handguns with infinite ammo or stronger Melee weapons which are suitable only for close range combat, and can thus be disadvantageous. Melee weapons also leave a bloody residue on the screen for a short time, which impairs the vision slightly (as does all killing done in close proximity to the avatar).



Figure 33: Blood-splattered Survivor-HUD after using a Melee weapon.

6.1.9 HEALTH, THRILLS & DESPAIR: A STORY OF IMPOTENCE

While losing health has no consequences for a Special Infected (aside from having less health), Survivors start limping and become considerably slower the lower their health is. This has several effects: Being slower prolongs the amount of time both Special and Common Infected have to assault, and thus raises the number of assaults. It means more attacks of single Infected and more hoards, while the Infected team does not have to rush as much, and can plan and coordinate their attacks better. Players with low health often drag behind the rest of the team, and with Common and Special Infected often attacking from behind, they are more prone to be picked out and further damaged. Even worse, being hit from behind makes a Survivor stop dead – they cannot go on, and thus are even further separated from their team. All of this means that the bad health of a single team-member takes a toll on the whole team, making it more of an effort for them to stay together, leaving them vulnerable to attacks, and maybe also straining them psychologically, as they all know it could go faster in theory. When Infected lose all their health, they die. When Survivors lose all their health, they first become incapacitated – they fall and have to be picked up by a standing teammate. While on the ground, they can only defend themselves with pistols, and have a much worse aim, i.e. cannot hit anything with a certainty. They also only have temporary health, which puts a time-restraint on their colleagues to save them. Incapacitation makes Survivors a preferred target of hoards, and they are often swarmed and viciously beaten to death. If another Survivor manages to help an incapacitated one up, they can continue with a small amount of temporary health, which drops to one relatively quickly. With just one health, one hit is enough to



Figure 34: *Black and White* view from the Survivor's perspective.

incapacitate players a second time. In such cases, when they are picked up again they become *Black and White*. This means that their vision turns to a dark, impairing gray-scale, and they start hearing their hearts beat loudly, making it harder to catch other noises. They again receive some temporary health that slowly runs out. Going down a third time kills the player, leaving a defibrillator as the only option to revive them.

These descriptions shows how fundamentally different the playing experiences and life-circles of Survivors and Infected are. Surviving does become the main goal for the appropriately named Survivors, making everything else into means to this end. For them, the main thrill of the game derives from this monitoring and managing of health (and defensive equipment) in relation to their linear progress within the environment, and in relation to their current and possible future equipment. Watching the health-bar slowly drain, feeling the body slow down, fearing the 1 HP that is so easily taken away creates an enormous tension. Each health-mechanic is designed to make this fight a more desperate one – having a slowly draining health-bar is in itself bad enough, but when a player is *Black and White*, they *know* they are slowly approaching their death, they *see* their approaching death from all the drained colors, and they *hear* it from their own wildly beating heart. The intensity of this experience of one's living and dying stands in stark

contrast to the experience of the Infected. For the Infected team, death is comparably cheap – they are easily killed, but will re-spawn after a maximum of 20 seconds. Their main thrill derives from the inherent opportunism of their gameplay, and its necessity to wait: The Infected can win a round either by slowly draining all the Survivors’ health until all their resources are gone, or they can pin them all simultaneously while they are still in good health, which is the harder thing to do. Sometimes a game teeters on the brink, when for instance the Survivors are in one of the few places that leaves them highly vulnerable, or are all but one pinned/incapacitated. In such a case it is vital for the Infected to neutralize the last Survivor, because they still might save everyone else. If an Infected player then has to wait to re-spawn or for their attack to re-charge, they can do nothing but wait and hope they will be in time. Thus, the success of the whole team can depend on one person and their timer. The rules of spawning may aggravate such a situation further, as a player first has to find a suitable place out of sight of and not too close to the Survivors, and can lose valuable seconds doing so. The livestream had players screaming and begging the game loudly to re-charge in time/let them spawn, which gives an indication of the levels of stress and emotion they might experience:

A: come on (1 sec) come on fucking charge up again (1 sec) plea:se! *plea:::se!* [on 2012.01.22]

A: trying to *spawn!*

D: (2 sec) get in there! (2 sec) fuck em up!

A: I’m trying to *spa:wn!*

[on 2012.01.22]

This begging is not unlike the way they sometimes plead with their friends on the opposing team to not shoot them, which normally has similar effects on the proceedings within the game – none whatsoever. Sometimes, however, it does seem to work, leading to the following exchange, and a semi-serious, but nevertheless vicious, feud in its tail:

A: [as a Charger, trying to attack Scott] hello there, Jund. hang on hang on let me, let me see that *stop it! stop it! . stop it!*

B: sorry sorry sorry. sorry. (1 sec) there you go. *why did I let you do that!?*

A: [laughs]

B: you asked so nicely, I thought alright, I might as well

A: [keeps laughing] why *did* you let me do that?

B: cause I’m really kind, I guess. I had a, had a full mag, just, just let you do it. I’ll fucking die now

because I’m nice [...] you’re just a bully now. who’s the asshole now? [...] you’re getting no mercy from me anymore. [...] I’m just hunting your bitch-ass down for that. where are you? that’s it.

A: what did you think I was gonna do, *not* do that?

B: just talk to me, I don’t know

A: you thought I was gonna talk to you in this, super-serious game?

B: (1 sec) yes

A: oh, okay. I’m sorry

[on 2012.08.12]

This is the only instance I witnessed on the stream where asking an ‘enemy’ to be left alone had any impact, and to their disadvantage. However, the negative response this course of events elicits is much stronger than the usual enmity displayed between the competing teams. The dynamics of attack and defense play out mostly as individual encounters, even while the game is ultimately team-based. Still, these confrontations seem to be mostly contained within brief moments, ending usually in the death of the Special Infected character, and without too much animosity being performed. This changes in the above example, where the plea not to be harmed is followed, resulting in an immediate pinning and a prolonged, violent death of a Survivor-player. Whether this was a basic misunderstanding on both sides (with Scott interpreting Cry’s request as a serious one, and Cry not realizing in time that

their relationship had just changed), or a momentary disregard of the actual context of their interaction from Scott's side, this parapraxis has actual consequences in how the involved people relate to one another. Even while Scott does not really make an effort to hunt down Cry as an Infected the following round, which is not all too practical a thing to do (as it interferes with the opportunistic gameplay of the Infected team), for a while he does frame his actions as pertaining in one way or another to the earlier incident, reiterating its significance.

There are two other prominent aspects of the game that invariably elicit strong reactions from the players, especially on the Survivor-team, and an immediate adaptation of their behavior: Witches and Tanks. Because Witches can instantaneously incapacitate players, they demand great care, and while Survivors need to find a way around them, or a way to take them out safely, the Infected team can use them as traps that are not only costly in health, but in time as well. Normally, as soon as someone hears a Witch, they inform everyone else on it. The same holds true for the Tank, which is easily the greatest threat to the Survivors:

D: come on go go go before the Tank gets here and fucks our day up [...] heal up, heal up, there's a Tank right around the corner [on 2012.01.08]

A: oh God *it's a Tank!* I set him on fire! (2 sec) I::'m, s:o: afraid of that thing. [on 2012.04.01]

D: there's a Tank. there's a *Tank Tank Tank*

A: (1 sec) already?

D: (2 sec) yeah (1 sec) now get this guy off me

A: (2 sec) I killed him. *o::: what the fuck is this thing doing here already?*

[on 2012.01.22]

In the right environments (i.e. closed ones), a Tank can take out all four Survivors at once, although some help from their Infected teammates can heighten their chances of doing so. Tanks in most cases need to be killed to proceed, and are thus an unavoidable obstacle. When Survivors become aware of a Tank, they usually immediately check their surroundings, change location if necessary, and look for sources of fire, such as Molotov Cocktails and gas canisters, all of which help to ease the threat he poses. To be able to keep one's distance to a Tank, Survivors need high amounts of health, so taking pills or healing might be necessary, and it has to be done discreetly. But more on this later, when discussing the game-play from the perspective of the livestream.



Figure 35: A Black and White Survivor healing while being attacked by a Common Infected, and a Hunter approaching him in the background.

All of these causes of stress, thrill and emotion seem to derive from a player's impotence as they're entangled in a complex net of unbendable rules and high contingency. Players cannot change their re-spawn time, they cannot will their health up, and they cannot make their characters heal more quickly. But they know that their foes operate under similar conditions, even though their actual status is unknown to them. They can only hope and see whether

they will be able to heal in time, *before* another (Special) Infected has a chance to attack, and sometimes the situation will be narrower in its outcome than others. One way or another, the players can never know *in advance*, they can only take an educated guess from their experience and from the most recent developments within the game. A very hard decision that might arise is to break off an almost-finished healing in order to avoid being attacked, and often players try to proceed with the healing anyways, mostly to their disadvantage, as for instance in case of the screenshot to the left, where the player was hunted and killed a mere moment later.

Another thing becomes obvious through this description: Even though both Infected and Survivors have an overview of their teammates' health, their relationship to one another differs fundamentally. Because the Survivors are evaluated as a team before they are assessed as individuals, and because they can influence the health-status of their mates, they become accountable for one another. The Survivors are co-dependent in a much more profound way than the Infected are. Losing just one teammate is not only a loss in points, but puts the whole team at a much greater risk. It means one less person to watch out for the others, to help against the zombies, to carry equipment, and to divide the enemy teams' attention. This accountability adds an additional layer of complexity to the Survivors' game-play, making their strategies not just about their own health- and defense-management, but about looking out for one another and adjusting their own pace to the abilities of others. Having healing as a central game-mechanic changes the dynamics of play from mainly offensive strategies to waves of offensive and defensive play, with players being forced to wait and bid their time, even under pressure to proceed. Although the Infected players, too, need to be patient in planning their attacks, waiting for instance for good opportunities to not let their efforts go to waste, such periods of patience are divided into much smaller units, and their plans cannot go too far ahead. As their character-classes are assigned randomly, and their re-spawns are contingent on their time of death, waiting too long for a 'perfect opportunity' to arise is counter-productive to their cause. It gives the Survivors more time to proceed, or heal, or work out plans themselves. The Infected game-play is much more reactionary and opportunistic, even more so because the progress made as Survivors is what actually counts towards a win; the performance as Infected becomes meaningful only indirectly.

6.1.10 CONTEXT-SENSITIVE INFORMATION

In addition to the earlier described HUD, there is another kind of so-called context-sensitive information displayed for the players: On the left side of the screen, some general information on how far the Survivors have made it is superimposed at the 25%, 50%, and 75% marks, as well as information on who killed/incapacitated whom. Both appear bold and in bright red to each player, regardless of team-affiliation. On the other hand, there is team-specific information: Players see speech-bubbles on top of their teammates' displays as well as hovering over their avatars whenever one of them communicates through the game. Infected players see which one of them dealt how much damage and to whom, in the form of "Cryaotic hit RickyPJangles x2". Survivors see which players on their team protected or saved whom. In addition to that, they see displays hovering over avatars and objects, telling them that "Ru\$\$ Money Startled the Witch" and to "Help Ru\$\$ Money up", although this additional information



Figures 36 + 37: Context-sensitive information from a Survivor's perspective.

can be turned off deliberately. Survivors also have progress-bars when healing (themselves or others), when helping a teammate up, and sometimes when opening up passages to proceed within the game. These make the timing of such actions easier to assess, which becomes essential in relation to potential foes in one's vicinity, and their approximate time to attack (as indicated earlier). Another such display that appears to both Infected and Survivors, but is more essential to Survivors (because of their relatively longer lives) is a red triangular shape appearing around a circle in the center of the screen whenever a player is hit, indicating the direction from which the damage is dealt. This visual cue helps to inform people on foes, and is always tied to several auditory ones: Survivors hear their attackers scream, the impact of kicks and punches, as well as their own characters' screams in reaction to

said beatings. Furthermore, the camera sometimes jerks away in reaction to impacts, and the avatars' bodies stop reacting properly to player-interaction, for instance by stopping in their movements. All of this emulates physicality of not just one's own bodies, but of the bodies one interacts with within this virtual environment, and underlines their adamant limitations. It also shows that the post-apocalyptic setting of the game has *actual consequences* for (the bodies of) the few people who remain, which work towards the dramaturgy of the game. The screenshot below showing the impact-markers also shows a small, almost complete circle around the crosshair at the center of the screen. This indicates the vanishing strength of the Survivor: When Survivor-players use right-click with their mouse, they *shove*. It is a move that does not deal damage on other Survivors, and only small damage on Infected, but it works to shove them away and make them stumble, giving oneself more room and a short amount of

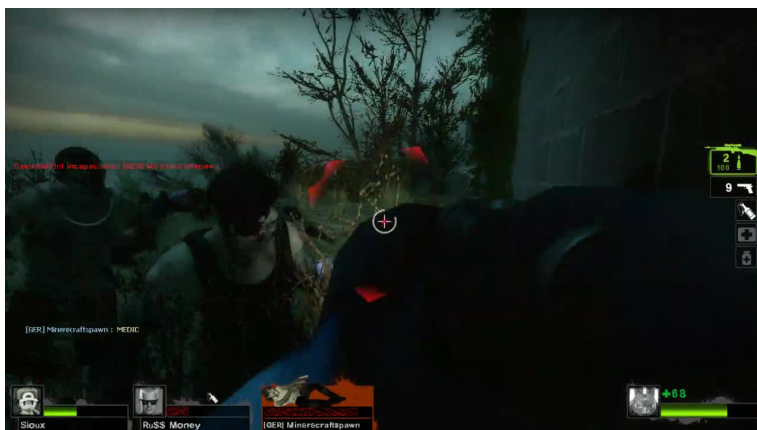


Figure 38: Swarmed Survivor hit from several sides simultaneously.

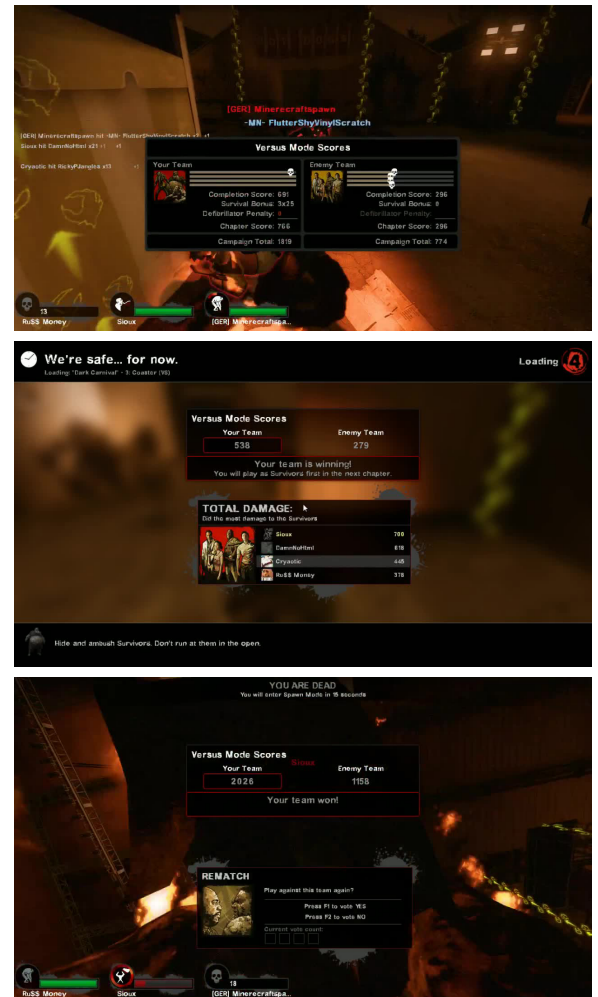
time (e.g. to reload or kill zombies), and to kick Infected off one's teammates. Thus, it is a very useful mechanic, especially when being swarmed, and was soon after release severely limited through an exhaustion-mechanic. This exhaustion is indicated through the small circle that fills up more and more slowly the more often one shoves, and in the course blocking this ability.

6.1.11 ROUNDS AND END OF A GAME

When playing Campaign-Versus, the games are structured both in a linear and in a circular way: In the greater scheme of things, it follows the story of the regular Campaign-modes, but repeats each Chapter twice, alternating the teams between the classes (Survivor and Infected). Both the *run* of one team through the Chapter and the run of both teams can be referred to as a *round* by the players. Each Chapter, except for the last one, ends in a Safe-Room, just like the regular Campaigns do. At the end of each round, the *scores* or *stats* of each team are displayed, representing the linear progress (and possibly death) of each team-member as Survivors in the form of a line. Underneath, the Chapter-Score of the team as a whole is calculated, and added up to an overall Campaign-Score. These scores are not marked by name, but are roughly assignable as long as players keep an overview on the status of their teammates. Surviving the round gives a bonus, while using a defibrillator gives a penalty. After the scores, players load into the next Chapter, which takes about 20 seconds. During this time, individual statistics are displayed in a hierarchical list: There always is an overall score on *Total Damage*, informing players on who “Did the most damage to the Survivors”, and a *General Defense* score on who “Killed the most Infected”. All other scores are random, and include best-lists of single Infected classes, such as “Spitter Damage: Did the most damage as a Spitter”, pinning-times, and so on. These lists always show the four highest-ranking players, regardless of team-affiliation, and no-one else.

In all of this, these Score-boards are highly partial. They define as what is worth noting only aggressive actions, and omit for instance practices of healing or otherwise helping other teammates (which are relatively hard to quantify within the mechanics of the game). They also make mention only of the “best” players; not making the list might in itself mean failure, regardless of how much damage one dealt in absolute numbers. These lists also don’t discriminate between players who have had different means to get said points: When becoming a Tank, players have the chance to make thousands of points of damage in just one round, which is almost impossible as any other Infected. Yet, such players are still featured in the “Total Damage”-list, and usually at the very top.

That these lists have meaning to the players becomes obvious when looking at the livestream, where players talk about how well they did, and whether they are winning or losing as a team, at the end of



Figures 39-41: Listing of individual and team scores, final winners.

nigh every round. They also comment on the performance of players, both directly and indirectly:

A: [...] I think your Tank was a bit better than our Tank

D: (1.5 sec) definitely

A: just saying [laughs]

D: I think our, I think our Tank was not afk

A: [laughs] yeah, that would help

[on 2012.01.08]

In this excerpt, the interlocutors not only evaluate the efficiency of the individual Tanks, meaning the players respectively controlling them, but they offer explanations as to why one was better than the other – the worse Tank was “afk”, which means “Away From Keyboard”, i.e. absent during the game. Thus, they agree that the current performance was not a question of actual skill, but rather a question of etiquette or technical difficulties – the failing Tank was not there to do his job. This is, however, not the only time individual performances are evaluated by the players, as will be discussed more in-depth later.

As soon as the next Chapter is loaded, the statistics vanish, and the players find themselves in the Safe-Room ready to start the next round. The team with the currently higher Campaign-Score always starts out as Survivors, giving the (possibly) losing team a slight advantage in getting to know the obstacles and specificities of the Chapter before having to navigate through it themselves – randomly spawned items as well as Tanks and Witches are the same during each run. At the very end of the game, there are only the final team-scores displayed to designate the winning team, and no more individuals statistics. Instead, players are asked to vote on whether they want a rematch. If they vote against a rematch, players return to the Lobby and may proceed however they want from there.

6.1.12 COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

There are several ways to communicate when playing Left4Dead. One is through a voice chat-function provided by the game itself, which comes in two forms: Voice-activation or speech-enabled chat transmits noises from the microphone whenever they arise and exceed a manually set threshold. This gives a player less control on when to transmit, but makes transmission itself easier. Push-to-talk (ptt) transmits the voice whenever a key is pressed, and only then. It is easier to control, but takes up one finger of one’s left hand which might be needed elsewhere (e.g. to move in the game). In Versus games, voice-transmission by default is limited to one’s own team, and is not conveyed to one’s enemies. This lays the focus on the strategic and competitive aspects of the game, in favor of its possibly friendly ones. To change these settings, players must vote in-game to open up the channels, and a majority of both teams must be in favor for the vote to be successful. Aside from that, in-game voice-transmission is a risky business, as it does not always work well and voices can be distorted into complete incomprehensibility, without the person talking ever realizing.

Another option for in-game communication is in written form, by opening up an overlaying interface that overrides all interaction within the environments of the game. This takes time and leaves players extremely vulnerable to attacks, and is thus a risky thing to do, especially for Survivors. Written chat therefore often happens in waves, during breaks from attacks, in Safe-Rooms, or while Infected players

wait to re-spawn. The chat can be used to either address all players in the game or only one's teammates, so it is suitable for strategizing, negotiating, general (un)friendly communication, and trash-talking. At the same time, especially in the heat of battle, such messages are often overlooked or ignored, and are not the best means to get something across:

B: i- is, everyone else is in?	A: (1 sec) we didn't hear him at all
A: not. Russ	D: (1.5 sec) <i>that's why I typed it!</i>
B: not Russ, where is Russ?	B: oh we didn't read, <i>what</i> , you think we read?
A: Russ!	D: no:
B: he's not even in the call what the	B: we don't read text, we hire people to do that
A: (1 sec) <i>what?</i>	for us
B: Red, Red, where is Russ? (3 sec) hello?	A: who the f::uck reads?
[...]	[on 2012.10.28]
Red: he said to hold on but nobody waited	

The third way to communicate in-game is through the already mentioned pre-recorded dialogs activated by pressing one of two keys (denoted "Orders" and "Questions and Answers" by the game itself). These are mainly related to gameplay, allowing players to agree on how/whether to proceed, and to make one another aware of something. At the same time, they can be used to explicate hierarchies (e.g. "Hurry!", "Let's Go", "Be Careful", "You Take the Lead") and courtesies (e.g. "Nice Job!", "Thank You", "Sorry"), and to express emotions (laugh, scream, cheer, taunt, and so on). As discussed earlier, however, these mechanic is in my experience mainly used to annoy other players, instead of its ostensible purpose of game-related communication:

A: why is someone spamming who's, who's Zoey? it was <i>you</i> !
D: I'm Zoey
A: [laughs] you (1.5 sec) <i>dick</i> [laughs]
[on 2012.01.08]

A fourth option is to utilize additional software outside of the game to voice-chat, which has two advantages: On the one hand, the quality is much better most of the time, and programs intended for the very purpose of communication often have additional settings with which to adjust everything to one's liking. On the other hand, additional software is more exclusive, and helps players decide deliberately whom to talk to, and whom to omit. It also makes it possible to talk to people not actually in the game, diverting its function away from pure in-game strategizing. All of these factors work together to create an environment where chatting about things not necessarily related to the game is facilitated, especially when there's not too much going on in-game, as will be discussed more in-depth in the following, with regards to the livestream.



Figure 42: The title-screen of the livestream used throughout 2012.

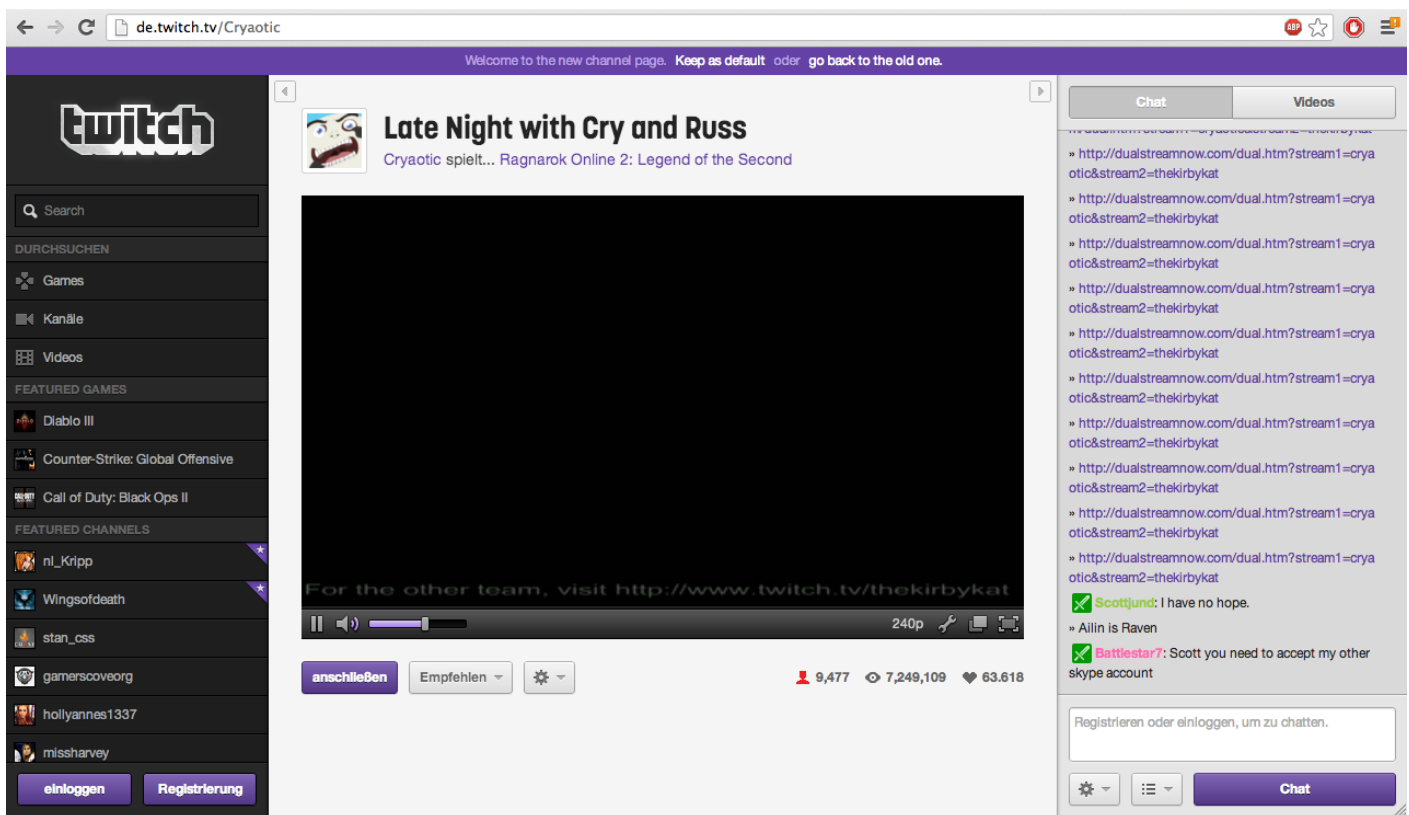


Figure 43: Livestream on 2013.05.12 at ~0:30 am EST, showing 9,477 current viewers, 7,249,109 overall views, and 63,618 “fans”.

6.2 DYNAMICS OF PLAY: A PLAYERS' PERSPECTIVE

This section of my thesis finally tackles the livestream and its enactment and construction of social relations, based on the materiality of the software utilized as it was described in the previous chapters. In the following, I will first give a short overview of the livestream, discussing its structure and the diverse participants taking part in it. Then, I will look at the specific practices of organizing virtual bodies undertaken when creating/joining a game of Left4Dead, including the rules governing this social environment. Next, I will dive into the in-game communication practices of the group, looking at the subject-positions created in dialog with the highly specific environment provided by the game. Finally, I am discussing in-depth two specific themes encountered throughout all those “Late Nights”, namely the questions of sexualization on the one hand, and proficiency and leadership on the other.

The livestream is a complex social artifact that tightly entwines a number of dimensions: It is first a (somewhat improvised) piece of entertainment with its own dramaturgy, ordered according to a contingent, ever-adapting set of rules and values, but with an active effort of composition as a driving force behind it. Second, it presents instances of gameplay of a variety of videogames, both single-player and multiplayer, involving a number of agents of varying status. In this, it gives an insight into at least parts of more universal videogame cultures, both by enacting and referencing them, which is exactly what initially made it interesting for my purposes. Finally, it is in part a stage for the complicated personal on- and offline relations between the people involved, making it hard to do it justice in all its depth. The livestream's virtual nature gives rise to a complicated interplay of a (somewhat exhibitionist) public presentation and an adherence to and insistence on varying levels of anonymity that is highly contingent on its social and material setting. For several reasons, indulging in these personal interrelationships will be held to an absolute minimum in this thesis, although meta-levels of their trajectories will be discussed.

6.2.1 OVERVIEW

The livestream I am looking at is titled “Late Night with Cry and Russ”, and is issued by a man³¹ nicknamed Cry (shortening of Cryaotic, with another nickname being Chaotic Monki). It is broadcast on a weekly basis on TwitchTV, which is a website dedicated to videogame broadcasting and communication. It airs videos in Flash-format and includes a chat-window on every channel, allowing for continuous exchange between viewers (even at times when the stream itself is offline). The chat is regulated by the respective owner of the channel, as well as people they can designate as moderators (who “take over chat duties” [e.g. on 2012.01.08]). Furthermore, each channel can post past streams and make

31 While the different participants of the livestream show varying levels of comfort with revealing personal information, all things said on the stream have to be taken with a grain of salt, as they are essentially unverifiable to me. Sometimes details given are contradictory, while others are repeated often and comfortably enough to seem accurate. The interchangeable use of different nicknames and sometimes presumably ‘real’ ones is part of this phenomenon. Interestingly, the aspect performed most comfortably and unambiguously by the people who actually have a voice on the stream is the gender of individuals. Although they often use gender-neutral pronouns when addressing people with an ambiguous gender, and thus perform awareness with the uncertainties of online encounters, established gender-identities are never questioned, as sexual orientation for instance is (often facetiously). The same is true for ethnicity, although this is a category with much less obvious linguistic markers, and thus harder to trace from the material at hand.

them available for re-watching. Late Night with Cry and Russ has been running almost every weekend since November 6th, 2011. It runs the whole night through, about 6 to 9 hours from Saturday 11pm EST through Sunday morning³², and features a group of people playing a variety of videogames, doing stuff on the Internet, and talking all the while through. Although the initial audience was only about a hundred, present broadcasts have peak audiences close to 10.000 people. As of Apr 30, 2013, the channel has over 7 Million hits, and over 60.000 *fans*.³³

For my research, I only looked closer at broadcasts issued in 2012 that feature Left4Dead (as far as videos still exist for them), because the group plays too great a variety of games to tackle all in one thesis. These make 21 instances in total, and give a good input into the different ways the game can be played by just *one* community. The stream as a whole is mostly structured according to a schedule, pre-determining the actual playtime to some degree. While earlier livestreams had clearly defined time-slots for each activity, this is no longer the case. Still, a rough structure of the stream, including how many and which games will be played during the night, is (usually) released on the same day as the broadcast. If there are any kinds of problems or technical difficulties with a game, however, the schedule might be adapted or abandoned altogether. Among my sample, one game of L4D was quoted during the stream to be watched by 6000 people [on 2012.10.28], making the stream into an event with a somewhat wider cultural significance. While none of the people participating are paid to do so (at least not during the frame of reference), many of them have an additional presence on YouTube, and identify themselves as *YouTubers*. Cry himself mainly produces *Let's Play* videos, in which he records himself playing videogames; his YouTube-channel has over 600.000 subscribers and over 73 Million video views, as of Apr 30, 2013. If not ended prematurely, the group's runs of L4D can take between 30 minutes and 2 hours, although the different distinct play-modes described earlier are constructed to take much varying amounts of time.

The people participating in the livestream differ greatly in status. While Cry is the one who normally broadcasts from his computer and makes up the center of the stream, he is usually connected through a Skype-call to at least one other person (unless there are for instance technical issues). Whenever they actually participate, there are three people with unrestricted access to the call: Russ (Ru\$\$ Money), Scott Jund (DamnNoHtml, among others), and Red (The Dread Red), regardless of whether they are actually playing a game with Cry or not. Sometimes, they also take over broadcasting the stream, and are the ones playing a game instead of Cry. Red is Russ' girlfriend, and while she indeed is in the call most of the times, she usually does not talk too much, unless she actually plays a game with the others. Aside from these four, who all seem to be white, US-American, and in their early to mid-twenties, there are three more people invited to the call on a regular basis: BattleStar, a white US-American man who manages guest-callers at the end of the livestream; Snake (Sioux), an African-American man who talks in a Batman-like assumed voice; and Raven (ZutaraRaven), an Asian-American woman, who is Scott

³² All broadcast-dates given in this thesis are Sundays, as TwitchTV only makes past broadcasts available for re-watch after the end of the livestream, and dates all its videos accordingly.

³³ Following Anderson [2006], the overt visibility of these numbers, as well as the counter underneath the livestream-window itself (as seen in Figure 41) is an important tool for the construction of the imagined community of "Late Night with Cry and Russ". It facilitates an impression of concurrence of thousands of viewers, which is further strengthened by the possibility to communicate via the chat-window.

Jund's (sometimes-)girlfriend. Recently, MangaMinx (a British woman who identifies as lesbian) and CinnamonToastKen (a white US-American man), both Let's Players, became regulars on the Stream. All five of them had to establish this status over time, however. While the Skype-call was initially more exclusive, allowing access to most people only under special circumstances, it seems to have become more open, with people being invited at the very beginning, even if they don't participate in the games. These 6 to 8 people make up what I will call the core-group of the livestream henceforth. Furthermore, Red and Raven's YouTube-Channels are more about drawing than about videogames, with Red designing a lot of profile pictures and headers for the other YouTubers. All of this implies that the interconnections between the different participants of the stream, both inside and outside of the core-group, are varying in nature, changing over time, and contingent on a number of factors outside of the stream itself. Red, Raven, and Minx are the only women invited to the call on a regular basis, and only Red took part from the very beginning. There are some other people who join the call from time to time, and far more that play with the group in online multiplayer games. These people, however, only get to join occasionally. To play online multiplayer games with the group, people usually have to join the Steam Group "Late Night with Cry and Russ", which as of Apr 30, 2013 has 11.860 members. Thus, there is some exclusivity to the community, there are different degrees of participation, and it entails a number of online and/or offline connections between the people involved, which will be discussed more in-depth in the following chapters.

6.2.1.1 STRUCTURE OF THE STREAM

At the start of the stream, and in variable order, Cry usually shows a short video, mostly of the YouTube and musical variety, and introduces the stream along the lines of "Welcome to Late Night with Cry and Russ featuring Scott Jund [and other people]", or some variation thereof³⁴. There is often some chitchat among the group while they figure out whether the stream is working properly, and whether the audio- and video-settings are satisfactory. Sometimes, there are already a lot of people in the call when the stream starts, and sometimes they only get added later. Timing varies and is contingent – there is no official procedure at the beginning of the stream, although the short introductory videos and the greeting-line seem to represent an effort in such a direction. After a while – sometimes sooner, sometimes later – the one issuing the stream (in most cases Cry) starts playing the first game on the schedule, which can be anything from single player to MMO. As a rule of thumb, the fewer slots there are available in a game, the more exclusive the group is in who gets to participate. For some people, there is always a slot reserved, while some get general preferential treatment, and others have to be lucky. For instance, Red tends not to play too many games with the group, but in *Worms: Revolution* (4 slots per game) she always participates, as long as she's around and interested in joining. On the other hand, *Team Fortress 2* has 24 or more slots that are freely accessible, which results in players dropping in and out at their leisure, without there being too much gate-keeping involved. This is, to a degree, the expressed purpose of the stream:

34 E.g. "hi guys, and welcome to people talk on Saturday night instead of going out clubbing, like people should." [on 2012.03.04], and "hi guys: and uh welcome to Late Night with Cry and Russ an:d . for some reason Scott's here all the time [inhales] why are you here, Scott? what's going on, man?" [on 2012.04.01]

A: I, I do:, play with, uh, the peoples. that's, that's what we're doing right now, we're playing with, peoples. (1.5 sec) like, yeah, that's the whole purpose of the livestream is to play with peoples. (2 sec) at least that's what I thought it was for. [on 2012.02.12].

While the group usually plays a variety of games with different mechanics and differing numbers of participants, the stream sometimes deviates from this formula. For instance, the above described core-group of the stream might take turns in playing just one single player game the whole night through, switching the broadcast from one computer to the other, and thus from one location within the US to another (as they did for instance with “Breath of Fire” on Mar 31, 2013). Sometimes the stream features a *Viewer's Choice*-segment where single, randomly decided upon viewers can choose a game for the people on the stream to play. It can be single or multi-player, well-known or obscure, serious or facetious suggestions (such as Left4Dead vs. a Barbie browser-games), although it is not guaranteed the group will go through with it:

A: do you guys like viewer's choice?

D: na

B: na

A: do you guys even wanna do viewer's choice?

B: na

D: well let's, let's try to do one, and see what they suggest, and then we go from that

A: alright we'll, we'll judge it by the first one, if the first one's not good then *fuck* the rest of them

B: (1 sec) [laughs] that's horrible, but alright

[on 2012.08.05]

At the end of the stream, usually from about 4 am EST onwards, the *Wind-down Hour* starts, which is the last segment of the stream. Here, the decided purpose is to *casually* play whatever games they decide to play while talking to fans, who are invited one by one into the Skype-call, usually managed by BattleStar. They can address questions to anyone on the stream, although there are some questions defined as off-limits, such as what Cry looks like and other things threatening his anonymity. As with all things related to the stream, this segment is also rather contingent: Its length is determined by how tired the core-group is, and how much they enjoy staying online. While it can well last 3 hours or longer, not everyone stays until the very end. Sometimes, the group plays games where it is not possible to talk to fans, such as karaoke, and forego talking to people directly. At the same time, however, the core-group often responds in real-time to written conversations in and questions from the chat-window (on the TwitchTV-channel) outside of Wind-down, even while playing games more ‘seriously’. The livestream usually ends without much ceremony when the group decides it is too tired to continue, although sometimes some words of parting are issued.

6.2.2 PLAYING LEFT4DEAD: JOINING & TEAM-BUILDING

With 8 available slots in a Versus game, Left4Dead usually has some spare room for fans to join. At the same time, the processes of negotiation leading to the final teams are a good example of the differences in status the respective players have. Usually, only people in the Skype-call can be Lobby Leaders, and are mostly either Russ or Scott, and less often Cry, although there has been an instance where BattleStar was Lobby Leader. They would not join anybody else's Lobby, and policing can be very explicit in this respect. Initially, it was only Russ who made Lobbies, even though that changed later:

B: create new Versus lobby, hm::

A: but it's supposed to be the Ru\$\$ Money who makes the server
 B: okay fine
 A: you're not allowed to be changing how we do things

[on 2012.01.08]

This quote also hints at the primacy Cry has in deciding upon issues relating to the structuring of the stream, giving him the situational right to sanction Scott's behavior, with Scott actually accepting and acting on it. If any of the 3 main players – Cry, Russ, or Scott – is not within the game while actually wanting to take part in it, a slot will usually be made available to them. They wait for each other before starting a game, and by securing the position of Lobby Leader can kick players to make room for one another. While the time spent in the Lobby varies, most of the time it takes comparatively long for the stream-participants to actually start a game, as first a variety of conditions have to be met. For instance, they would not start before specific people have joined, or before all slots are taken. They also need to agree on the composition of their teams, although there is no necessity to reach a general consensus on this, and neither do they work on making everybody reasonably happy. Usually, only the wishes of the people in the call are considered at all, and they, too, are often unhappy with the final teams. Keeping in mind that the central goal of the game is to win, the discontent of half the participants might be considered inherent to the mechanics. Still, there is a wide scope of how winning and losing might actually be achieved, framed, and perceived within this highly contingent socio-technical framework, and frustration may already start in the Lobby. Interestingly, the question of who gets to join a game seems to be much more problematic than the actual structuring of teams. While it does often proceed silently, the following prolonged excerpt shows how precarious joining can become:

D: join me! join me!
 A: okay
 D: Imma kick people until you guys get here. (1 sec) kicking people
 A: (1 sec) ah:, it's already filled up immediately
 D: is that you? it's not you. kicking.
 A: don't kick me bro
 D: kick, kicking, and a kick, kick, and a kick
 B: I can't even hit join game
 A: [laughs]
 D: Christ where are you man?
 B: it just, it just. it just grayed out. it's like, it's just no.
 A: [laughs]
 B: it's like don't even try faggot
 D: keep trying!
 A: there's so many people [unintelligible]
 D: he's there Scott, okay. now we just nee::d, one more person. (1 sec) which is Atom.
 B: (1 sec) and Snake.
 Atom: I'm waiting for an invite [laughs]
 D: and Snake. *no don't*, just join off me, just join off me
 B: yeah you gotta do right-click on him and just join
 D: now where's Snake?
 B: goddamn it Jangles! why is Joe here above Jangles?
 D: I don't know [...] come o:::n Snake
 A: this is fucking absurd [laughs]
 C: I'm working on it

B: there's so many people who wanna join us and I'm just like *please! please!*
 A: we're probably kicking so many people's dreams by, by kicking them
 [...]
A few minutes later, Cry starts a new Lobby due to technical difficulties. The game is full and he wants to make room for some people:
 A: we gotta, we gotta kill someone now. someone, who are we killing, to invite Atom Bomb in here?
 B: in honor of Russ, you know what to do [Jazzy is the last person who joined, and Russ doesn't like her, as will be discussed later]
 A: [laughs] *damn it* I hate making decisions like this!
 B: (1.5 sec) do it before she says anything else that makes you sa::d!
 A: *do:::n't do it!*
 B: *plea:::se!*
 A: ua ua hu a:::h!
 C: I won't hold it against you
 E: there's no other option, sir
 A: oh, Joe just joined!
 B: fucking Joe!
 A: Joe! Joe you're the last one to join I gotta kill you bye. okay. quick, Atom Bomb. KirbyKat I gotta kill KirbyKat! quick Atom Bomb!
 B: *please!*
 A: *Joe!* no, that's bad Joe. alright come on Atom Bomb. come on Atom Bomb. now you got 'em.
 [...]

A: [to Russ] are you uh, are you gonna be able to join us sir?
 D: yeah. just as long as there's a slot open
 A: we have to kill someone. who are we killing? Jund, you pick.
 B: u::m, pick a number betwee::n, one and eight
 D: just kick somebody, that's what I do
 A: *but I feel horrible doing that!* it's a conscience thing!
 D: oh, I see. I have a lot of people yelling at me

already, so you know I just do it.
 C: Campbell. do it. [Snake indicates himself]
 A: *no! I can't do it Snake!* [inhales] I can't do it.
 B: you're too loved, I'm sorry, no. I can't do it. I'm not even the host so I physically can't do it.
 A: wait wait, Ricky is here every time. every time, I think we gotta, we gotta kill Ricky. I think so, cause he is always here. *Ricky I love you friend!* but, bye.
 [on 2012.07.29]

These two instances are from just one broadcast, and document one attempt to play the game, with two people trying to create a Lobby and find a server – first Russ, then Cry. It shows a series of more or less openly agreed upon rules structuring their social play: First, there are people whose position is largely secured, for which the group would wait, start new games, and kick other players with less comfortable claims to participation. Cry, Russ, and Scott are the people producing the stream, and none of them would leave their slots to someone else (or so it seems from the broadcasts of my sample). Other players are granted similar rights by those three people – while Snake even offers to leave the stream himself (while not actually doing so, thus leaving the decision to the others), no one takes him up on it. While the ultimate decision is that of the Lobby Leader, in consultation with the other two, the above quote indicates that the popularity of the person in question factors in such decisions. Snake is “too loved” not just by the participants of the stream, but the audiences watching, as is brought up every once in a while in the discussions of the call – “people. love. the Snakester” says Cry [on 2012.10.28]. Still, Snake, BattleStar, and Raven are left out sometimes, and even though the ‘triarchy’ (of Cry, Russ, and Scott) will often wait and kick other players for them, they seldom re-start a game just for them to take part, while they do so for one another routinely. Another group of people is made up of regular participants who usually don’t get to join the call, such as KirbyKat and RickyPJangles. While their places are by no means secured, they are not unknown fans who are at risk of being taken as “randos”, random players, and kicked for that very reason:

A: wait, we have people we never had before finally, we always usually have the same people. I'm proud of everyone (1.5 sec) awesome
 D: (2 sec) these might be randos, actually
 B: (1.5 sec) are they?
 A: really?
 B: no::
 D: (2 sec) yeah they might be
 A: [gasps]
 B: well kick them *the f::uck* out

[on 2012.01.08]

Sometimes, the triarchy realizes afterwards that a person they kicked was actually in their Steam Group or played with them in another context, but they never try to mend such mistakes, and said kicked players can do nothing but try to rejoin the Lobby before someone else takes the slot. Thus, unknown players have the weakest claim to participation. At the same time, these two quotes in combination show another thing: Cry explicitly puts variation in participants as a desirable thing, and regulars who participate “every time” (whatever that might mean in actual numbers) are at risk of being kicked for that very reason, to make room for others. Although many of them are known as seasoned players

who are reasonably competent in playing the game, which is continuously put as an almost essential property for players to be respected as such, their very affinity to the group might occasionally make their position more precarious. This shows the profound imbalance of power between the different agents of the stream, that is to some degree inherent to the technology itself: If two or more individuals who know one another (and who may be communicating with one another outside of the channels provided by L4D) join the same game, they can quickly gain a majority necessary to enforce specificities of the game through votes, or to kick other players they do not agree with. This works both to the possible disadvantage of anonymous teammates, who can be sanctioned negatively for whatever reason (as long as there is a consent among the other players), and as a possible advantage to everyone belonging to such a group – even if such a person plays badly or ‘misbehaves’ themselves, they might be protected from penalization because of the necessary majority-vote. Likewise, the position of Lobby Leader enables individuals to pick and choose the participants of ‘their’ game, and possibly become executioners of their friends’ preferences. On the other hand, there are indirect ways for the players to sanction a Lobby Leader’s behavior, by either staying in the Lobby or leaving/not even joining it. Scott for instance must first be enabled by Cry as Lobby Leader, who may refuse at will. With regards to the stream, however, thus acknowledging (a member of) the triarchy is a necessary, if not a sufficient, cause to even have a chance to participate.

There is a fifth group of participants, which is also mentioned in the longer quote: Individuals who are personally invited to the stream for just one time, for whatever purpose, and are thus granted temporary ‘immunity’ from kicking. Atom Bomb is one such player, who provides free copies of a number of games that can be won by players outside the ‘core group’ (or at least aside from the triarchy) by winning a game of L4D against a team consisting of some variation of the core-group and Atom Bomb. The practice of giving away games gives an insight into another dimension of the power-structures mentioned above: Because the triarchy tends to play on one team, with a fourth person from the core-group joining in, they usually play with people they know, and with people they can actually hear and strategize with, making it much easier to play the game as an actual team. On the other hand, their competitors are mostly made up of people who don’t know one another, and if they do they cannot connect through a call the same way Cry and his friends can – the very fact that their place within the game is always at risk makes it considerably harder to coordinate their communication, and consequently their gameplay, in the same way the core-group can. Through all of this, their probability to succeed *within these structures* is noticeably diminished:

A: generally, the viewer’s team, is not supposed to be doing as good as we’re doing [on 2012.08.19]

[after just losing a Scavenge-game]

D: now it’s time for, Left4Stomp, other people

A: [laughs] yeah. (2 sec) that doesn’t really count as, our, our team losing, because our team only consisted of two of the usual people

[on 2012.06.24]

These quotes show not only that the group is used to and comfortable with winning, but that the very fact they did not win is in need of both explanation and justification. Cry makes an effort to emphasize that their team was not complete, and could therefore not lose – their loss is that of another team,

not ‘theirs’, i.e. the one they are actually identifying with. This move allows him to keep thinking of himself as a part of a winning team, regardless of the previous defeat, and thus strengthens the idea of L4D as a game based fundamentally on cooperation. He also avoids to explicitly address his own (and Russ’s) abilities that seem to have been insufficient in this specific case. Implicitly, though, his statement constructs their defeat as an individual one, while emphasizing that they are usually part of another, albeit contingent, unit. All of this gives an insight into the complex interplay between individuality and group-identity that pervades Left4Dead as well as the stream – who is allowed to call themselves part of a group or a team, who is winning when a team wins, who is losing when it loses, who carries their teams and who kills them through their behavior/gameplay, is all a matter of socially agreed upon understandings and interpretations that intertwine complex online and offline relations with social rules and material mechanics of gameplay. When Scott says “we’ve got a runner! [...] scumbag Ellis. it’s gotta be, it’s Joe. of course it’s Joe!” and Cry reacts with “so his team is gonna die, cause of his, his actions.” [on 2012.03.25] they put the whole team’s loss on Joe’s decision to run ahead and leave the rest behind. Even though within the mechanics of the game it is indeed harder to stay alive with 3 instead of 4 people, seasoned players may still manage to survive, so while having “a runner” is annoying and life-threatening, it does not necessarily guarantee a team’s defeat. However, leaving one’s mates is a practice fundamentally frowned upon, and doing so is discursively connected to losing much more tightly than for instance an individual dying very early on is, although both are interpreted to a degree as individual failures. While a Survivor getting killed near the beginning often draws scorn, it is seldom put as *the* (singular) reason for defeat, in contrast to running ahead: “leaving em all for *dea:d! as soon as people start doing that the team loses!*” [shouts Cry while leaving his team behind, on 2012.04.22]. Thus, being a bad teammate is reprimanded much more strongly than being a bad player (even though being a bad player is by no means a trivial offense, as will be discussed more in-depth later).

At this point it is important to explain that there are specific situations in which running ahead and leaving one’s incapacitated teammates behind is socially sanctioned and considered a valid option: When a team expects to lose soon anyway, with all (healing) equipment exhausted and three out of four Survivors incapacitated, helping up one’s mates may become a liability that is more likely to end in defeat than in improving one’s chances to win. In such a case, “running for points” becomes an option. Incapacitated individuals can be used to draw hordes away from the last person standing, or at least divide their attention, while running Survivors can use a short window of time – before they are noticed or before the other team gets a chance to re-spawn – to get as many points as possible. In this, they even are often encouraged by their teammates, and thus know that they will not be penalized for leaving their mates in this situation:

Undead Koala (types): RUN CRY RUUUUUUNNNNNNNNNNNNNN
D: gotta run for points bro
A: (1 sec) okay

[on 2012.01.22]

Returning to teambuilding, Cry’s above statement furthermore comes as a reaction to Russ’ proclamation that their team is now complete again, which he constructs as synonymous with winning, and easily and

completely at that: He predicts that they are going to “stomp” some anonymous “other people”, which probably does correspond with his personal experience (for all the reasons discussed above). However, his statement disregards 1) the contingency of the composition of the randomized other team, 2) the contingencies of actual gameplay, and 3) the instability of the involved technologies, assuming that their usual team wins regardless of such changeable factors of online social play. Alas, in this specific case the subsequent inclusion of their regulars does not lead to victory – presumably facilitated by the fact that KirbyKat³⁵ has difficulties with his computer’s processor, and thus randomly falls in and out of the game. In the wake of another defeat, Russ proposes to change the game-mode from Scavenge to Campaign-Versus, which is affirmed by Cry. The frustration of repeatedly losing is thus enough to make the group change game-mode, but not abandon the game altogether, which might hint at three things: 1) A certain tolerance to disappointment that is possibly necessary when playing a competitive co-op game, where losing is an integral part of the game-mechanics. 2) A willingness to adhere to their self-imposed schedule, which requires them to play a full hour (or more) of the game. 3) A specific culture of sportspersonship that demands of players to stay in a game even when confronted with defeat. The practice of so-called *rage-quitting*, which refers to angrily abandoning a (running) game due to repeated or certain loss, is generally frowned upon in online multiplayer gaming, as it makes it impossible for the enemy team to ever actually *win* their game:

B: KirbyKat rage-quit

A: did he?

F: [laughs]

A: [laughs]

B: yeah

[...]

A: well did he actually rage-quit or did his Internet fuck up?

B: nah, it’s probably Internet. can’t imagine KirbyKat would, rage-quit

A: yeah, I don’t think he’s that much of a *bitch*:

[on 2012.08.12]

Rage-quitting is a practice that is both made fun of and disapproved of, and people suspected of doing so are constructed as weak and somewhat lousy. They are “bitches” that leave their mates behind and won’t grant the other team their victory. Even though there are occasions in which individuals of the core-group, and especially Scott, quit a running game while voicing annoyance with it, and thus might themselves be ‘guilty’ of rage-quitting, they still universally condemn the practice verbally. Repeating this disapproval serves to construct and reiterate a social pressure to follow through with lost games. This might to a degree be necessary in a game with a clear win-lose scenario for the involved parties, and where a defeat can be devastating, as e.g. in the case of highly unbalanced teams. If winning takes an integral position within this social environment, and defeat is clearly conceivable from the very beginning, going through with a game becomes an effort, and needs to be socially sanctioned in its own right.

35 Another interesting question is when individual players get to be part of “our team”, and when not. KirbyKat sometimes joins them, but he is not comparable to Scott, or even Snake for that matter. It seems to be that, in this case, inclusion hinges on the intersection of regularity and proficiency – facilitating the ‘A-game’, so to speak.

6.2.2.1 MANAGING FRUSTRATION

Another, closely related issue becomes visible in the extensive quote above, namely two types of frustration displayed in relation to joining a game: First, the frustration of trying to join a Lobby itself, with slots being filled so very quickly. People who try to join and have a secured slot know the game can only start once they are in the Lobby, and (at least from this perspective) everyone is waiting for them. Each time they don't manage to join the Lobby in the short instance before someone else takes 'their' spot is a kind of failure, and prolongs the process for everyone involved. On the other hand, the people who have precarious slots, and whose voices are usually not heard on the stream, may still hope to get to join the game. They know their spots are at risk, and don't know whether they will be able to take part in the end. To have any chance at participating they need to join, but in joining they might annoy a lot of other people, and be responsible for the prolonging of the initial, pre-game set-up. Second, there are the people with secure spots in the Lobby, who wait for the right people to join. The continuous back and forth with the 'wrong' people entering the game, without being able to influence who gets through, must be dispiriting, too, as might be deduced from Scott's repeated cries of "*please*" in the extensive quote above. With the Lobby Leader being the only person able to kick people (when still in the Lobby), there is a lot of responsibility on them, and while they might like the power of the position, the above quotes show that they are aware of the discontent they almost certainly produce. Still, while all of them at times display an understanding of the wider implications of their actions, only Cry audibly expresses regret and unease at kicking people, while Russ and Scott tend to act as if mostly unaffected. Cry is also inclined to apologize to people by name, or add explanations for his actions, when Russ and Scott often keep it factual:

B: sorry, last people here jo:inin:g [on 2012.10.28]

Due to these processes of negotiating access, and because of often encountered technical issues, such as finding a server or getting everyone in the game, it can take quite a long time and many attempts to get a successful game going. In the long instance quoted above, it took Cry 20 minutes from starting up the game to actually being in a game and playing it, going through three Lobbies in the meantime. Although this is an extreme case, it happens often enough to be worth noting. In the 21 instances of L4D available in 2012, only 10 worked completely without issue, although 2 additional times the stream broke down, cutting off the creation of the Lobby for me to see, so they, too, might have been working from the gaming perspective. 6 times, the group returned to the Lobby or made new ones at least once, and in 3 instances they abandoned the game altogether – once because they couldn't find a server at all, once because Cry's game kept crashing, and once because the livestream ran unevenly when recording L4D. This demonstrates two things: 1) How precarious the gaming experience itself is, with a constant risk of technical failure or misbehavior. This leads to participants closely watching the timeframes needed to find a server or load into a game, theorizing over whether it is working or not:

B: is this not now loading for anyone?

A: yeah it just kinda sits there

Atom: yeah, it stopped

C: give it time. Versus games take a while to set up

D: [sighs] not back in the da::y hn::

[on 2012.07.29]

B: why:: am I not loadin::gs [...] there's something wro:ng [...] it's just like, staying at the first little bar of loading (2.5 sec) this is gay [...] connection failed after 10 retries, daf:uck? [on 2012.01.08]

Interestingly, even when knowing the fragility of getting a game started, players still react with surprise (and anger) when it does not work, especially if it is only single individuals encountering issues: Scott asks “daf:uck?” when being thrown out of a game, which is a variation on “what the fuck”, and indicates an angry questioning of circumstances that is often used accusingly. At the same time, competently handling the situation or offering explanations is a way to demonstrate expertise and experience in playing the game and using the technologies involved: Snake offers that Versus games take longer than regular Campaigns to start, positioning himself as knowledgeable in this regard. Russ responds by jokingly indicating that this is not necessarily his experience, which originated far off in the past, “back in the day”, making himself into not just a knowledgeable player, but one who has been playing for a (very) long time. Through this, he secures his own claim to knowledgability, and moves to (jokingly) top Snake's. But more on the essential role of expertise and proficiency in play later. 2) On the other hand, the earlier mentioned data shows how each additional technology added makes the functioning of the whole socio-technical assemblage more fragile and risky. Problems may arise from each human and nonhuman actor involved, and having Skype and the streaming-software on top of the game itself leads to continuous problems. At the same time, however, the social reactions to this fragility are quite robust, and players often seem both patient and resourceful in getting a game started, leading to only three instances where the game was abandoned in total. Furthermore, in such instances there was always another game started or another activity found, meaning that the stream itself always stayed up, indicating that it has primacy over everything else. Even in the rare cases the stream does not work from Cry's computer at all, someone else will always take over streaming. Thus, *the contingency of the framework is both a risk and an advantage to its realization*, resulting in an ultimately quite resilient construct.

6.2.2.2 ARRANGING THE TEAMS

As mentioned earlier, the arrangement of teams is a major point of discussion and a major source of discontent to the participants of the stream, even as it is done swiftly most of the times. Team-composition affects the whole game about to be played, and is therefore a critical process in relation to the overall experience of playing the game. In some instances, the group decides to “randomize” the teams, leaving their final make-up to chance rather than deciding upon it themselves. This move is done explicitly and deliberately to give somewhat equal chances of winning to all participants, while delegating the responsibility of team-creation to the software. Although randomization does have a certain risk that the final teams may be (highly) imbalanced, it also might be utilized to break up the core-group and their usual allegiances, which they are rather unwilling to give up otherwise:

A: what are we doing, we doing survivors first?

B: u:::m, wanna do all random?

A: (1.5 sec) okay!

B: that seems like the fairest

[on 2012.10.28]

A: fuck. I am on everyone else's team. okay!

B: enjoy getting fucked [laughs]
A: fuck [laughs] damn it, why didn't we think of this earlier?
B: I did. you didn't-, you just decided to random like a pro
A: I forgot

[on 2012.09.09]

The decision to randomize teams stands in contrast to the earlier quoted exchanges that indicated the triarchy's preferences of playing together on one team. Taken on its own, randomization is constructed as both a "fair" practice and a "pro" practice, as in something professional/proficient players do, alluding to the risk involved in randomizing team-affiliation. This risk is mainly an individual one, even while winning and losing is a team-effort, as single players can't know how well the final configuration will work out for them. Randomization may break up usual allegiances, and thus weaken identification with one's 'squad', which poses an additional risk to the enjoyment of the game. In combination, the above quotes show that the final decision on the structuring of teams lies mostly with the core-group, or even just the triarchy. Not only do they have a time-wise advantage because of their connection through the Skype-call and their ability to join games off one another, but through their leading the Lobbies they can kick people until everyone they want is in and has chosen the 'correct' team, undermining everybody else's ability to choose in the course of it. Furthermore, they at times ask other people *through the stream* to change teams, assuming that all people who join them *simultaneously* watch it (with its varying time-delay), which is verified when said individuals do, indeed, change teams (after a while). Watching the stream while playing serves as a distraction and takes up both parts of the processing power of a PC and burdens the internet connection, which might impede the gameplay of anyone joining the game as a viewer further. At the same time, the triarchy has the option to ask for team-changes through the chat-window embedded in the Lobby's topography, and not doing so works to reiterate the primacy of the stream. Even more so, it seems people participating in the stream (but not the call) realize the group's preferences, and seldom try to get on the their team on their own account, foregoing such discussions altogether. On the other hand, and as indicated earlier, the triarchy does not always get what it wants, and they often refrain from mending teams their way after the final teams have formed and the search for a server has started, even when they could do so. The earlier quote where Cry 'accidentally' ends up on "everyone else's" team shows a tendency to accept the final teams, and by extension a certain willingness to play even when the odds are stacked against oneself (just like he, to some extent, expects a weaker enemy team to go through with playing the game, as was suggested by the earlier discussion on rage-quitting).

While the triarchy often plays together on one team, the fourth member can well be someone they did not decide upon or agree with in the first place. In some such cases they do not change the set-up but still voice their disagreement, which is mostly directed at their friends, but obviously heard by anyone listening in via the stream, presumably including the people they think so poorly off. Most importantly, Cry, Russ, and Scott all *assume* they are listening, as discussed and quoted numerous times above. This move to disregard other players' feelings and wishes might be facilitated by the bias of the media they utilize – while they can talk to and about people listening to them, said people have either less direct means to respond, such as text-based messages or a time-delayed voice-chat, or they have no means

at all. Furthermore, their point of view will most likely go unheard by the vast majority of the audience of the livestream, as it is entirely up to the ‘big three’ of the broadcast to make mention of differing opinions and other people’s emotional well-being. Uttering the following remarks while knowing that several thousand people are listening, *including* the person criticized, is to some degree an exploitation of power, and has elements of abuse, as will be discussed more in-depth later on:

B: damn it! fucking Joe’s on our team

A: [laughs]

D: that’s what I was talking about, yeah

B: [sighs]

A: o::h, Joe

D: expect him to shoot everybody

[on 2012.04.22]

D: oh n:o:-h. Jazzy’s on our team [sighs]

B: oh, it’s your favorite person

A: Jazzy’s not on our team. oh, she is on our team! (1 sec) I’m okay with it!

[on 2012.06.24]

While both these remarks diminish the person they make mention of, the first conversation relates a reason for this reaction which is founded in actual gameplay, while the second exchange leaves the explanation implicitly on a level of personal aversion. Although on another broadcast Russ explains his dislike of Jazzy by relating to her gaming-abilities, he refrains from doing so here, emphasizing his personal dislike over his ‘professional’ one (even more so by not explicitly rejecting Scott’s sarcastic remark). This gives insight into different dimensions that pattern online encounters in videogames (be they anonymous or not), which are furthermore to some extent interwoven and hard to differentiate, even to the individuals expressing said opinions themselves. Because, while all members of the triarchy express friendliness towards Joe, he still is kicked once because of his perceived tendency to Friendly Fire (by Scott, no less, who doesn’t appear all too scrupulous in this regard), and once because he took a spot that was explicitly not his to take. On the other hand, while Jazzy is trashed repeatedly, within my sample she was never kicked for any of the faults ascribed to her. Paradoxically, this might stem exactly from the group’s closeness to Joe, which makes it socially more acceptable to treat him the way he is treated (as the compulsion of politeness diminishes within closer relationships). This example still opens up another issue, which will be discussed in the following chapters:

6.2.3 COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

6.2.3.1 STRATEGIZING & CASUAL TALK

This chapter will deal with the different dimensions of verbal communication found on the livestream when featuring Left4Dead. Here, communication is not just utilized for strategic gameplay, and to sanction and reprimand specific actions and behaviors over others, but also for casual talk about outside issues as well as for practices of taunting and what is in vivo referred to as “trash-talking” [e.g. on 2012.01.08] that seem to be an integral part of this social environment. Basic communication about what weapons and other items players find on the map, what players are equipping, what enemies they encounter, or whether they need help is integral to gameplay, and even more so when people are connected continuously outside of the game – it pervades their talk just as explications and

explanations of their gameplay itself do. Telling one's mates what is going on on their end of the game facilitates the cohesion of the team and its overall survival, while ascertaining them that the call is still up, and thus works to their general advantage. It may also give rise to a hierarchical structuring of teams, and facilitate for some players to establish themselves as group-leaders, which will be discussed more in-depth later on. Such talk thus serves as a constant background-fuzz that is specific to playing *Left4Dead*, and makes it highly distinguishable from any other activity followed on the stream.

B: o:::h here comes the Charger [laughs]
 A: I grabbed pills
 B: it's bad enough that I announced that and didn't move
 A: (4 sec) I am not doing something smart right now
 B: (2 sec) you're running by yourself, you'll:::, will be okay

[on 2012.01.08]

While the participants of the Skype-call use it to facilitate and comment on their own and others' gameplay, casual talk *aside from Left4Dead* plays an important role that emphasizes the social dimension of their relating to one another. It entails the participants talking about online and offline experiences of 3 kinds (although these 3 might not be clearly separable): 1) **Individual experiences** are stories of interest told by individuals that are not necessarily constructed as a starting point for a longer discussion. They might be curious incidents or things that were emotionally loaded for the one telling the story, but most often they are reactions to a question from the chat on TwitchTV. Therefore, they might not be inherently about the commonality of an experience *to the one speaking*, but a way of asymmetrically co-relating to the core-group/Cry, employed by the audience of the livestream. Such individual experiences, be they answers to the chat or told on their own account, are sometimes picked up and pursued by others, making them into an artifact of the whole group:

A: so u:m (2 sec) hm (2 sec) paper cranes, yeah I agree too (2 sec) do you know how to make a paper swan?
 B: (1 sec) I actually do
 A: really?
 B: mhm
 A: I've actually never, figured it out, but it looks pretty fun
 B: (1 sec) it's annoying

[on 2012.01.08]

A: did I ever mention that when I was little I went to the church and, I, I, I totally drank some of the wine that you are supposed to just blush yourself with? (1.5 sec) I was just curious of how it tastes (1 sec) and then I kind of realized afterwards that like, hundreds of people put their fingers in it [...]
 soho
 B: gross
 A: [laughs] yeah. that wasn't the best idea in the world

[on 2012.01.08]

2) **Common experiences** are experiences people make individually or with other persons who are *not* part of the stream, but are still assumed to be somewhat relatable for a larger community. This might include things as diverse as threads on reddit or videos on YouTube, or occurrences in everyday live with a pet dog. Relating stories or comments of that kind serves to build a common ground of (socially agreed upon) expected knowledge – it helps to draw boundaries between those who are 'in the know' and those who are not, those whose position is rather at the center of the community and those who meander at the periphery. It is one way to demonstrate expertise (done in a mostly nonchalant way) and one's broad horizon exceeding L4D. And it works to inform people on shifting interests and newly arising issues on the fast-paced Internet.

E: did you see the thing on reddit, where, in the original song they, had to, uh, vote on what the second line would be?

B: (2 sec) what?
A: yeahyeahyeah cause a::, he wanted like fat girls or something
E: (1 sec) yeah, where the girls are fat and they got big titties
A: [laughs] yeah, that was it

[on 2012.10.28]

While bringing up common experiences has an exclusionary aspect, it is still fairly open when compared to the third kind: 3) **Shared experiences** refer to things that individual participants of the stream experienced together, be it offline or online, and that thus (to some degree) presuppose a personal relationship. Examples are activities like watching movies together or having private conversations outside the stream. Relating snippets of information that might not be understood by anyone else, and that can definitely not be understood in all their dimensions by the audience, serves to strengthen (the exclusivity of) friendships, by emphasizing a common past and, sometimes explicitly, drawing a line between ‘us’ who know and ‘them’ who don’t:

A: they have no idea what we’re talking about
B: ah like three people do

[on 2012.01.08]

B: oh my God Snake what was that movie that we watched a long time ago with the clown alien?
killer clown
C: Killer Klowns from Outer Space
D: is that really a movie?
B: oh my God that fucking movie [laughs]
A: I’ve heard of that so: much but I never got to see it

[on 2012.10.28]

While they do not engage in this kind of talk too often on the stream, it still happens on a regular basis, which does lead to a clearer distinction between the core-group that knows each other more intimately, and everyone else. This might become most obvious with regards to Cry’s anonymity: While Cry does reveal a lot of details about his personal life, as well as things such as interests and political positions, he refuses to show (parts of) his body. Questions about his identity are frowned upon and swiftly penalized in the call, and in Oct 2012 he banned the mere mention of the word “face” on his channel’s chat³⁶. At the same time, his identity is known to some of the other participants of the stream, who fiercely contribute to safeguarding his anonymity. While they seldom discuss questions of real-life identities themselves, they are in the privileged position of not having to. As mentioned earlier, the different participants of the stream show varying levels of comfort in revealing personal information, and while Snake neither uses his real name nor shows pictures of himself, and speaks with an assumed voice, Scott Jund for instance regularly uses his webcam on the stream to show both himself and his living environment. At the same time, personal (mis)information given on the stream is often contradictory and said in a tongue-in-cheek way, leaving anyone listening wondering over whether it’s actually true:

A: let’s see this team is, this group, Cry Ryan Terry is 13, and fat, and I’m an idiot
B: mhm. that’s a good group. I like that group [laughs]
A: you always start those terrible fucking rumours. I fucking hate you
B: [laughs] who said this is a rumour? who said this is a rumour?

[on 2012.08.12]

36 <http://craotic.tumblr.com/post/30202553612/i-just-banned-the-word-face-on-the-stream> (Access: 13.05.2013)



Figure 44: Fan-art of the so-called “Sup-guy”, representing Cry.

This comment also gives an insight into how the group handles posts on the chat-room that include guesses about their personal information. Mostly, they both agree and disagree, give supporting and contradictory additional information, and thus cause confusion over what might be considered ‘the truth’. Interestingly, these aspects of anonymity turn into somewhat of a trademark of the respective individuals – Cry’s facelessness was made into a mask used to represent him in fanart, and Snake is known exactly for his Batman-voice – even though parts of the audience still try to find out personal details about the group (hence the ban of the word “face” on the stream). All casual talk is of course somewhat distracting from the actual

game the group is playing, which means that it is often confined to calmer phases or instances of the game, for example when the speaker is currently dead, or their team is easily winning. Thus, the types of talk have a certain rhythm to them, which is contextually contingent on the game-mechanics and the current make-up of the virtual environment. This is true also for the other kinds of socially sanctioned, continuous communication, aside from strategic and casual talk, and most of all for practices of appreciation and scolding:

6.2.3.2 APPRECIATION, SCOLDING & ABUSE

These types of talk are thematically tightly intertwined with the actual course the game is taking, and thus have a double-nature of commentary on individual and team-wise efforts on the one hand, and social sanctioning of player’s behaviors on the other. Especially the latter aspect makes appreciation and scold into disciplinary measures that shape both the way the game is played (in strategies, in tone, in commitment) and the specific form the (hierarchical) relationships between individual players take (who is allowed to scold/praise whom). Therefore, they serve as a form of regulation, although a much more benevolent one than will be discussed in the next segment.

Appreciative talk is for some reason heard rather seldom on the stream, and much more so when measured against scolding. The most often repeated phrases are abbreviations commonplace in varying contexts of competitive online play that are usually typed out, although they are sometimes said out loud as well: “GG” is a shortening of “good game”, and is used *after* a game to indicate that players gave it their best. It is mostly done as a courtesy and to keep the tone of the game on a light side. It takes little time to type and foregoes any kind of exposition, which makes it both a highly unspecific phrase that can be used in all sorts of situations, and one with a lot of recognition value. GG also serves as a social way to mark the end of a game, aside from the one provided by the technology (the final listing of stats and the vote on a rematch), and is often used as a form of farewell:

A: oh we w-, it’s, it’s over?
Ru\$\$ Money (types): GG TX RU\$\$

[on 2012.01.22]

In this specific case, Russ also includes a TX, which is a shortening of “thanks”, and serves as an additional courtesy. In combination, this statement serves as a definite goodbye, as it structurally resembles for instance the end of a letter with an acknowledgement and a signature at the bottom. It also leaves no

space to start a longer discussion over the game, and might indicate that Russ has no desire to engage in anything like that. A variation on GG is GR, which stands for “good round” and indicates that a segment of the game, e.g. a Chapter, was played well. It does not imply the end of a game, but is still only issued at *an* end (i.e. of a round). Both phrases indicate a certain culture of sportspersonship, where they are accepted set-phrases for wishing the other team well, which are easily issued in passing. It also shows a certain desire to play ‘good’ games, which can refer to close ones with balanced teams, but also to unbalanced ones where both teams still appreciate the efforts of the other.

Likewise, a sometimes issued phrase at the beginning of a game is “GLHF”, which is an abbreviation of “good luck, have fun”. Similar to GG, it sets the tone of the following match as an amicable one, with everyone involved compelled to play fair and benevolently. It marks a nice and smooth start to a game, however it may play out later on, although I generally witnessed it less often than GG/GR on Left4Dead (with regards to both the stream and my own playing-experiences), and thus have the impression it is not that commonplace a phrase in this context. That it is most of the time conspicuously absent in L4D might suggest a different culture of play between games/genres, although this is far too big an issue to tackle in the framework of this thesis. In any case, niceties of this kind are limited in L4D, and might then be followed by (tongue-in-cheek) insults (note the deviation from official spelling):

Ru\$\$ Money (types): GG
 Shep (types): GG
 Ru\$\$ Money (types): SKRUBS

[on 2012.04.01]



Figure 45: The web-comic Penny Arcade discusses etiquette in the online game League of Legends.

During the game, appreciation is expressed differently, in less standardized language, more in voice than in typing, and a lot more contingent on the actual situation. Mostly, it is done in reaction to good gameplay, both in earnest and facetiously, but it can also be used as a means to reassure people who are insecure about their abilities:

E: that was an *amazing* charge Jund [on 2012.10.28]

F: nice pull! nice pull.

A: yeah!

B: yeah, the part where you clicked him? that was really good!

A: thank you!

[on 2012.08.12]

A: get off my buddy ma:n!

D: you can't beat him you gotta shoot him

A: oh, I'm sorry. I wish I knew this *better* [*than I do*]!

D: it's alright, it's alright, you doing good.

A: thanks

D: you know how to shoot guns and you just shoot the zombies in the face

[on 2012.03.11]

Appreciation can be expressed by both players who may be considered worse and those considered better than the ones it is directed at, and might be issued by one's teammates as well as one's enemies. In any case it works within the logic of competitive gameplay, acknowledging an apt handling of the game-mechanics against the other team. Reassurance, on the other hand, is often asymmetrical, as it is issued towards a player that just messed up somehow, and is thus in a more precarious position. Telling someone that they are "doing good" is a way of relieving pressure, and to some degree counteract the dictate of competition. It emphasizes the solidarity-aspects of play over its divisive ones, and reframes whatever mishap came before into something with a positive trajectory. At the same time, the last example from the above quotes entails casual advice on how to play the game, i.e. "just shoot the zombies in the face", while telling the recipient that they know how to do that already. It is a 'gentle nudge' into a specific direction, without being too specific at that (as already discussed, there's much more to a successful game than "shooting zombies in the face", even if that might be a good start).

Scolding, on the other hand, is done much more often, and is mostly issued within the same team, as a reaction to 'bad gameplay'. It, too, can be done in both a humorous and a serious/willful manner, while it may be either direct or indirect. Its functions can be diverse: It might serve to change an individual's behavior or playstyle, to position oneself as better or distract from one's own imperfect abilities, to express anger or allocate fault for a team's defeat. Whatever the reasons, scolding is a practice comfortably embedded into and aware of the logic of competitive play, enforcing its leverage over this specific iteration of the game. Through scolding, a competitive game-logic is realized much more than appreciation ever could:

A: I'm leaving you all for dead! bye

B: (1 sec) *you're a shitty teammate!*

A: I'm an amazing, leader!

[on 2012.02.12]

B: hey a Witch [...] I found a Witch.

[...]

Sioux (types): Might be able to crown her.

B: Snake there's no reason to. she's completely out of the way

Sioux (types): You say that now./

[...]

A: *oh shit I just startled the Witch! I didn't even notice her!* I swear I did not notice her, whatsoever

B: I didn't, I didn't account on Cry being retarded Snake.

Sioux (types): Case in point.

A: *I didn't see her!*

B: I didn't, I didn't think you'd be retarded. I'm sorry.

[on 2012.08.12]

B: *Raven*, where are you? [laughs] why aren't you spitting them? (1 sec) a:::ch, goddammit Raven

A: Raven's doing her best

[...]

B: the::re you are [...] fail [...] *damn it Raven!* you miss charges and get hit by charges

[...]

B: no, Raven's got the most points, she's gonna get the Tank

A: (1 sec) [laughs]

B: and she's just gonna charge into walls [...] damn it Raven stop getting the most points

[on 2012.10.28]

A: *damn it I missed all of them, are you kidding me?*

D: you bad

A: *that was bullshit!*

D: Cry you're kicked off the team. kick him! kick this sc-

A: *don't kick me::, plea::se!*

[on 2012.07.01]

All these quotes are examples of how scolding (and threat of punishment) is utilized to correct behavior, in a more or less straightforward way. It shows how a bad gaming performance might draw scorn that is issued with an attitude of legitimacy, using harsh and unambiguous language. The reactions from the ones addressed vary from silence (and presumably, to some degree, acceptance), to facetious re-framings and quips, to justifications or outright refusal. As suggested earlier, both the strength of the rebuke and the reaction to it seem to be tied in part to the position the respective participant has in the group. Cry seldom accepts a scolding without an act of resistance, and Scott is the one who hands out the most and the unkindest criticism. On the other hand, and as indicated in the last quote, Raven let's herself get scolded without more than two words defending herself throughout a whole game. Cry chips in twice to defend her, but far less emphatically than he usually defends himself. All of this shows how hierarchies within this group are structured not just by an individual's position with regards to the overall stream and participants' offline-relations, but also by their *performance within the game*. How well or bad people play influences how they are treated, how much support and respect they get, and how they are allowed to behave themselves otherwise. While it is by no means the only factor, it is an important one, implying that the competitive logic of the game has a fundamental value within this group. In most cases I witnessed on the stream, the competitive aspects of the game are played out rather seriously, and the participants adhere to its pre-given structure at least in this respect.

The last quote was also selected to suggest that the transition from scolding to abuse or downright bullying is a swift one indeed. In this specific instance, Scott keeps rebuking Raven continuously, and gets ever more unforgiving in the course of it. While he is continuously angry with her for making no points as an Infected, when she starts getting the most points he scolds her for that very reason, because the player with the most points tends to get control of the Tank (should one spawn at all, which in this case it wasn't). Thus, Raven cannot do right at all in this situation, which calls into question the earlier postulated corrective function of the scolding itself. Even more so, Scott's dismissal of Raven goes so far that it explicitly breaks with the cooperative foundation of the whole game: When Raven gets boomed and then incapacitated by a horde, Scott advises their third remaining teammate to leave her behind.

E: no. I just got boomed very bad

B: you know what Raven? Jangles, don't even save her

[on 2012.10.28]

In this specific case, RickyPJangles does not abandon Raven, prompting her to say "Jangles is so nice", as if the basic and oft-repeated game-mechanic of helping one's teammates turned into a concession or a sign of good will. In another, similar instance [on 2012.08.19], Jazzy (who is incidentally also female) is on a team with Russ, Scott, and mills, who is a guest on the Skype-call. When the group is almost wiped out, with only Jazzy and Russ being left, Russ goes through with abandoning Jazzy after she saved him from a Jockey, without drawing any scorn from the rest of the players. This situation is still filled with ambiguity, because in the context of Russ's usual behavior it might be argued that his intention was to 'run for points', and the hostility expressed through his actions are only mildly mirrored in his verbal comments – he just says "by:e" and runs off. Later in the same game, however, a much less ambiguous scene takes place: Scott gets angry with Jazzy for getting charged, and instead of simply

abandoning her, he shoots and incapacitates her (after first saving her) specifically to leave her behind. As discussed earlier, this is exactly the reason he gave for kicking Joe at the very beginning of another game, which indicates the grave breach such behavior represents, and that he is aware of this breach. The fundamental difference between those two cases, however, is that this abandonment is one he forced on Jazzy himself, leaving her mostly helpless and unable to survive. She is certain to die the moment Scott leaves her, were it not for another teammate:

B: that's gotta be Jazzy back there. oh look it's Jazzy	Jazzy (types): Wow thanks XD
A: [laughs]	D: bye Scott.
B: you know what, just fuck it	A: this is for Jazzy Scott
A: <i>why did you shoot Jazzy!?</i> [laughs] dude, get her	B: help?
up man, don't be a dick. [laugh] dude	A: this is for Jazzy, Scott
B: my, my, my trigger slipped	B: notice how, if we'd just let her die: I'd be fi:ne?
A: get her up, come o:n [laughs] that's such a dick-	A: [laughs] you let her die
move	B: that's the <i>point</i> . (1 sec) I'm making it into just a
[...]	3v4 then.
mills: I got you Jazzy, I think. I hope. oh God I'm	[on 2012.08.19]
gonna die	

Scott puts his behavior as completely justified because of Jazzy's insufficient gaming-performance, and vehemently defends himself even against a continuous and highly explicit disapproval from Cry's side (who is on the enemy team at that moment). His nonchalant reasoning indicates that he thinks having one less player gives them better chances at winning than having Jazzy on the team – he “just” wants to turn the game into one with 3 vs. 4 players, instead of its intended 4 vs. 4. When mills goes back to pick up Jazzy, she expresses surprise and amazement (“Wow”) in addition to gratitude (thanks), while she literally puts a good face on the matter (XD – a widely grinning emoticon). This indicates not only that she is aware of her dependence on another player to help her, and that this help is an act against someone hierarchically higher than both of them within their own team, but it shows that she did not expect this kind of concession *from the very people who should be looking out for her*. To take this one step further, I would argue that it shows a certain degree of acceptance and maybe even anticipation of this kind of abuse and contempt, especially considering that she did not immediately ‘rage-quit’ or even speak up/write out her disapproval when she got willfully knocked out by her own teammate. As she is a comparatively voiceless and disenfranchised participant of the stream, accepting this kind of treatment might also be a precondition for her to take part at all.

What is hard to communicate to the uninitiated in this context is the emotional dimension of being left behind. When a Survivor is pinned by a Special Infected, or otherwise incapacitated, they become more or less helpless within the mechanics of the game. Incapacitated Survivors are immediately swarmed by Infected and violently beaten to death, while being rendered immobile and left with a handgun to defend themselves at best. They need another player's help to survive, and by extension to be able to further participate in the game (at least for the respective round). The emotional toll such a situation can take is reflected to a degree in the reactions of pinned players. Cry tends to shout “*save my soul!*” [e.g. on 2012.07.01] or some variation thereof, Snake often types a simple “!” to make people aware of his situation or some variation of “!!!!1” to communicate greater urgency [e.g. on 2012.10.28], while even the normally calm Russ sometimes starts shouting angrily when faced with losing all his health:

“Joe help, Joe, Jo:::e, he:lp!” [ibid.]. At the same time, such reactions are not always displayed, and often the people who actually do have a voice on the stream make quips about such situations. But they also play 1) mostly on the winning team, 2) with people they explicitly consider friends, 3) with the option to tell said friends off when being abandoned or abused, 4) are able to disagree with such actions and noisily question their legitimacy, and 5) generally don’t have to fear being left behind out of spite at all. I only witnessed two situations in which people of the core-group were willfully left behind: First, as indicated earlier, to “run for points” when a game is already considered lost. Second, people sometimes deliberately ‘break the game’ or “troll” [e.g. on 2012.04.22: “Lucario is not supposed to troll!”], i.e. use the game-mechanics to hinder one’s own team(-mates). This is done usually when a game’s outcome seems already certain, e.g. with one team massively ahead of the other in the final Chapter. In such a case, such behavior shows awareness of the imbalance between the teams, and might be a way to get some kind of agency back for the ones on the losing side – for instance killing oneself instead of facing actual defeat. On the other hand, a player may decide for whatever (other) reason to not take the game too seriously (anymore), or annoy their teammates out of boredom or spite. In all of such cases of “trolling”, however, players usually choose other means to break the game than outright shooting and abandoning their mates, as doing so represents a most intolerable breach. In contrast to the earlier described case, however, the offending players know that what they are doing is considered wrong, and play exactly with the outrage this might generate – the function of such behavior is more to annoy one’s kin, and less to penalize someone considered inferior.

The last theme I want to tackle in this segment is the nadir of Raven’s abuse in the aforementioned round, which culminates in the highly uncomfortable, extremely intimate, and fundamentally gendered public discussion of her abilities. In the way it plays out, it is an example of an experience only women in gaming can share, even though there are certainly parallels to other traditionally disenfranchised groups. In the following quote Scott apologizes to Raven, presumably for his earlier treatment of her, just to follow it up immediately with an explanation of why he has sound reasons to treat her that way – she’s actually no good at this game, but good at other things:

B: I’m sorry Raven, you are very good at other things
 E: (1.5 sec) [laughs quietly]
 B: like art. and being Asian.
 A: and blowjobs
 B: (1.5 sec) yes
 A: [laughs]
 B: and you live in Kansas
 E: I’m good at living in Kansas
 B: (1 sec) you are *very* good at living in Kansas
 D: so pro

[on 2012.10.28]

In this instance, three men who are considered *friends* of the only woman currently participating in the game start discussing details of her general life and her personal interests to underline how there are things she’s actually good at. The things they bring up are overwhelmingly belittling and diminishing in one way or another – being Asian and living in Kansas are both things that need neither talent nor work nor expertise to do, and the joke of bringing up such examples is on her, not on them or

anyone else. Leaving aside the question of what gives them the right or the expertise to judge her in these regards at all, I want to focus on how they take care to emphasize her abilities in sexually gratifying men – giving blowjobs. Naming this as one of her prime accomplishments serves to make her agency noteworthy most of all in those instances where she pleases a man, and sexually at that. Her whole being as an individual with agency is reduced to her function as a provider of pleasure to *men*. Considering that Scott and Raven were/are an item, this might not be seen as a ‘simple’ degrading joke, but as an intrusion into an extremely private aspect of their relationship, of which Cry displays intimate knowledge. The structuring of the men’s turns in talking is furthermore not aimed at engaging Raven in a dialog at all, but at talking to her while actually talking about her – there are no questions asked, and no answers expected. After talking about fellatio, Scott brings up living in Kansas, and Raven becomes complicit in her own deprecation by agreeing that there is at last something she’s actually good at. This move can be seen less as a general consent to what is going on at that very moment, but as a vehicle to get away from the much more intimate theme brought up before. Scott trumps himself by patronizingly emphasizing just how good she is at living in Kansas, and Russ jumps in to tell her how much of a professional she is when it comes to living in Kansas. The whole exchange is highly reductionist and objectifying, stripping Raven of her agency both within the game (as she cannot play it properly) and within this conversation (as she is not engaged in any way), in a highly unbalanced juxtaposition of three “bros” working together to humiliate one woman. Although this is the worst exchange I witnessed in a whole year of playing Left4Dead, it gives an insight into what women might risk when playing online, and playing with presumed friends (or even partners). A mostly friendly environment can turn toxic instantaneously, and then stay that way for a prolonged period of time, without there being too many signals to know beforehand how far it will go. Even with Jazzy the impression remains that her abuse might be related to her gender:

D: well now it’s our turn. when they get, four minutes we have to play another round, else we beat em right now [...] but they have Jazzy so we’re gonna do great

A: [laughs] ah, it’s cause, funny cause it’s a girl

D: (1 sec) bullshit. well I’ve played with her before, she’s not very good

A: girls-. *girls don’t know how to play videogames!*

D: you’re right

[on 2012.04.01]

Regardless of whether Cry or Russ or their friends or their audiences ‘actually’ believes on some level that this is true (Russ first rejects Cry’s comment with “bullshit”), girls being bad gamers is a pervasive stereotype that is common enough to be referenced in the blink of an eye. In such an environment, it becomes impossible for women to ‘just play’, forgetting that as soon as their identity becomes known, they are being held against this trope, and their performance will be judged accordingly. Thus, an enjoyable game might turn toxic at any given moment. If “girl don’t know how to play videogames”, then videogame-environments cannot be fully theirs; their participation will always be somewhat precarious if they are constructed as different from and somewhat remarkable in comparison to their gaming-brethren. They remain guests, at least in this context – they are tolerated at best, and can decide to either accept the risks involved in entering such spaces, or not participate at all (just like Jazzy has the ‘option’ to not take part in the stream at all). In the above quote, the triarchy does its

best to send her fleeing. The strongest exercises of power I witnessed in a whole year are applied in a gendered context, and I do not think this is coincidental, nor is it inconsequential. The game's users can (ab)use its mechanics specifically to hurt others, and the reasons for such behavior are always socially embedded ones.

The next segment will deal with a similar issue that is still somewhat different, in that it is closer to the above-mentioned trolling, and less violent in its form of abuse:

6.2.3.3 TRASH-TALKING & TAUNTING

Joe (ptt): *get the bitch (2 sec) come back Russ!*

A: [laughs] (1 sec) he's trash-talking to you right now

[on 2012.01.09]

Trash-talking and taunting take up a significant part of the communication encountered on the stream. Both highlight the competitive nature of the Versus-game by picking up on game-mechanical enmities that are designed to be temporary (i.e. confined to matches between contingent teams). As indicated earlier, they are expressed more readily on the stream than benevolent or sympathetic communication, even among teammates. Although this is not necessarily inherent to Left4Dead, it is certainly to some degree enabled by the game – its channels of communication allow for both spoken and written messages, and while voice-communication is by default team-based, chat-messages may be directed to either one's squad or all participants of a game, and may thus be used as a tool for trashing the other team. At the same time, written messages can be ignored easily and in-game voice-transmissions are a risky business, while trash-talking as a practice may be penalized or otherwise sanctioned within this environment. Thus, most of the trash-talk I witnessed on the stream takes place within the context of the Skype-call, directed mainly at other people in the call, and therefore arguably at friends, and less often at people assumed to be listening through the stream. To a much lesser degree, individuals use push-to-talk to insult enemies, which for the aforementioned reasons happens mostly within the circle of one's own teammates, and is directed more at them than the one who is actually berated. This reluctance to abuse others on the stream as it is displayed (mainly) by people outside the core-group (or even just the triarchy) might still have another reason, aside from technical realities: The oft-mentioned hierarchical differences between the people who host the game/stream, and those who are rather guests in this environment. Unopposedly insulting others serves as a display as well as a joint enactment of power-relations, and is thus necessarily distributed unequally within hierarchical structures. The only person breaking with this arrangement and trash-talking quite freely and frequently is the aforementioned Joe. While his reactions to the contingent settings encountered in the game are much stronger and more explicit than those of other 'guests', so are the triarchy's reactions to him – he gets kicked and rebuked at the same time that people express strong amity:

A: hey, it's Joe

D: hey:: Joe. watcha got with that gun in your hand?

A: except

B: bye Joe

A: have, we don't have, fucking Russ here

B: we don't have Russ [laughs]

A: but it was *Joe!*

D: I know, I kinda want Joe to play with us one day

[on 2012.10.28]

Before discussing actual instances of trash-talk, I want to note that strong language is used quite casually by at least some of the participants of the stream, and sensibilities in this regard are not as high as they might be in other contexts. Furthermore, these practices of insulting and taunting serve to enact a variety of emotions and relations, not least of them affection and closeness within a group of friends (which is much different from the earlier described scolding and abuse). In the following analysis I will look at such dimensions of trash-talking, as well as the subject-positions and relationalities it serves to construct, embedded in the very contingencies of gameplay.

The most obvious feature of this kind of talk is that it is tightly grounded in the logic of competitive gameplay, while the reasons stated and the phrases used to insult others suggest the priorities and values of the specific social context of use. Trash-talking and taunting, similarly to scolding, derive their themes mainly from perceived deficiencies with regards to individuals' gaming-abilities, while they serve as a commentary on and exaggeration of the temporary enmity between people who are aware of this very specificity of the context of play, and less to 'correct' behavior:

B: fuck you, I'm throwing a rock at you Cry. coming right at your face

A: *missed!* you freaking *s:uck!*

B: I interrupted, faggot

A: *go to rock-throwing school!*

B: hua!

A: oh shit, Russ

D: I'm fine [laughs]

B: *no you're not bitch!* [laughs]

[on 2012.04.01]

A: *ye:::s, s::uck it, s::uck it, in my ba:ll::s! don't suck my balls that's gross, but I did it!* [on 2012.01.22]

A: *aw::: fuck! (1 sec) shit shit shit shit naw:::*

B: [laughs] suck my dick

A: I don't wanna suck your dick!

B: (1 sec) okay

[on 2012.10.28]

A: almost got to Bronze

B: you didn't even get Bronze you faggots

A: [laughs]

B: I mean, you:-

A: *you're a terrible ma:n!*

B: you homosexuals

A: [sighs]

D: he got me!

B: I have no problem with gay people. I'm one of them dude, I like dick

[on 2012.04.01]

D: aw, I'll:: ea::t you ali:::ve. (2 sec) you smell like poo-poo. [on 2012.01.22]

D: I think there is a Charger coming for me

B: I haven't even spawned yet you hacking bitch.

[on 2012.10.28]

As these quotes show, the language used for insulting other people on the stream is highly sexualized and gendered, and in this often one of domination and subjugation, while also containing a lot of fecal references. They refer to sucking and fucking, faggots and bitches, shit and poo-poo. The call to suck refers consistently to male genitalia, which constructs fellatio as an inherently degrading activity demanded from the losing party within a game, over whom the winners "[assert their] dominance" [on 2012.03.04], and thus works with a gendered imagery of male ascendance. In close relation to this, faggot is a term referring to male homosexuals, and its utilization as an insult is well-grounded within a system of heteronormative hegemony. Faggot is to a degree used to deny someone their masculinity, to create something other than 'real' or 'regular' men, and is thus an effeminating move within a binary gender-system, in which one can only be either male or female. Using it as an insult reaffirms traditional gender-roles, and in the context of defeat puts both men with questionable masculinity and women in general as tantamount with bad gameplay or insufficient skills. Bitch is likewise used in a relational framework of subjugation, where "bitches" are both 'irrational' and 'phony' women (they are qualified

with terms such as “dumb bitches” [e.g on 2012.04.01], “little bitches” [ibid.], and “hacking bitches” [on 2012.10.28], among others), as well as an inherently cheap means of sexual gratification for men. The strength with which this phrase is grounded within this specific social environment is shown by the phrase never being actually challenged, discussed, or subverted, as the term faggot on the other hand is on numerous occasions. Interestingly, there is a similar bias between the group’s references to fucking and sucking, with fucking never being actually challenged, and sucking being reframed quite regularly. This might be explained by the difference between a “fuck you” and a “suck me”, where the sucking is interpreted as a homoerotic activity in which Cry (in the above quotes) proclaims no desire to take part. At the same time, sucking, when used as an attribute instead of an instigation, refers to someone being bad at something, or being a disagreeable person in general, as in “you freaking *s:uck!*” in the above. This is an interesting contrast between a use as a term of subjugation (with sometimes explicated homoerotic connotations) and a use that is mostly a means of taunting. A swearword similar to “bitch” in the casualness of its use, which is not quoted above but used aplenty, is “dick” (as seen in many other quotes above). Dick is a term gendered similarly to bitch, and is used to qualify someone who is acting aggressively or deliberately inconsiderate towards other people, such as when Scott downed Jazzy and abandoned her in an incident discussed above. All of this shows that gendered insults are of great import within this specific online context, and dab into common stereotypes about masculinity and femininity. Shit, on the other hand, is used quite freely as a general, non-directional exclamation commenting more on a situation and less on a person and their specific behavior. The use of poo-poo in contrast is quoted because it represents a certain kind of facetious insult that is used to parody both the group’s practices of insulting one another, as well as the competition and enmity facilitated by the structures of the game. “You smell like poo-poo.” is recognizable as such exactly because it contrasts with the otherwise extremely harsh language used, and actually belongs in the world of children’s language where kids get angry with one another for seemingly trivial reasons. While making little reference to the specific context of its utterance, or the abilities displayed by the ones insulted, it relates strongly to the competitive juxtaposition of the two actors involved, by emulating children’s stern, if temporary, enmities towards one another.

While all these terms are generally uttered without pause, they are sometimes rejected for their very offensiveness. This shows a certain awareness of discrimination and similar societal issues within the group, even if they would not refrain from using such language on a regular basis, as they most obviously do with “faggot” and variations thereof. There are, on the other hand, a wide variety of expletive terms not used as comfortably, especially those referring to racial categories, and when they are referenced they are always accompanied by a framing showing an awareness of their problematic

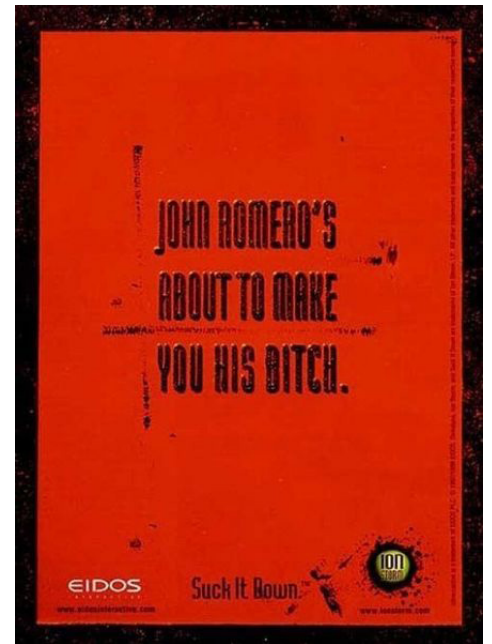


Figure 46: Advertisement for the ill-conceived 2000 videogame *Daikatana*, reading: “John Romero’s about to make you his bitch. Suck it down.”

nature, as well as an often strong and tenacious rebuttal:

A: guys everything involving Let's Players and stuff is just a matter of personal taste and opinion. (1 sec) don't gonna argue about it, it's kinda like saying whose version of music is better
D: (1 sec) dude, vanilla: is: the better ice cream flavor
A: *I f::ucking hate vanilla, your opinion is wro::ng!*
D: dude, chocolate is so: beneath vanilla
A: f::uck that, man
D: if you know what I mean
A: (1.5 sec) f::uck tha-, oh
B: (1 sec) that was so fucking racist
A: [laughs]
D: wha:t? wha::t?
B: chocolate is so:::: beneath vanilla
A: that was so racist. it was so racist
D: what are you talking about, I just love vanilla
A: (1 sec) o::h Go::d
D: (1 sec) damn.
B: (1 sec) so racist

[on 2012.01.22]³⁷

In a similar vein, insults might be refused or taken back on the basis of their content, which is a move dissociating a turn of phrase from its symbolic meaning and re-associating it with its actual textual predicate, when e.g. Cry takes “suck my balls” literally after uttering it himself. All of this serves to indicate the overall not entirely earnest use of this harsh language, questioning its application and opening up a meta-level of meaning (if less so for some terms than others).

At the same time, the above statements also include highly codified phrases that rely on the videogame-specific context of their utterance, such as the relation between a specific kind of Special Infected to a Survivor-character within a Versus-game. Rock-throwing is something only Tanks can do, eating someone is ascribed solely to the attacks of Hunters and Smokers (as opposed to riding, pounding, and suchlike), and spawning is a fundamental requirement to manipulate one's surroundings, and thus to attack and, for the intents and purposes of competitive gameplay, ‘exist’. Thus, the design and mechanics of the game serve as a contingently enacted basis for these types of talk, which in turn serve to interpret and ‘play out’ this framework in a culturally meaningful way. Without the competitive fabric

³⁷ Racial categories are nevertheless used quite frequently when referencing specific characters, players, or tropes:

B: I got the black gu::y!
D: (1 sec) get off me I'm black!
A: [laughs] [...] he's pulling the race card on ya

[on 2012.01.22]

B: oh hey, it's black guy
A: (1.5 sec) what?
B: (1.5 sec) that black guy?
A: what?
B: that black guy is on our team, hell yeah
A: (1 sec) oh, cool, yeah, black guy (1 sec) good

[2012.10.28]

FlutterShyVinylScratch (types): Always gotta leave the black guy to die huh? I died first [2012.10.28]

Unfortunately, because of the limitations of this thesis, I cannot delve into this theme the way I would like to, even though it is an issue of immense importance – both on a wider societal level and within this very context, as it is brought up repeatedly, in almost every gaming-occasion, by the group.

of the game, the insults traded between individuals would have a different meaning, although parts of their social function might be overlapping: Most of the insults are traded between Cry, Russ, and Scott, who all have a very similar status on the stream, are in continuous contact also when the stream is offline³⁸, and can be certain, and show they can be certain, of each other's affection by insulting one another in a casual way.

Generally speaking, there are two types of trash-talk displayed on the stream: The one expressed by the (socially and structurally constructed) attacker, and the one expressed by the attacked. In the context of L4D's design and game-mechanics, attackers are necessarily mostly Infected players, because the Survivors are a rather defensive class, with their in-game goal being geared mainly towards (longest possible) survival. Trash-talk voiced by Survivors often seems to be similar to taunting, as it is less uttered when Infected attacks succeed, and more when they actually fail (as in "*go to rock-throwing school!*"). When voiced by Infected players, on the other hand, it often accompanies in-game acts of aggression against someone they know, and temporarily identify with a specific virtual body. The juxtaposition of longer- and shorter-lived bodies of Survivors and Infected might be a contributing factor to the one-sidedness of trash-talk, as Survivor-bodies are more easily assignable to one specific person for a prolonged period of time. Even more, as described in the first section of my empirical analysis, Infected players may know whom each virtual body belongs to at any given point in time, while Survivors only know the identities of avatars on their own team. Therefore, verbal identification by means of the Skype-call or the in-game communication-channels is a basic necessity for a Survivor-player to positively address their aggressors, and thus confidently direct any possible trash-talk. Interestingly, Infected players in the call also proclaim much more often when their attacks were successful, and gleefully announce their accomplishments. Aside from sharing one's joy in their success, such actions make it possible to identify a possibly skillful perpetrator. In parallel to trash-talking, the individuals in the call furthermore often greet or otherwise acknowledge their 'victims', with either a simple "hello" or something along the lines, indicating that all ways of verbally engaging ones counterpart are a way of adding a layer to and commenting on the physical interaction taking place within the virtual environment of the game. It serves to frame the gameplay, and emulates 'real life' interactions where acts of verbal communication usually accompany physical interaction or other forms of bodily communication (such as when people shake hands, nod, and utter a greeting simultaneously).

A special case encountered above is trash-talk voiced by people not actually in the game, but in the Skype-call, as is the case with Scott in the second quote. By trashing the team for not even reaching Bronze, he positions himself as knowledgeable of the game, and obviously better, as he displays surprise and disapproval at his friends' insufficient achievement. This again hints at the fundamental significance of proficiency encountered on the livestream, which will be discussed more in-depth a bit later. But first, a look at taunting as a practice:

Similarly to trash-talking, taunting is a practice grounded firmly in the logic of competitive gameplay. It is done mostly as a reaction to the perceived failure of another player, who is usually someone from the enemy team, but might sometimes be a colleague. In most cases it is expressed by someone on

38 <http://cryaotic.tumblr.com/post/29004045660/lets-take-a-walk-down-my-life-in-a-day> (Access: 20.05.2013)

the Infected team who just dealt a lot of damage, or after one team just gained a decisive victory. It is therefore another way to ‘assert one’s dominance’, and make other’s aware of it. At the same time, however, it might also be used for backhanded compliments:

D: oh, so much death [on 2012.01.08]

D: I hope y’all do a lot better (1 sec) I have a good feeling about this one [on 2012.01.08]

B: [laughs] I saw you fail like a chump

A: [laughs] *shut u:p!*

[on 2012.01.22]

A: let’s see how far your teams go now BattleStar [laughs] no-one’s saving him [laughs]
[...]

Cryaotic (types): SAVE YOUR TEAM NOW BATTLESTAR

[on 2012.02.05]

All these quotes show individuals wallowing in their own performance and/or other people’s pain and defeat. Some quotes are more straightforward in their glee, while others are rather sarcastic and mischievous in their construction. Assuring a team that is on a rather certain path to defeat that Russ has “a good feeling about” them doing “a lot better” than his squat just did works to feign empathy with the other team while actually calling attention to one’s comfortable lead. Similarly, the fake lament of “oh, so much death” emulates an elegy that bemoans the loss of life, while simultaneously indicating that Russ actually enjoys the Survivor-team’s ordeal. On the other hand, when Scott points out a Hunter, and Cry identifies himself as such, Scott immediately uses this knowledge to tease Cry about his perceived failures. This might be an example of how much easier teasing becomes when being able to correctly identify the perpetrator. The last example takes place when Cry successfully smokes BattleStar, who is an experienced player that has been foiling a lot of the Infected team’s earlier attempts at picking out individual Survivors. Cry taunts him by referencing both his helplessness *and* his otherwise impressive performance. Through this, he includes a sort of backhanded compliment and a recognition of the other player’s abilities in his taunt, while still being highly gleeful about his own accomplishment, which becomes all the greater through BattleStar’s stated proficiency.

Taunting, too, is a fixture on the stream, and is patterned largely according to the current framework of accomplishments and failures. Through this, it contributes to the negotiations over what defines a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ performance in the context of the game, while intensifying the competitive aspects of the interactions between the teams. While taunting on the stream is largely done within the bounds of the Skype-call, for all the reasons discussed above, it is sometimes expressed by more peripheral participants of a game, such as Joe, and then mostly in written form:

[GER] Minecraftrespawn (types): Having problems, Ricky? xD [on 2012.10.28]

Finally, the overall patterns of communication and the tone with which conversations are held on the stream vary from iteration to iteration of the game. It might sometimes be rather amicable, and sometimes intensely hostile or begrudging. As the specific dates of the quotes above indicate to a degree, there are times when individuals trash-talk or taunt more than on others, and while Scott for instance uses a lot of strong language, the trajectory and earnestness of it varies greatly. Thus, tone and patterns of communication are contingent on a multitude of factors, including the actual participants of

the game and the call, the composition of teams, the mood of the (individuals of the) core-group, the course of the game, the current state of the relation(ship)s between individuals participants, and so on. It is impossible for me to identify all factors comprehensively, even more so without interviewing the people in question, but I tried to give at least some insight into contributing factors with my analysis.

6.2.4 SEXUALIZATION & “SEX JOKES”

A: well, I’m pretty sure we won no matter what. that’s, that’s good
D: maybe. maybe. they might, they might pull through
A: oh, okay. (1 sec) that’s good
D: they’re definitely not gonna pull it out, though. what?
A: [laughs] that’s a, sex joke. (1 sec) the best kind.

[on 2012.07.01]

The second to last issue I want to tackle here is the prevalence of “sex jokes” and sexual innuendo in much of the group’s facetious commentary on the game. It pervades all kinds of the types of talk described above, although it is used most tenaciously in reference to the Infected’s assaults. This might be facilitated by the earlier discussed sexualization traceable in both the design of the characters as well as the mechanics of attack. Because of the intimacy created by the physicality of Special Infected’s attack, and the similarly themed names given to said attacks, there is a comfortable basis for sexualized interpretations, although these are in no way necessary (aside from masturbation-jokes about the Charger, I myself was largely oblivious to this kind of thinking before watching the stream and looking at fanart, although this might have been facilitated by my general reluctance to play Versus, and thus assign the Special Infected any kind of personality). At the same time, the comments are never purely pleasurable interpretations, and thus suggest an awareness of the violent nature of the sexual imagery used:

A: I’m gonna splooge all over Jazzy
D: (1 sec) aw:-h:, that’s bad
A: I did it
B: no one should ever say that, ever
A: [laughs]
B: in any context
[on 2012.07.01]

A: get the Smoker please! (2 sec) *plea:::se!* thank you!
B: oh, it was Jazzy too, adding insult to injury
A: I know, I know. I don’t wanna be tongued by Jazzy, ple:::ase!
[on 2012.08.19]

A: boom! (2 sec) bitches! (2 sec) at least I ploughed through two of you
D: (2 sec) no it’s good, cause I spat on them
B: joke’s on you, I like getting ploughed
[on 2012.01.22]

B: ZutaraRaven, I do not approve of you riding, Cry [...]
A: o::h no: I’m. no::: that’s not gonna last as long as I wanted it
B: (1 sec) tha:::t’s what he said
A: [laughs] it was on your girlfriend too, so
B: aw:::, Christ
E: it was. (1 sec) watcha gonna do about it?
[on 2012.07.29]

D: I’m gonna boom on all these guys, cause they’re dumb
A: okay
B: I bet you like booming on guys
A: [laughs]
D: yeah. cause it’s not gay if I boom on them
A: mn it’s true
[on 2012.04.01]

F: I’m coming Cry::
A: ew::::! (2 sec) BattleStar is gross!
[on 2012.04.22]

The types of (re)interpretations of actions and statements depicted above are largely references to a heteronormative gender-framework, and common tropes arising from it. Interestingly, the gender of the individuals involved seems to make a fundamental difference between both the way jokes are

made and the reactions enacted to it. With regards to men, implied homosexuality of either party is a recurring theme. Both attackers and attacked address and reiterate the sexualized design and construction of the Special Infected and their respective assaults, while referencing the joy in inflicting sexualized (homoerotic) violence within the framework of the game. Almost accusingly Scott states, in a facetious tone, “I bet you like booming on guys”. Russ concurs, but twists Scott’s accusations by using a common homophobic trope that draws a difference between active and passive partners within a male homosexual encounter, where only the latter is ‘really’ gay. Similarly, in another instance Scott disarms Cry’s claim to success by indicating that he enjoys being on the receiving end of sexualized violence (or violent sex), and thus subverts Cry’s aggressive physical interaction. While such remarks show awareness of homophobia, and a certain comfort with being accused of or claiming one’s own homosexuality, it still makes male homosexuality the punchline of a joke, even if it can be interpreted as the empowering move of someone recently attacked. Furthermore, these examples give another hint at how the differences in design affect gendered interpretations of in-game occurrences: Because no controllable Special Infected is female and has that kind of physical attack, male sexualized aggression as well as homophobic fears of intimacy between men are to a degree reiterated by the game’s choices in design and mechanics. This is exemplified by the later addition of a female Boomer that somewhat breaks with the interpretation of Boomer-bile as semen, resulting in comments like the following:

A: oh God! I’m, freakin’ boomered! (1 sec) it’s like a female Boomer too, so it’s weird [on 2012.03.25]

On the other hand, attacks on and from female players participating in the game are interpreted largely in terms of desirability and questions of affiliation and ownership of the respective woman, and thus again reference male sexual gratification. Jazzy is constructed as undesirable, which is reiterated each time someone expresses how they do not want any kind of intimacy with her. Cry’s verbally underpinned act of ‘ejaculating’ on Jazzy is put as disgusting not because the act itself is thought of as inherently repulsive, but because Jazzy is. Likewise, when she smokes him in another instance of the game, he reiterates how the intimate nature of their contact is revolting because she is. The framework within which she is judged by the group (of men) is one where her inherent undesirability as an object as well as an agent of sexualization pervades every physical interaction with her. This seems to be less a consequence of who she is in ‘real life’, as this is never discussed or referenced at all by the group, but a reaction to the combination of her being considered a bad gamer and of her being a woman – there is *nothing* likewise to be found within one year of streaming relating to a man considered a bad gamer. On the other end of the spectrum is ZutaraRaven, who is indeed constructed as somewhat desirable, facilitated by her relation to Scott. Her attacks are interpreted in a framework of ownership, as her (inter)actions are used to tease and engage Scott, and are often held against the background of her being a *girlfriend*, on top of being a woman. This relationality is all the more interesting as Scott is not held against the same frame of reference – for him, the theme of homoeroticism is the main issue, not his being a boyfriend to another player in the game. This again shows that there might be a fundamental difference in the treatment and construction of female players in the framework of the stream, which is facilitated to a degree by the design and mechanics of the game.

6.2.5 EXPERTISE, EXPERIENCE, PROFICIENCY & LEADERSHIP

The last segment of this analysis of the livestream tackles the mechanics of expertise and leadership expressed and enacted within the context of the game, that are of fundamental importance in structuring the way individual participants relate to both one another and their teams in general. Thus, the expertise I am looking at is a largely game-related one, as opposed to for instance pop-cultural knowledge or aptitude in taking part in the intricate relationalities structuring the core-group. Expertise forms a trinity with experience and proficiency, all of which are pre-requisite for leadership within a game: With expertise, I refer to expert knowledge of the game, including its properties and the rules of its environment, as well as its specific terminologies. It is a rather explicit form of knowledge that can be acquired by reading wikis and FAQs, and might enable players to make sensible decisions within the contingencies of a game. Closely related to expertise, experience refers to the multitude of instances where an ‘experienced’ individual lived through and played the game, and thus came to know it in both an explicit *and* a tacit way. Experience enables players to recognize recurring patterns within a game, such as particularly dangerous passages within a segment of the game, or common spawning-areas for Witches, Tanks, or equipment. Finally, proficiency refers to the ability to implement both expertise and experience, and only comes with repeated and continuous play. This entails a large array of abilities, such as a good aim, swift use of different items and weapons in a situationally smart/successful way, ‘correct’ behavior in critical moments, good timing, and so on. Proficiency also means a mastering of the basics of the game to a degree that makes it almost casual, freeing one’s attention to engage with the gameplay of others, and especially one’s teammates. Through this, leadership is enabled, which plays out as a recurrent directing and correcting of other’s gameplay – enrolling them in specific actions and strategies (such as healing, staying together, using certain items, and so on), pacing the team’s advance within the game, arranging their bodies within the virtual environment, demanding a certain discipline in gameplay, and so on. Of course, leadership needs to be accepted and enabled as such, and not all proficient players necessarily engage their teams that way. If all participants play reasonably well and are acquainted with one another’s gameplay, their interactions may be rather heterarchical, as they mainly have to monitor one another and responsibly adjust their gameplay. Thus, these sorts of hierarchies are facilitated by steep differences in the abilities of teammates. Furthermore, even if someone fashions themselves as a leader, and is accepted as such, inexperienced players may not be able to go through with their suggestions, because they may be too slow or don’t know all the functions of the game well enough to implement them:

D: eat your pills, eat your pills
A: hang on, hang on, hangonhangonhangonhangon
D: he’s not gonna hang on!
A: o::h no, I wanna, I wann- . *did it!*
D: good job
A: it was *good*, I hit him with a thing. (1 sec) ouch
D: gotta eat your pills
A: I don’t- oh, I have pills. aw:: fuck I was gonna eat em! [but he got downed by the Tank first]
[on 2012.04.01]

D: they started it, go
A: (1 sec) I’m doing it right now?
D: no. go, to the other side, and when they go up

that staircase, hit em
A: what staircase?
D: that staircase over there where we went all the way up you see like across from us this way? over here?
A: (1 sec) oh, this one?
D: (1 sec) yeah charge em-
A: okay, hit em right over here?
D: yeah, they come up here just charge em this way and sometimes when there’s two, it will knock em off and kill em instantly
A: [gasps] you’re a genie

[ibid.]

As the above quotes show, team-leading is not just about one person ‘playing boss’, but is about sharing one’s experience, relating tricks, and keeping a team together and alive. It entails a lot of care-work and encouragement of weaker players, on top of earlier discussed optional reprimanding, such as monitoring their health and equipment, and telling them when to use the latter and on whom. This description also shows that the emergence of leaders is game-mechanically facilitated on the Survivor-team, where people need to stay together and stay alive *as a group*, and only to a lesser degree on the more individualized Infected team. As indicated earlier, the Infected’s spawning-times are often shifted, while their life-cycles are rather short, which fundamentally breaks up their team’s cohesion. The second quote from above takes place in a game of Scavenge, which is situated in a small and relatively lucid area, where the Infected have time to plan their first wave of attacks while the Survivors equip themselves. In all other instances, be they other game-modes or just the second wave of attacks, coordinating the actions of the Infected entails an element of insurgence against the game-mechanics. It often means postponing one’s attack even while attacking is not just game-mechanically possible, but *imperative* – it is the *only* thing Infected characters can do within the game, and it is what they need to do to win. Thus, waiting can be quite a trying thing to do:

D: wait for everybody [...] wait for everybody! (2 sec) wait for everybody
 A: don’t wait for everybody (1.5 sec) hey what’s up? [he charges]
 D: why did you do that Cry?

[on 2012.01.22]

This quote can be read less as a rejection of Russ’s leadership, as Cry acknowledges it many times over at other instances, and more as a rejection of waiting for a possible coordinated attack. Russ takes on a leading role on the stream quite often, with BattleStar tending to similarly head the enemy team (while facing all the restrictions in communication discussed above). As this leadership extends mostly over ‘weaker’ players, however, he seldom tells Scott or Snake what to do, who are both constructed as highly competent within the game. At the same time, they sometimes display a dynamics of trumping one another with their expertise/experience/proficiency, apart from questions of actual leadership:

A: hey you’re right, without the glows it’s kinda weird (3 sec) it’s like super hardcore mode
 D: (1 sec) oh yeah, it’s Realism, yes
 [...]
 B: I was wondering why we were getting raped so much, but yeah, it’s cause there’s no glows or anything like that (1 sec) stupid Realism mode, it’s too hardcore for me

[on 2012.01.22]

B: we are so: fu::cked! you know how hard Realism is? [laughs]
 D: not at all. you just can’t see outlines
 B: oh I’m thinking of Realism Expert
 A: oh
 D: yeah, we’re fine

[on 2012.03.25]

These quotes show 2 different reactions to Realism mode. In the first, the group already played through one Chapter and thus already experienced the difference to their regular gameplay. When Cry suggests that they are playing “super hardcore mode”, Russ agrees and identifies it as Realism. Through this, he can show his expert knowledge, while still somewhat accepting Cry’s framing as it being tougher in relation to their usual games. Scott in return describes his team’s performance as underwhelming by

indicating they were “raped so much”³⁹, and designates Realism mode as the responsible party for this perceived failure. He adds that it is “too hardcore for [him]”, which is a facetious admission of personal insufficiency. As discussed earlier, admitting one’s own faults and failures can be a way of claiming agency, while the sarcastic tone of the remark calls into question whether this identification of failure is actually an earnest one. At the same time, Scott’s statement provides a preemptive explanation for a possibly upcoming defeat, and allocates responsibility just in case justification is needed later on. On the other hand, the second quote shows Scott reiterating “how hard Realism is” before the actual game starts, and thus before any gameplay takes place. Russ then uses this statement to nonchalantly position himself as a better player than Scott, by casually and completely refuting his assessment – “not at all. you *just* can’t see outlines” [emphasis mine]. Scott immediately back-paddles and reframes his statement, by saying that only Realism *Expert* is hard (meaning Campaign-mode on Expert in Realism), which serves to indicate how he can play both Realism Versus and Expert, but struggles only with Realism Expert, which is the hardest of all regular game-mode. It is a way to show expert knowledge and ability with regards to the game, and thus agrees to Russ’s invitation to rank themselves according to their knowledgability. This suggests the importance of proficiency for at least some participants of the group, which works to fundamentally pattern the way individuals relate to one another. These two sequences also show that proficiency is an inherently relational category, which is contingent on the social construction-work done by the participant of the current iteration of the game, and their respective claims made in conversation with one another. Whether a player with a generally strong claim to proficiency, or a high tendency to display it, can voice weakness of any kind depends in part on the situational positioning done by the other players involved.

Still, while some participants of the stream work hard at creating such an air of knowledgability around themselves, a large portion of players ‘flies under the radar’, without either commenting on the game (in part because they belong to the earlier discussed ‘voiceless’ population) or being trashed too much. A smaller number of people, on the other hand, receive more or less regular scorn from ‘better’ players. This entails for instance Jazzy and Raven, who often accept beratings without too much protest, as elaborated in greater length above. In contrast to this, Cry, who is a relatively inexperienced player in L4D himself, claims agency by commenting continuously on his own gameplay, and is often the first to say when he ‘messed up’. While he is not the only one to do so, he also sometimes references his own (in)abilities to defend others, which is rather unique a thing on the stream:

39 Although highly conspicuous, I unfortunately cannot delve too deeply into the intricacies of this choice of words, which is fairly prevalent on the stream, as well as (to my knowledge) in online multiplayer FPS-cultures in general. I can say, however, that rape is used as a term for being brutally attacked and losing a lot of health, and thus to a degree for failure within the logic of competitive gameplay. This is in itself somewhat problematic considering the otherwise common meaning (and legal definition) of rape, which is (penetrative) sexual assault, mostly done by a male perpetrator to either a female or, less often, male victim. Thus, “raping” is something done to a weaker and mostly feminized individual, while being weak is considered both a bad thing and a personal failure within the context of the game. This reiterates the gendered construction of dominance and subjugation discussed earlier, while, to a degree, constructing rape as the fault of the victim.

A: *I missed!* (2 sec) I just punch this guy! [...] beating up Ranka. aw it didn't work out too well, but I hit him 4 times
 D: that's pretty fucking-, that's bad
 A: is it bad?
 D: yeah [laughs]
 A: [laughs] I'm pretty bad at this game, actually
 D: I know
 B: you're bad at a lot of games seems like. are there any games you're actually good at?
 A: u:m:, honestly? not a lot.

[2012.02.05]

D: oh I fucked that up. I'm very good at videogames.
 A: I like being bad at videogames so you should, stop that.
 [...]
 A: who's that, who's that Hunter right now?
 D: I don't know
 A: it's probably Jazzy
 D: Jazzy
 B: yeah it's Jazzy. you can tell by the lack of people being actually hit
 A: [laughs] well I'm a fucking terrible Hunter too so I don't blame her

[on 2012.08.19]

Although a lot of attention is directed towards Cry, and thousands of people may witness him fail, he is never trashed as utterly as many other players are. This is to a degree facilitated by his position as host of the stream, who has a voice even when there is no Skype-call, who (arguably) attracts most of the audience, has the biggest fan-base, and generally has a comfortable legitimacy in participating in the game. Whatever he does, the game will be structured around him, and his is (usually) the perspective we are enabled to witness. At the same time, these different ways of reacting to success and failure, and the ease with which specific subject positions are taken up or the vehemence with which they are rejected might hint at different ways of playing the game, as well as different values followed in doing so. Still, in this context, competitive gameplay is emphasized, legitimized, and reiterated continuously and by the very people with the strongest claim to authority. For this reason, it becomes difficult for those who do not share this focus and system of values to enact their diverging priorities, or at least to voice them and make them explicit. Even if some viewers participate mainly as an end in itself, and don't care too much for winning, this seldom finds reflection within the discussions of those who actually have a voice on the stream. Furthermore, all of this means that leadership, expertise, failure, and so on, as well as the reactions displayed in relation to them, are contingent on a number of factors, including the (hierarchical, temporal, technological) structuring of the stream, the mechanics of the respective game played, the roles taken within the game, and the on- and offline relationalities between the diverse participants of the stream. As I hope to have shown in this extensive empirical analysis, this is true for all aspects of this example of online social play.

7 CONCLUSION: REVISITING THEORY

In this thesis I have analyzed online social play as a heterogeneous, multifaceted socio-technical assemblage. Using a symmetrical analytical approach informed mostly by ANT and feminist STS scholarship, I looked at the diverse actors involved in playing a specific game online with a larger group of people. While the network I constructed was in no way complete, my analysis brought forth a variety of key agents in the co-construction of materiality, social practices, and meanings, as well as the enabling of power-structures, including humans with varying status and scope of action, and artifacts such as the game itself, but also additional software such as Skype and the streaming platform TwitchTV. To better understand the network they compose, I analyzed both the material aspects of the design and infrastructure used to play the online multiplayer first person shooter Left4Dead, and the specific meaning-making processes of a certain community of practice engaging in this form of online social play. The result is a discussion of the highly contingent, but always hierarchical interrelations and interdependencies between diverse material-semiotic agents, who enable and restrict one another in complex, multi-leveled ways.

The materiality of the game Left4Dead thus allows for the construction of allegiances between the members of its small teams, and for the continuation of such allegiances through time (over more than one game) by utilizing, for instance, the architecture of the game's Lobbies. It allows for the construction of hierarchies through the adherence to the competitive logic of the game's mechanics, and the performance of proficiency and leadership in its wake. Both individual and group identities are thus tied to their relationalities to the software at hand, and are expressions and products of the complex, heterogeneous network of users and technologies. At the same time, the network is patterned unevenly, leaving some actors at the center, and others rather at the periphery. This move is aggravated somewhat deliberately by involving additional software, such as the livestreaming platform TwitchTV and the voice-communication service Skype, which are both differently but strongly policed spaces. They are essential in bringing the livestream into existence as the social artifact it is, and they do so in an inherently stratified way. Without difference, there would be no network; without Cry, there would be no Late Night; without TwitchTV, there would be no audience.

The most obvious indicator of heterogeneity in this virtual space is auditory: Some people always get to have a voice, some are granted a voice occasionally, and some never are allowed to speak. "How is it [...] that the centre may come to speak for and profit from, the efforts of what has been turned into a periphery?", asks John Law [1992: 8]. One answer to this question is given in my thesis: Through a variety of heterogeneous, dispersed but interconnected, and always somewhat contingent processes. This includes the structures provided by the game and performed by its players, the channels opened up and closed off by Skype, the deliberate non-friending of people on Steam, but also, pivotally, the compliance of the periphery. While I have to stress that being part of the periphery is not necessarily a bad thing (it is *essential* to the existence of a network!), it may have disconcerting consequences in situations where the center does not agree with, or particularly like, the periphery – when Jazzy for instance is made uncomfortably aware of her standing, in front of a live audience of thousands of her

periphery-peers. So when Langdon Winner [1986] asks “Do Artifacts Have Politics?”, I might respond that, while this is a complicated question with no definite answer, what we may reasonably argue is that they *allow* for politics. In any case I have to emphasize that whatever politics may arise from a technology, in dialog with it, is necessarily tied to the network/s it is part of. There are no politics without relationality, and specific meanings and practices are what give an artifact its identity, and its significance in a wider societal framework. Relying in one’s analysis on either technological or social determinism is a fundamentally problematic move, as it makes one blind to the contingencies that govern everything human (and nonhuman).

Following Madeleine Akrich [1992], and revisiting the stubbornness of our nonhuman agents, my analysis shows how the de-descriptions undertaken by the users of our technology result in a new, contingent, and to a degree unique configuration of both what might be deemed ‘the technology’ and ‘the social’ part of this *agencement*. It is, essentially, an assembling practice that is accomplished in a cooperation between users and technologies, and including an appropriation of both. In the end, no-one is the same as before. My thesis gives insight into the fundamental significance of the technological structures and design-choices of a game to the realization of the identities of both human and nonhuman agents. For instance, even within the relatively limited differences between the two factions of a Versus-game of Left4Dead, the play-style, identification-, and communication-practices differ greatly, even while the same people alternate in playing each faction. Furthermore, it becomes obvious how de-description is not a simple, straight-forward process, but involves multiple, network-specific transformations. By including additional technologies with their own scripts on top of the game itself, the participants of the livestream reinforce some aspects of the game’s internal structure and adapt others, while still others are circumvented or weakened. An adaptation such as the building of external communication-channels impinges on the dynamics of play in a very specific form, while still being *allowed for* by the logic of the game – it does not break because of this modification. Even relatively small nuances in both the game’s mechanics and design, such as the sexualization of the Special Infected’s visuals and attacks, can be exaggerated into the highly sexualized frameworks of interpretation employed by the group. While the materiality of the game enables such an amplification, it is in no way imperative – that it pervades the community’s framings at every step is a specificity performed by these individuals. Furthermore, as shown in my analysis, the contingency of these thusly performed heterogeneous networks is both a risk and an advantage to its realization, resulting in an ultimately quite resilient, but never fixed or final construct.

All of this shows the importance of looking at all aspects shaping online social play – the design of the game, additional technologies utilized, as well as specific cultures and practices a community develops in dialog with these – in order to understand the contingency of the gaming-experience, and the meaning it might have for different communities. It also underlines the value of approaching online social play as a socio-technical assemblage. How human actors relate to other agents of their network is highly dependent not just on immediately accessible factors such as the current willingness or stubbornness of the nonhuman actors involved (and the possible need for ‘troubleshooting’), but on much more obscure and far-reaching agents such as complex offline-relationships between

human actors, general dis/comfort with specific videogames (and, relatedly, the total amount of time spent playing a specific game), or knowledge of things such as tropes and online-phenomena that are essential to being accepted as a competent member of the community. Thus, my socio-technical assemblage of online social play also displayed its interconnectedness with other, often much more powerful, networks. The immutable mobiles that are YouTube-videos (which went through a number of translations to become click- and watchable from all over the world) and pieces of fan-art, as well as the naturalized use of expletives like bitch and faggot, may be interpreted both as efforts to stabilize the network, and as sings of its stabilization. “Late Night with Cry and Russ”, as well as its large community, organize themselves within existing nexi of power, using time-proofed modes of translation found in many other communities, and thus make themselves (more) recognizable, relatable, and stable, while contributing to the recognizability, relatability, and stability of these modes of translation.

Such an interpretation stands in contrast with social scientific approaches defining use as a simple human ‘reading’ of the nonhuman ‘text’ of a technology/artifact. Refuting such a perspective is one of the fundamental benefits STS-approaches may bring to the social sciences in general – the re-assessment of the role nonhuman actors play in their own co-construction with their human counterparts. Only through this can we understand social phenomena in all their depths – even though the analysis might become considerably thicker. Thus, my research has consequences for both the field of Game Studies and the better social scientific understanding of online spaces and interactions in general, while showing the utility of STS approaches to explore new media. Although a lot of interesting social scientific research on videogames exists, the emphasis on technology as an essential agent of human actors’ subjectivities, interrelations, and identity projects (and vice versa) is often understated. Bringing together New Media Studies and STS thus proved an immensely fruitful endeavor, indicating the importance of continuing such efforts in the future.

As suggested in the introduction to this thesis, digital games are an ever-increasing market, and a fixture in the daily lives of millions of people, even more so in younger generations. Thus, understanding them is key to get a grip on changing subjectivities in societies increasingly permeated by ICTs, where digital play builds new and changes old ways of relating to one another, and aspects of gaming seep into many other areas of (everyday) life. Because ludic structures become omnipresent in all kinds of digitalized contexts, building a basic appreciation of how they facilitate certain practices of inclusion and exclusion, how they enable some and obstruct others, is nothing but imperative. It is my firm belief that STS offers a particularly fine lens in this regard, and it would be a mistake not to use it.

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Figure 1: Character Ivy from Soul Calibur: http://static.allmystery.de/upics/GvfPYj_25662_Soul_Calibur.jpg (Access: 2013.05.08)

Figure 2: Web-comic Penny Arcade: <http://www.penny-arcade.com/comic/2010/09/15> (Access: 2013.06.15)

Figure 3: Screenshot from the livestream on 2012.10.28

Figure 4: Screenshot from the livestream on 2012.04.08

Figure 5 + 6: Screenshots from the livestream on 2012.10.28

Figure 7: Screenshot from the livestream on 2012.08.12

Figure 8: 'Poster' from the first Campaign of Left4Dead2: http://www.neogamer.de/pics/games/646/pic_1255421322.jpg (Access: 2013.04.28)

Figure 9: Promotional poster from the movie "Shaun of the Dead": http://images.huffingtonpost.com/2013-03-13-shaun_of_the_dead_ver2.jpg (Access: 2013.04.28)

Figure 10: Screenshot from the livestream on 2012.10.28

Figure 11: 'Poster' from the Campaign "No Mercy": http://images4.wikia.nocookie.net/__cb20081114202256/left4dead/images/d/d2/No_Mercy.jpg (Access: 2013.04.28)

Figure 12: 'Poster' from the Campaign "Swamp Fever": <http://media.moddb.com/images/games/1/13/12106/SwampFever.1.jpg> (Access: 2013.04.28)

Figure 13 + 14: Screenshots from Left4Dead2 (self-made)

Figure 15: The Special Infected: <http://www.worldofpwnage.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/L4D2SIGuidePic1.jpg> (Access: 2013.04.28)

Figure 16: The head of the Spitter. Screenshot from the Introductory Movie of Left4Dead2

Figure 17: Fan-art of Left4Dead: <http://ayumi01.deviantart.com/art/Left-4-Dead-Hunter-Rape-122653101> (Access: 2013.04.23)

Figure 18: Fan-art of Left4Dead: http://i442.photobucket.com/albums/qq146/umbrellachemicalinc/Left%204%20Dead/L4D_pounced_by_urur.jpg (Access: 2013.04.23)

Figure 19: Screenshot from the livestream on 2012.07.01

Figure 20: Screenshot from Left4Dead2 showing a Slave Cabin (self-made)

Figure 21: Slave cabin from the Woodland Plantation in Louisiana: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:WoodlandPlaqueminesSlaveCabinSugarKettle.JPG> (Access: 2013.04.24)

Figure 22: Screenshot from Left4Dead2 showing the Plantation House (self-made)

Figure 23: Plantation house from the Nottoway Plantation in Louisiana: <http://media-cdn.tripadvisor.com/media/photo-s/01/0b/e5/21/nottoway-plantation.jpg> (Access: 2013.04.27)

Figure 24: Screenshot from Left4Dead2 showing the Cemetery (self-made)

Figure 25: Saint Louis Cemetary: http://www.earthwatch2.org/lff/coleman/uploaded_images/IMG_4026-711170.JPG (Access: 2013.04.24)

Figures 26-31: Screenshots from the livestream on 2012.10.28

Figure 32: Screenshot from the livestream on 2012.08.19

Figure 33: Screenshot from the livestream on 2012.07.01

Figure 34: Screenshot from the livestream on 2012.10.28

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Figure 42: Screenshot of the livestream's title screen throughout 2012

Figure 43: Screenshot of the livestream in-browser on 2013.05.12

Figure 44: "Sup-guy" fan-art: http://fc07.deviantart.net/fs71/f/2012/249/3/7/sup__by_toastbrotgoesrawr-d5ds1o6.jpg (Access: 2013.05.15)

Figure 45: Web-comic Penny Arcade: <http://www.penny-arcade.com/comic/2010/09/15> (Access: 2013.06.15)

Figure 46: Advertisement for the videogame Daikatana: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Daikatana_ad_-_John_Romero_is_about_to_make_you_his_bitch_-_Suck_it_down.jpg (Access: 2013.05.19)

9 GLOSSARY

Achievements: Optional game-objectives, not necessarily tied to beating/winning a game. Additional meta-tasks to keep players invested in a game after all other objectives have been met.

AI Director: The software-algorithm that decides when to spawn foes and equipment, taking into account the current situation, the condition of the Survivor-team, and the setting of the difficulty-level. The AI Director works to make each gaming experience unique, at least to some degree. He is addressed as a male entity by the gamers.

Ammo: Short term for ammunition for weapons. In-game, it is used both to talk about how much ammunition one person has left with one specific weapon, as well as for stacks of ammunition which can be found throughout to re-charge weapons.

Ammo-Stack: A pile of ammunition where players can refill their weapons with limited ammo. The only weapons that cannot be refilled are the Grenade Launcher and the M60. These weapons are relatively powerful, and are normally provided only once per Campaign.

Auto-Scrambling: An automatic shuffling of teams by the game. A means to keep teams balanced, and give each a 'fair' chance to win.

Avatar: The (2- or 3-dimensional) bodies players use in videogames. They are the main means of acting and interacting with(in) the game, and (within it) with one another. In L4D, while alive, gamers mostly play from a first-person perspective, which means they only see the hand of their avatars and the weapons they are carrying, as well as their feet when looking down.

Bot: Short form of "Robot". Denotes the AI controlling a character that could theoretically be controlled by a player. Thus, bots (barely) replace humans. Although the bot-AI is programmed comparatively well in Left4Dead, bots are not able to strategize and can thus be a risk to the team. They also malfunction sometimes, like not reacting when a teammate needs their help.

Campaign: Campaigns are the basic units of the videogame-series Left4Dead. Similarly to a 'level' in other videogames, Campaigns entail a clearly structured story-arc with a beginning and an end. They are divided into several Chapters that work as saving-points from which players can proceed should they die in the meantime. Campaigns end in a Finale; surviving the Finale is tantamount to winning the game.

Chapter: Sub-divisions of Campaigns, breaking them up in smaller parts. Whole Campaigns can take an hour or more to play, and dying at the very end could be very frustrating. Thus, Chapters work as saving-points from which to re-start after dying. Their beginning and end is signified by so-called Safe-Rooms, in which weapons, ammunition, healing items, and other equipment can be found.

Character Class: Class in this case is a term derived from role-playing games, denoting a specific set of properties and abilities to a specific type of character. Sometimes it is one of two axes to choose from, with the other mostly being 'race' (which boils down to appearance) and/or gender. Often, however, the two are conflated, meaning that playing a class is equivalent to playing a character, making the two terms interchangeable. This is the case with the Special Infected in Left4Dead.

Combustibles: All items in L4D that can be set on fire or shot to explode, including: Gas cans, propane tanks, oxygen tanks, and fireworks.

Co-Op: Cooperative games/game-modes, where players need to work with one another to be able to beat the game/the other team.

Crescendo Event: An event where waves of Common Infected attack because of some kind of trigger, usually a loud noise and/or bright lights. Crescendo Events need to be waited out before Survivors can proceed, unless:

Crescendo Gauntlet Event: Are Crescendo Events with that do not stop automatically. In such a case, Survivors must proceed through hordes of Common Infected to either disable whatever attracts them, or to spawn-block them.

Engine/Game-Engine: A system designed for the creation and development of videogames. Usually engines are used for several games that subsequently have similar mechanics and properties, as they provide a specific set of possibilities upon which games are then constructed.

Finale: The final Chapter of a Campaign, in which Survivors have to hold out a massive Crescendo Event while waiting for rescue. Common Infected attack in continuous waves, interrupted only by Tanks. Normally, two consecutive Tanks must be killed before rescue arrives, although some Campaigns have two Tanks attack at once, or Tanks that can be outrun and need not be killed.

FPS: First Person Shooter. A game genre played from a first person perspective which has as a main game mechanic the violent engagement of enemies, mostly by shooting but often also by brawling or stabbing.

Friendly Fire: Dealing damage to a teammate, either by shooting them or hitting them with a Melee-weapon. Friendly Fire is not necessarily enabled in all games, but is an integral aspect of Left4Dead.

Ghost State: Also called Spawn Mode. The state in which a Special Infected player is ready to spawn, but not yet spawned. It's the state that follows the death of an Infected player.

Health: Each player, Infected or Survivor, has a health-bar, representing a health-status counted in points. Survivors have a maximum health points or "HP" of 100, while the health of Infected varies: Tanks have 6000 HP, Chargers have 600, Hunters and Smokers each have 250, Spitters 100, and Boomers 50 HP.

Hoard: A crowd of Common Infected attacking at once. Hoards are spawned randomly but continuously by the AI Director. Hoards can swarm Survivors.

HUD: Heads Up Display. A display projected onto the field of vision of a player, informing them on the respective status of their teammates, as well as their own. For the Survivors, it shows health, equipment, and remaining ammunition. For the Infected, it shows health, attack-status, and re-spawn times.

Incapacitation: In the context of L4D, players on the Survivor team can become incapacitated or "go down" when they lose all their health. In such a case, they need to be helped up by a teammate, or they die.

Infected: As the game is set in a zombie-apocalypse, the main antagonists of the series are individuals infected by a virus. There are three types of Infected encountered by the Survivors: 1) Common Infected are 'regular' people who became infected with a rabies-like virus, leaving them highly aggressive, and drawn to (loud) noises and bright lights. Once they recognize a Survivor, they approach them with high speed and erratic movements, making them harder to shoot. They attack both individually and in hordes. Their design is kept largely in grey-scale, making them look more dead than alive, although they are still living human being, and can thus be killed. 2) Uncommon Infected are 'special' versions of Common Infected, that somehow make them more menacing.

They can be discerned by their respective outfits, which often are the source of their ‘powers’ – Infected in hazmat-suits are fireproof and can take more damage before dying; clowns squeak when walking and attract small hordes; infected riot police officers are armored and can only be shot from behind; and so on. 3) Special Infected are individuals that developed mutations after becoming infected with the virus. There are 8 types of Special Infected, with their attacks often being named after them: Boomers boom Survivors, Chargers charge them, Hunters hunt or pounce them, Smokers smoke them, Spitters spit them, Jockeys jockey them, Witches get startled, and Tanks can either just hit them or “rock” them, by throwing a rock at them. Witches get startled before attacking the responsible individual.

Insta-Kill: Instantaneous kill of a Survivor-Character. This can be achieved for instance by throwing a car at the Survivors as a Tank, or charging them off high buildings. Falling down great heights is deadly to Survivors.

Lag: A delay experienced while playing a game. It can result either from drops in the processing power of a computer, or from problems with the transfer of data between the diverse systems connected to a game, i.e. the internet connection.

Latency: The time delay experienced by players when playing the game. As FPS-games depend on quick reactions, even delays of a fraction of a second can be deadly. Also see “ping”.

Loading Screen: The screen shown while loading into a game. There is no manipulation of the game possible while loading in, and neither is there a built-in way to cancel the process while it is ongoing.

Lobby: A virtual space at the beginning of a game, before the actual game itself starts, where players can wait for one another, chat, and form teams. There are only as many slots in a Lobby as there are slots in the game. The so-called Lobby-Leader, (mostly) the person who created the Lobby, can change settings and kick players from the game.

Lobby Leader: The Leader of a Lobby. They can change the settings of a game while still in the Lobby, and may kick players. When the Lobby-Leader leaves the Lobby, the player who was the first to join automatically takes over.

Map: The environments in which players operate are sectioned into clear-cut areas called Maps. Maps are closed-off pieces of virtual world through which players can move. There are usually some sort of entry-points (Spawn Points), and sometimes (as in L4D) some kind of exit-points. After exiting one map, a new map might be loaded. In L4D maps correspond with Chapters, with Safe-Rooms often being entry- and exit-points for the Survivors.

Melee-weapons: Optional secondary weapons which can be used for strong melee-attacks. They entail objects such as baseball-bats, katanas, machetes, guitars, frying pans, and chainsaws. While melee-weapons are stronger than most sidearms, they are highly limited in range and cannot be used by incapacitated Survivors.

MMO: Massively Multiplayer Online game. Games played online with possibly thousands of people simultaneously.

NPC: Non Player Character. Characters that are part of a game, but are not controllable by a player. NPCs can turn into PCs and vice versa.

PC: Player Character. Characters that are part of the game and are controllable by a player. PCs can turn into NPCs and vice versa.

Ping: Refers to the “round-trip time” and signifies the time information needs to be delivered from one system to another and back (e.g. a PC to a server back to a PC), and thus measure delay or “lag”. It is given in milliseconds.

What is considered an acceptable ping varies, but within the fast-moving genre of online FPS, a ping of about 50 is already mediocre, at about 100 (that is, $\frac{1}{10}$ of a second) it turns bad, and everything above makes it increasingly infeasible to succeed in a game, because objects tend to move too quickly to react to them in time.

Pinning: Survivor-characters can be pinned by Special Infected. In such cases, Survivors cannot escape on their own, and need the help of a teammate. If all Survivors are pinned simultaneously, the team is doomed. Forms of pinning are: Pounced/Hunted (Hunter), Smoked/Grabbed (Smoker), Charged (Charger) and Jockeyed (Jockey).

Round:

Throwables: Items that can be picked up and thrown by the Survivors. They entail Molotov Cocktails that burn Infected, Pipe Bombs that draw them close and explode, and jars of Boomer Bile that attract Infected away from the Survivors.

Safe-Room/Safe-House: Most Chapters' beginning and end. It serves as a saving point and structures a Campaign into segments. Within the Safe-Room weapons, ammunition, healing items, and other equipment can be found, which is usually spawned randomly, except for the health-packs.

Secondary Weapons: Other than primary weapons, secondary weapons cannot run out of ammunition, and are thus usable at all times, even while often being weaker. Secondary weapons are either sidearms or melee-weapons. While melee-weapons are stronger than handguns, they have a highly limited range and cannot be used when incapacitated.

Sidearms: Additional but mostly weaker handguns with unlimited ammunition that can be used both to save the ammo of one's primary weapon and in case one has no ammo left.

Spawning/Re-Spawning: The (re)appearance of (manipulable) objects/avatars within a virtual environment.

Spawn Block: In Left4Dead, certain objects and individuals can only spawn when out of sight of a Survivor-character. Thus, strategically positioning one's Survivor-body can be used to block Infected (players) from spawning.

Spawn Mode: Also called ghost state. The mode in which a Special Infected player is ready to spawn, but not yet spawned. It's the state that follows the death of an Infected player.

Spawn Point/Location: Pre-given points/areas in which specific objects and individuals can be spawned (by the AI director). It refers mainly to non-manipulable points in the game, which are usually not freely selectable by the player.

Re-Spawn Time: The forced time-delay experienced before a player is able to re-spawn.

Source-Engine: The Source game-engine, which was developed by the Valve Corporation and used for games such as Left4Dead, Team Fortress 2, and Half Life 2.

Steam: A platform for the management and distribution of games, that allows for members to 'befriend' one another and keep track on things such as online activities and gaming statistics of both oneself and others.

Survivors: The non-Infected main characters of the game Left4Dead. There are four in each game, who are some of the few Survivors of the zombie-apocalypse in which the game is set. They have a story-arc where they need to get to safety from some desolate, zombie-infested place.

Swarming: Surrounding a Survivor-character with a horde of Common Infected, attacking from several sides at

once and hindering their movement.

Tier 1/Tier 2 Weapons: The different types of main weapons available. Tier 1/Level 1 weapons are weaker than Tier 2/Level 2 weapons, which are only found later in the game. Tier 1 weapons entail shotguns and submachine guns, while Tier 2 weapons entail stronger shotguns, sniper rifles, and assault rifles.

Valve: The developer of both Left4Dead and Team Fortress 2, as well as the Source-engine.



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Publikationen

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Weiterbildung

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