“A Silent Team is a Dead Team”:
Communicative Norms in Competitive FPS Play
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This paper documents the discursive practices of an emergent domain in digital gaming: the world of professional videogame play, or “e-Sports”². Through analyzing audio-visual recordings of competitive FPS players’ verbal communications with one another in the context of team-based tournament play (and in players’ training sessions), the paper documents the ways in which particular communicative forms are positioned as central to the execution—and, crucially, the performance—of cyber athleticism,
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as it is practiced by a community of competitive North American 
Halo players.

My case study is based on fieldwork from an eight-month audio-
visual ethnography of Halo 3 tournaments in three very different 
sites: a small-scale local area network (hereafter LAN) club called 
“NerdCorps,” the 2008 Major League Gaming (hereafter MLG) 
Toronto Open, and the 2008 World Cyber Games (hereafter WCG) 
Finals in Cologne, Germany. My ethnography followed a core group 
of approximately twenty competitive Halo 3 players who regularly 
attended monthly NerdCorps events in order to train for the far more 
lucrative MLG and WCG tournaments, where they competed against 
other Halo 3 gamers in the hopes of attaining “professional” status4 
and even sponsorship opportunities. The exploration I undertake 
here, of players’ verbal communications during team-based Halo 
3 competition, constitutes part of this larger study of emergent 
forms of competitive digital gaming, and FPS play specifically, that 
are directly modeled upon the transformation of other participatory 
activities into high-stakes, low-participation spectator-driven sports. 
In particular, this analysis of how players use particular communica-
tive forms to choreograph each others’ in-game activities, as well 
as to craft and perform their own (and others’ identities as “cyber 
athletes,” illuminates one means by which these players enact 
the transformation of FPS play into a professional spectator sport 
through their embodied practices.

This exploration begins with an overview of speech act theory 
(Austin 1975; Searle 1976), which offers a conceptual framework for 
analyzing the performatively dimensions of speech. Following Bronwyn 
Davies and Rom Harré’s reformulation of speech act theory (1990) to 
account for the ways we perform inclusion or affiliation with particular 
discourses, I develop a broad taxonomy of the speech acts uttered 
most often from competitive Halo 3 gamers at the tournaments I 
attended. This taxonomy separates “intrinsic” speech acts, those 
directed explicitly towards choreographing players’ in-game activities 
during play, from “extrinsic” speech acts, which are directed more 
towards signaling or performing inclusion in a discourse that links 
competitive gaming to the domain of professional, male-dominated 
spectator sport. Analyses of specific speech acts uttered by research 
participants during tournament play are drawn from my audio-visual

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data. In each instance, I provide a still image taken from the audiovisual data, describe the context of the utterance, the speakers and audience, and the apparent effects of the utterance.

**Background**

In a 2008 interview with ESPN, Chris Puckett, a play-by-play commentator for Major League Gaming’s Pro Circuit tournaments, offers this advice to aspiring competitive *Halo* 3 players: “put in the practice, focus on communication first, then your shot.” In Puckett’s opinion, verbal interactions between teammates are more important to success in team-based competition than one’s “shot”—the dexterity and hand-eye coordination normally associated with game-based competency, and with FPS games specifically⁵. This advice about what it takes to become an elite competitive *Halo* 3 player highlights a central aspect of the professionalization of team-based digital play as I saw it practiced by the gamers I studied: players’ performance of specific forms of verbal, game-related communication and the regulation of these performances by other players, as well as organizers and spectators. As one player described to me when asked about the importance of communication, “a silent team is a dead team”: knowing how, when and what to speak in the context of team-based play are as important to the performance of professional *Halo* 3 play as (for example) the ability to re-load a weapon at just the right time, aim while running and jumping, or seek cover from enemy fire.

The particular focus in this paper is to develop an analysis of players’ verbal communications with one another. I draw from audiovisual data to discuss the following kinds of utterances: a system of game-based descriptors used during play to coordinate team action (called “map callouts” by players); verbal encouragement, critique, and mentorship among players (which often focused on how and when to use map callouts); and rebukes and taunts between players and the homophobic and misogynistic language used to do so. In documenting these different types of utterances, I make a distinction between speech acts that directly pertain to in-game events and are intrinsic to team-based play, and speech acts that are extrinsic to

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play and whose effects relate more to players’ public performance of a particular kind of subject position made possible by the transformation of play into sport.

**Methodology**

Between early 2008 and late 2009, I served as NerdCorps’ videographer, producing promotional audio-visual materials to recruit more people to their competitive LAN events in exchange for the opportunity to interview players, collect surveys, and record LAN play. This involvement in a socio-technical community that very much relies on audio-visual technologies and the spectatoral opportunities they represent, gave me the opportunity to travel with NerdCorps teams as they participated in larger, more lucrative Halo 3 tournaments.

Video ethnography allowed me to explore, and represent, the choreography between players and non-human “agents” within the socio-technical apparatuses of the LAN tournaments I attended. In doing so I deployed one of the core insights developed by other games researchers working with Actor-Network Theory: that gaming competency is as much a product of a game or genre “training” its players as it is about players’ mastery over the game (Giddings and Kennedy 2008, 19).

For my video ethnography, I employed audio-visual recording, alongside written accounts of my non-participant observation at each tournament, to generate textual and audio-visual data. I collected over 50 hours of audio-visual data (including four hours of video recorded interviews) that I edited into approximately 400 individual clips, between 30 seconds and four minutes in length. Following a set of coding protocols developed and refined through my involvement in previous, large-scale ethnographic projects employing audio-visual recording tools, I edited and coded data through an iterative and inductive process informed by grounded theory methods (Glaser & Strauss 1967).
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Theoretical Framework: Word Play

In order to more meaningfully differentiate between the communicative forms players used, I draw upon speech act theory, first articulated by John Austin (1975) and then refined/re-worked by John Searle (1969; 1976), Kent Bach and Michael Harnish (1979), and Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré (1990), among others. Speech act theory offers a framework for categorizing and analyzing the "performative" aspects of spoken language, asking how speakers "do things with words" (Austin 1975): formalize relationships, coordinate the actions of others, commit to a particular intent, and so on. In a series of lectures collectively titled How To Do Things With Words, Austin (1975) articulates an understanding of spoken language where the utterance "is, or is a part of, the doing of an action" (5). According to Austin, a performative utterance can be analyzed in three ways: as "locutionary" act, in terms of its ostensible meaning and content; as "illocutionary" act, in terms of its intended effect on the speaker or listener(s); and as "perlocutionary" act, in terms of its actual effects on the speaker, the audience, and the context of the utterance (98–103).

Working from this distinction, Austin asserts that analyzing the illocutionary sense of an utterance—what the speaker does or intends to do through the speech act—is of primary importance to social studies of language. John Searle re-formulates Austin's rough taxonomy of illocutionary acts, a project he sees as crucial in accounting for the "limited number of basic things we can do with language" (Searle 1976, 22). Briefly, this taxonomy includes: "representative" illocutionary acts, which describe a set of conditions; "directive" utterances, intended to coordinate the actions of the person(s) to whom they are addressed; "commissives," which consign the speaker to a particular goal or plan; "expressives," to communicate the speaker's state of mind; and "declaratives," such as "you're fired," that bring about the conditions to which they refer (10–14). This taxonomy (and its further refinements and extensions: Alston 1991; Bach and Harnish 1979; Harnish 1990; Sbisa 2002) has been used to carry out focused analyses of discrete talk segments (see, for example, Kubo 2002; Moulin and Rousseau 2002; Recanati...
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1987; Yamada 2002). In these approaches, statements are often represented in symbolic and/or schematic form as sequences of syntactic elements, in order to examine their mechanics: the force with which they are expressed, for instance, or the presumed sincerity of the speaker.

Rather than apply Searle’s taxonomy to formal analyses of individual talk fragments, however, I employ it as a set of concepts for expressing and organizing the effects of different speech acts in the contexts of their use. In doing so, I follow attempts to bring speech act theory in line with a post-structuralist notion of discourse as dynamically realized and socially reproduced systems of meaning, through which subjects regulate and negotiate acceptable identities, activities, and practices (Davies and Harré 1990, 45). In this post-structuralist formation of speech act theory, and similar to Snider, Lockridge, and Lawson’s approach (this volume), the aim is not to decode individual speech acts in order to reveal the speaker’s intention or psychological state of mind; rather, speech acts are regarded as means through which individuals take up and rehearse particular subject positions within a given domain (46).

Going Pro

Following this re-working of speech act theory7, the different performative utterances documented here constitute one set of resources (alongside non-verbal forms of communication such as gesture, proximity, gaze, and gameplay) through which players engage in and reproduce a discourse around what constitutes professional Halo 3 play: here, mastery of a highly codified lingo, as well as an ability to trash-talk, are as important as abilities related to navigation and targeting. Silence is associated with incompetence and inexperience. This discourse is further characterized by an acceptance (celebration even) of misogynistic and homophobic banter between players—banter that has far more to do with rehearsing particular hyper-masculinized subject positions than with executing gameplay. These speech acts form one part of the discursive matrix through which competitive gaming is legitimated as (male-dominated) spectator sport.

In contrast to recent studies of e-Sports, which either provide rationales for competitive gaming’s status as sport (Hutchins 2008),

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or accept this as fact (Rambusch, Jakobsson, and Pargmann 2007), my aim in this paper is to regard the professionalization of gaming as a process carried out through the deliberate appropriation of imagery, media production practices, and discourses from the domain of spectator sports (Taylor 2009). In this regard, I see in the professionalization of digital play a shift that is similar to the rise of professional sports beginning in the early twentieth century (albeit on a different scale and under different socio-economic and technological conditions), and continuing with the emergence of a sports media industry that caters primarily to heterosexual men (Messner 2007). The legitimation of competitive gaming as spectator sport carries with it similar gender effects: it elevates and rewards participants in a typically masculinized domain, while relegating others to the sidelines (McDonagh and Pappano 2009).

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Speech Acts

The utterances analyzed here are organized in two general theoretical categories. I differentiate between speech acts intrinsic to play, those that immediately relate to events in the game and direct players’ efforts to a particular strategy or course of action, and speech acts extrinsic to play, those that address other players rather than the minutia of play, including taunting, trash-talking, mentorship, and motivational speech. The intrinsic speech acts I examine enable team members to choreograph their efforts with each other in real time, and constitute part of the domain of embodied competencies elite players draw upon in team-based play. Extrinsic speech acts, by contrast, involve the “discursive positioning” of participants in relation to notions of what being a pro Halo 3 gamer entails (Davies and Harré 1990). These categories are not mutually exclusive; the distinction is intended to illustrate that participation in this pro-gaming community has as much to do with affecting a particular subject position—one which traffics in the kinds of homophobia, misogyny, and hyper-masculinization commonly associated with professional sports (Curry 2002; Waite 2008; Taylor, Jenson, and de Castell 2010)—as it does with playing FPS games expertly.

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Map Callouts: Choreographing Play

Following the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic speech acts, the first set of utterances I look at involves a specialized vocabulary for competitive Halo 3 play, generally referred to by players as “callouts.” These constitute a highly codified terminology for describing and identifying on-screen events among teammates, referring to specific areas in specific game arenas (or “maps”) where enemies, power-ups, and/or objectives appear during the course of gameplay. To show how they are used and what they accomplish within competitive team Halo 3 play, I will refer to an audio-visual clip recorded during the first day of competition at the 2008 MLG Toronto Open (Figure 11.1). The clip shows a high-ranked American team in the foreground, playing against another team. As in most instances of team-based play I observed, players repeat each map callout two or three times, although one player is the more vocal and audible team member throughout this clip. Here, the more vocal teammate is “Slice,” on the left side in the image (the other two teammates are not visible in the shot).

Unlike the systems of specific pre-scripted plays or formations used in organized team sports (as engineered, for instance, by the quarterback in football, or the midfielder in soccer), map callouts are not often used as “directives” to explicitly regulate other players’

Figure 11.1 “Slice,” on the left, shouting callouts during MLG tournament play.
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actions. Rather, they are used more as "representatives": they describe, in a codified and concise way, the action unfolding in a particular part of the game environment, which other teammates might not be in a position to see on their screens. For instance, when Slice yells "Two dead in their lobby! Two dead in their lobby!" he describes a specific set of conditions that he is viewing/taking part in: two opposing players have been killed (by one of Slice's teammates) in the opposing team's lobby, the area of the arena where opposing players re-spawn after being killed. Similarly, when Slice's teammate proclaims "One shot our snipe, one shot our snipe" he is notifying other teammates of two conditions: he has spotted an enemy player on their side of the map close to the area on their side of the arena where the sniper rifle power-up appears ("Our snipe"), and this player has been weakened (presumably, though not necessarily, by the player himself) to the point where he is only one direct shot of the battle rifle (the default weapon for MLG competitive play) away from being eliminated. As these examples show, callouts are used to instantiate a shared virtual topography through a pre-determined system of verbal cues.

While most commonly used as "representative" utterances, I also observed callouts being used as directive utterances on occasion, in players' instructions to one another. In the same clip, Slice alerts his team members to "Joker," an opponent. At first, he exclaims "Joker one shot Joker one shot," his representative utterance indicating that this player has been weakened; in the next instance, he yells "Joker is one shot, just jump up and shoot him once," a directive utterance aimed at no teammate in particular. A second later, Slice comments "I got him I got him." In a matter of seconds, Slice identifies an enemy's weakened status, urges his teammates to finish the opponent off, does so himself, and then alerts his teammates that he's done so. From my observations of competitive Halo 3 play across various tournaments, this rapid-fire narration, in which callouts are repeated several times in quick succession to describe unfolding events in-game, marks a standard, even mundane competitive gaming moment. At the same time, the use of callouts in directive utterances is less common in my audio-visual record than their use in representative utterances. While each player on the team engages in uses of callouts as representative utterances, only

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Slice seems to use callouts as directives—perhaps indicating (and/or instantiating) his status as team leader. This was consistent across the majority of teams I observed: while all team members engaged in callouts, typically only one member employed them in directive speech acts.

**Verbal “Screen Looking”**

Callouts constituted the majority of players’ verbal communications with their teammates during the *Halo 3* play I observed, and were regarded by players and commentators as an essential part of the repertoire for competitive team play. At the elite levels of 4x4 team-based play I observed, *Halo 3* is intensely fast-paced and chaotic; the difference between killing another player or being killed by them is often a matter of who sees who first. Knowing the location of teammates and opponents offers considerable strategic advantage. As a communicative system for representing on-screen events, then, callouts are a means of *verbally* extending players’ field of vision, allowing them to overcome two constraints on their ability to see, and react to, on-screen action. The first limitation is virtual, and relates to the design of the game arenas used at the tournaments I attended (the four most popular arenas at the NerdCorps, MLG, and WCG events I observed are named “The Pit,” “Construct,” “Narrows,” and “Guardian”). These spaces are comprised of dark corridors, multiple, disjointed platforms, and sharp, blind corners: they are designed to curtail and confound players’ in-game lines of sight. The second limitation concerns the material layout of televisions and consoles at LAN tournaments: because a team of four has to use multiple television sets (either two televisions running in split-screen mode, accommodating two players each, or four televisions, one for each player on the team), players usually have to look away from their own television in order to see where their teammate(s) are and what they are doing—called “screen looking” by players. In the 1v1 training sessions I observed at the local NerdCorps events, screen looking was a much-maligned practice in a setup where players usually had to sit beside or share screens with other opponents. Screen looking your opponent is a means of gaining strategic advantage, and over the course of my fieldwork at NerdCorps I observed several
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instances of players accusing one another of cheating, or in some cases defending their screen looking as a legitimate tactic. In team play, however, screen looking is an encouraged and even habitual act: when a player dies, they look at their teammates’ screens during the seconds before they re-spawn, often shouting out encouragements and/or warnings as they do so. When their avatars are alive, however, the rapid pace of competitive team play makes it almost impossible to look at other teammates’ screens. Because of this physical limitation as well as the design of virtual arenas, callouts constitute “verbal screen looking”: a kind of collaborative “lateral surveillance” (Andrejevic 2005) that extends players’ awareness of on-screen actions beyond what their limited line of sight, constrained by the configuration/design of both virtual and material technologies, allows for.

Community Artifacts: Mapping Speech  

Callouts are regarded as central to the skill repertoire required for competitive team-based Halo 3 play, as I learned from observing the local, national, and international LAN tournaments I attended, as well as talking with players and organizers. Like the hardcore gaming communities around other games (particularly massively multiplayer online games; see Steinkuehler 2008; Taylor 2006), these practices are also articulated and debated in online game-related forums (the most prominent among competitive Halo franchise players in North America are MLG’s forums, at http://www.mlgpro.com/forums). On those sites, players produce and publish diagrams of callouts, identifying the locations and communally regulated codenames for weapon and power-up spawn points, elevators between platforms, team re-spawn points, and so on. As resources made explicitly to instruct other players in not only where certain points on the map are located, but how to call them out to teammates in online and LAN-based matches, these digital artifacts are one means through which a codified set of verbal/textual referents is regulated and standardized.
Regulating Talk: “Be Loud!”

As with T. L. Taylor’s (2006) look at in-game communication tools for participatory surveillance in World of Warcraft, a player’s use or misuse of this technical register is subject to regulation and critique from other participants—whether teammates, spectators, or opponents. In another clip from the 2008 MLG Toronto Open, a NerdCorps participant, “Shadow,” is watching a local Toronto squad lose to an American team (Figure 11.2). After the match, Shadow criticizes one of the team’s members for not being loud enough. “When you do badly don’t be quiet – you weren’t talking!” he says, leaning in after some seconds trying to get the other player’s attention. When the other player defends himself, claiming “I was yelling,” Shadow replies that the only player he heard making callouts was “OldSchool,” another player on the team. This interaction suggests a shared conception about the importance of “being loud” to successful play: Shadow’s critique, and the other player’s defense, suggests that the team lost in part because one player wasn’t audible enough in his callouts.

Here, a player critiques his peer for his perceived silence during play; the player accused of not communicating properly insists that he was being loud (perhaps just not loud enough), signaling his recognition of and participation in the discursive equation between

![Figure 11.2 “Shadow” (left) telling his peer to “be loud.”](image-url)
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“being loud” and competent team play. It is not enough that this particular player utilizes map callouts; it is also how he produces these utterances (being “loud enough”) that matters to his participation in a pro-gaming community. This instance demonstrates the extent to which the performance of callouts is central to not only successful team strategy, but also to the discursive construction of professional Halo 3 play.

Extrinsic Speech

The use of standardized callouts is regarded as an integral part of elite team-based Halo 3 play, so much so that a player’s misuse of callouts can be blamed as a primary reason for his team losing. In this section, I examine speech acts that are not directly related to in-game events or to the real-time choreography of effective team play, but may be just as important to players’ performance, in public, of the subject positions associated with this emergent e-Sport. This includes forms of encouragement and motivation between players, as well as the various ways taunts and insults are deployed: whether to distract, provoke, or alienate other players. I argue that although each of these communicative forms is related to and often triggered by participants’ gameplay, they are largely extrinsic to in-game events—that is, they concern the regulation and certain subject positions regarded as acceptable within a community heavily invested in the links between gaming competence and a (sports-related) hyper masculinity.

“Keep This Pace Goin’ Guys”

Among the more common kinds of extrinsic speech acts are instances where players (as well as spectators) congratulate each other for specific in-game achievements (i.e. “Nice shot”) or spur each other on (i.e. “Let’s go”). Audio-visual footage of training tournaments at Nerd Corps LAN events offers examples. The instance I examine here is from the 4v4 team finals of an event in Spring 2008 (Figure 11.3): “Reach,” in the middle, encourages his teammates on as they play another team of NerdCorps regulars in the tournament.
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Figure 11.3 “Reach” urging his teammates (not depicted) to “keep this pace goin’.”

finals. Widely regarded as less skilled than other NerdCorps players, Reach was heavily involved in helping the organizers run monthly events, and at the time of my study was volunteering for MLG Canada in hopes of being hired on as a play-by-play commentator for MLG tournaments. One of the NerdCorps organizers described these activities as attempts by a less competent player to “make a name for himself” in the competitive gaming industry.

At the start of the clip, Reach exclaims “Let’s keep this goin’ guys, we got a good pace goin’ here.” Moments later, Reach again shouts “Keep this pace goin’ guys” as the camera pans from his teammates to him. As illocutionary acts, Reach’s comments appear as directive utterances, in so far as he is urging his teammates towards a stated goal, however vaguely described. In contrast to the more substantive directives made by Slice, however, Reach’s comments seem more deliberately performative, as if he is rehearsing a more motivational role for his team (and possibly for the camera). His directive utterances have no noticeable impact on his teammates, as they continue to focus intently on their screens and shout callouts to one another. “Keep this pace goin’ guys” may be framed as a directive utterance, but not in the same way as Slice’s intrinsically oriented utterances. Instead of coordinating the play of his teammates, Reach seems more intent on rehearsing a particular identity in relation to his more...
competent teammates, that of a motivator or coach rather than captain.

**Taunts, Trash-talk, and Put-downs**

Taunts and insults were a common occurrence throughout my fieldwork, and seemed to be integral to the discursive repertoire of many players. In looking at specific moments of players mocking, teasing, and/or provoking one another, I argue that inclusion in a competitive gaming community involves, for these players, participating in a kind of verbal antagonism: trash-talking between opponents was regarded by most players I interviewed at NerdCorps and MLG events as a legitimate tactic, and some players at the World Cyber Games felt that play suffered as a result of the tournament’s strict rule against it. Players used taunts and insults not only to trash-talk, but to marginalize less competent play(ers) and, specifically, to describe their play in misogynistic or homophobic terms. Once again, the discursive parallels between competitive Halo 3 play and masculinized sports practices and institutions is significant: across both, competence is often associated with heteronormative masculinity, and expressed in violent and hyper-masculinized language, while incompetence is equated with femininity and homosexuality (Atencio and Wright 2008; Curry 2002; Waitt 2008).

Here, I examine three clips in which participants at NerdCorps training events engage in antagonistic speech acts. In the first instance, players on opposing teams engage in trash-talk during heated 4v4 play, which can be regarded as a kind of belligerent but harmless verbal sparring. The second clip shows novice players being punished and marginalized through the speech acts of their teammate; here, put-downs are used to disassociate an accomplished participant from the incompetent players she has been teamed up with. In the third clip, which is perhaps qualitatively different in ways worth pursuing, a successful and popular male player loudly but “jokingly” threatens a female player after she reacts to his sexualized comments during Free-for-All play at a NerdCorps event. Unlike the first two clips, the exchange is wholly unrelated to on-screen action, and demonstrates that much of the discursive practices this community engages in has far more to do with players’


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embodied and gendered identities than what they are doing, or capable of doing, in the game.

"Sit Down With That Shit, Man!"

In the first clip I examine here, two teams of NerdCorps regulars are playing one another in round-robin 4v4 play during a training event in the summer of 2008. During play, "Focus," the player closest to the camera, and on the team that is currently behind by a match in the best-of-three format, engages in a two-minute exchange of taunts and provocations with a player on the other team who is off-camera. The following is a partial transcript of their exchange:

Focus: Suck on that!
Focus: Sit down with that shit man!
Other player: Are you winning?
Focus: Sit down with that shit!
[15 seconds later]
Focus: You wanna play that buddy?
Other player: I'm gonna play that cuz I'm winning - and I've already won a game. Where's your win?
Focus: It's comin' baby, it's comin'.
Other player: I'm waitin' for it, any day buddy.
[90 seconds later]
Focus: Oh baby ooooh baby! Is everybody dead?

This transcript does not represent a full record of what is said over the three-minute clip; their dialogue is only part of a complex, multi-layered soundscape as players from both teams shout callouts, encouragements, and taunts. Their exchange of provocations is antagonistic, but not hostile; the participants seem more concerned with distracting and teasing, rather than provoking one another, and notably, it stops abruptly as soon as the match ends, at which point each team member shakes hands and/or congratulates opposing team members. This sort of trash-talking is the most common type of verbal antagonism I observed, and according to many players I talked to (as well as the NerdCorps organizers), it constitutes as legitimate a gameplay tactic as callouts; while callouts work to
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choreograph the actions of team members, trash-talking is regarded as a way of disrupting this choreography. The almost playful verbal sparring between the two opponents in this clip stands in contrast to the following account of novice players being alienated through a dismissive exchange between more accomplished NerdCorps regulars.

“These Guys Have So Much Awareness”

The interaction I examine next, from another NerdCorps tournament during the summer of 2008, involves “Fatal Fantasy” (hereafter Fatal), the lone female regular at the events, and her friend “Burns,” who are teamed up with two unfamiliar and novice young men, whom I had not seen before and did not see afterwards (Figure 11.4). One of them is not visible in the camera shot. “Mad Hatter,” another NerdCorps regular, watches their round-robin team play. Both Fatal and Burns engage only sporadically in callouts, demonstrating what seems like a lack of enthusiasm for, and disengagement from, their match. Their teammates appear to be silent the entire duration of the clip. At the beginning of the clip, Fatal tries to coordinate the other two players, explicitly turning to look at them twice as she utters map callouts. Halfway through the clip, Fatal shakes her head and

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 11.4 Mad Hatter, Burns and Fatal (from the left edge of the clip), disparaging novices.


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exclaims that the match is the "Most epic choke I've ever seen, I kid you not," presumably in response to her team's struggles. Moments later, Mad Hatter comments, sarcastically and in earshot of the whole team, "Wow, these guys have so much awareness," referring to the novice play of Fatal's teammates. She replies by stating, "These kids? No they don't." She appears to avoid looking their way for the rest of the clip. After the round comes to a close, another spectator off-camera exclaims "You got raped guys, so hard," and Fatal shakes her head again.

In my reading of this exchange, Fatal distances herself both verbally and non-verbally from the poor play of the two inexperienced players. She replies to Mad Hatter's comment in a way that both alienates and infantilizes the two novices ("These kids? No they don't"), effectively positioning those sitting directly beside her as unworthy of any further direct contact. Where the trash-talk between Focus and his opponent involved two NerdCorps regulars relatively equal in skill, this exchange involves the outright dismissal of two new and less competent players by a group of more expert regulars.

"Slap You Across the Throat"

Whereas the previous exchange depicts a player distancing herself from the poor play of her teammates, the next audio-visual clip I discuss depicts male participants marginalizing a female player for reasons wholly extrinsic to her play—her gender, in a community in which women are not regarded as legitimate participants (Taylor, Jenson, and de Castell, 2000). The clip is from the NerdCorps event directly before the 2008 MLG Toronto Open (Figure 11.5). It begins with "Vik Vicious" (hereafter Vik), regarded by NerdCorps organizers and participants as the club's most successful player and one of the best Halo 3 players in Canada, shouting racialized and homophobic remarks, to no one in particular, during an otherwise quiet period of Free-for-All play. Moments into the clip, Vik begins to yell "Suck my bird, nigga!" in a loud and deep voice, to no one in particular. "Hopper," seated beside him, laughs, and Vik continues "why can't you talk, is there a bird in your throat?" Seconds later, Vik again yells "Eat my bird, nigga!" more loudly, at which point Fatal, seated several feet away with her back to Vik, leans back and looks at Vik.
until he catches her gaze, then turns back to look at her screen, shaking her head. Vik responds “Oh what, you got a problem with that [Fatal]? I’ll slap you across the throat,” after which he comments “No really, I don’t hit girls.”

None of the other players around Vik or Fatal (including Hopper, Vik’s teammate, who had laughed at the initial outbursts) seem to visibly or audibly respond to the exchange. Vik’s outburst is encouraged by his teammate Hopper, also a well-respected player, who laughs out loud after the first two remarks. His response to Fatal, the only one to visibly take offense at this remarks, is to threaten physical violence against her, before assuring her (and the other participants, as well as the camera and possibly myself) that he doesn’t “hit girls.” His threat against her is certainly problematic, but so is his following claim that he doesn’t hit girls; this comment re-emphasizes Fatal’s gendered identity within a male-dominated space. Here, the marginalization of a player affected through the utterances of others has little to do with Fatal’s gaming competence, as is the case with the novice players Fatal dismisses in the previous clip, and everything to do with the maintenance of a discourse that problematizes Fatal’s attempts at legitimate participation, on the grounds of her gendered identity.

Instances of utterances involving misogynistic, homophobic, and/or racialized language occurred frequently throughout the tournaments I observed. As in other leisure and sport-related contexts...
dominated by young males (Curry 2002; Pascoe 2007; Waitt 2008), such speech acts arguably function to alienate “other” subject positions; in this instance, Vik’s utterance and its sanctioning by other players (as well as myself) serves to (re)create a space that is unfriendly, and potentially unsafe, to female gamers. The interaction I examine between Vik and Fatal clearly illustrates that affirmations of heteronormative masculinity are a significant part of this community’s discursive practices. The forms of extrinsic speech sanctioned in this community, and deployed to marginalize particular players, demonstrate that the ability to perform professional gaming has as much to do with players’ gender as their abilities to shoot one another in Halo 3.

**Conclusion**

The categorization and interpretation of verbal interactions offered in this account of competitive Halo 3 players’ discursive practices is a representative but not exhaustive sample of the communicative patterns I observed. Excluded from this account are the forms of communication employed by Halo 3 coaches, participants whose function, from what I observed at MLG Toronto, is to take on the role of shouting map callouts for the entire team, so that individual players do not have to. I also did not take up players’ use of the term “rape,” and the issues the use of this term raises in a male-dominated community where women are most often positioned in supportive and sexualized roles.

The analysis offered here, however, plays up what appears to be a crucial characteristic of the emergent discourse around professionalized Halo 3 play, expressed through the sentiment that a silent team is a dead team: that the competencies required to participate in this community not only involve game-based skill, dexterity, hand-eye coordination, and a familiarity with the game formats and maps used in tournaments, but also the routinized deployment of a codified speech system that both accomplishes and demonstrates successful team coordination. The communicative forms that I have defined as intrinsic to play, then, are as much the repertoire for elite players as the ability to aim and fire while running or jumping, rapidly...
navigate virtual space, and memorize when and where on each game terrain certain power-ups appear. As my exploration of extrinsic speech acts makes clear, however, callouts constitute only part of the ways players verbally participate in a pro-gaming discourse. Players’ verbal enactment and regulation of a pro-gamer masculinity seems as important to competitive Halo 3 play as the cultivation and execution of game-based competencies, including callouts.

This analysis contributes to a growing body of research that examines the competencies and practices associated with competitive FPS play (Reeves, Brown, and Laurier 2009) and e-Sports (Rambusch, Jakobsson, and Pargmann 2007; Taylor 2009). In following Halo 3 players’ own understandings of what constitutes elite, indeed professional play with regards to competitive FPS gaming, this work extends current accounts of what expert FPS play entails and requires, in two primary ways. The first concerns the inclusion of linguistic competencies in the repertoire of expert Halo 3 players; the second is the acknowledgement that expertise, however defined, is certainly not the most important qualifier for success, or even inclusion in this emergent e-Sport. Equally important for this community of competitive FPS gamers is the ability to occupy a particular gendered subject position—to “talk the talk” that links competitive FPS play to the domain of male-dominated, professional spectator sports.

Notes

1 Thank you to the organizers of NerdCorps, and the players with whom I worked between 2008 and 2009, without which this research would not have been possible.

2 The term has primarily been used to refer to tournament-based and league-sponsored play in either team-based or one-on-one games (Rambusch, Jakobsson, and Pargmann 2007; Taylor and Witkowski 2010). Popular genres include real-time strategy (Starcraft and Starcraft II); fighting games (Street Fighter IV, Super Smash Brothers Brawl); sports games; and FPS games, both PC-based (Counter-Strike) and on consoles (the Halo and Gears of War franchises). The name of this organization, and the nicknames of its participants, have been altered to protect their anonymity.

Voorhees, Gerald A. (Editor); Call, Joshua (Editor); Whitlock, Katie (Editor). Approaches to Digital Game Studies: Guns, Grenades, and Grunts: First-Person Shooter Games. New York, NY, USA: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012. p 280.


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At the time of my study, *Halo 3* was the most recent installment of the *Halo* franchise, and the one most played in the competitive tournaments I documented, including the Major League Gaming (MLG) tournaments. It has since been replaced by *Halo: Reach*.

Teams that place eighth or higher at Major League Gaming tournaments are given “professional” designation.

See, for instance, Reeves, Brown, and Laurier (2009); Thompson (2002).

Searle, like Austin, maintains that the intended effects of a speech act cannot be conflated with its actual effects, and preserves Austin’s distinction between illocutionary (intended) and perlocutionary (actual) effects of speech.

A similar framework is offered up in James Gee’s articulation and application of discourse analysis (1999), in so far as inclusion in a particular “affinity group” is partially a matter of mastering the group’s discursive practices.

Throughout this chapter I will refer to moments in my audio-visual record as clips, in order to emphasize the selective and specific audio-visual ethnographic techniques by which such moments are made visible: e.g. through setting up a recording and positioning the camera, to editing and annotating particular instances in the data.

When they are killed, players must wait a certain set amount of time (depending on particular tournament rules) before they reappear—“re-spawn”—back in a designated part of the game arena (their “lobby”), usually on the far side from their opponents’ lobby.

Most players played far more *Halo 3* online, over Xbox LIVE’s online gaming service, than they do in LANs, meaning screen looking is only an issue at LAN play. The regulation of screen looking is, therefore, part of a more general negotiation between players, organizers, and volunteers about what counts as “legitimate” tournament play, particularly as the e-Sports industry positions LAN events as the primary arenas for professional gaming (see, for instance, Taylor 2009).

T. L. Taylor, examining user-created software modifications to *World of Warcraft*, makes a similar comment regarding experienced players’ deployment of software tools for monitoring teammates’ in-game actions. Taylor claims such practices perform “important work in assisting collaborative play, especially at the high end of the game” (Taylor 2006, 329).

See, for instance, the maps published on http://www.freewebs.com/competitiveonlinegaming/mapsandcallouts.htm.

Significantly, the only site/event where taunting among players is
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not present is at the World Cyber Games, where trash-talking was disallowed as part of a mandate to promote “good sportsmanship” at events styled as competitive gaming “Olympics.”

Participants’ frequent use of “rape” to describe in-game events is an issue that demands further and separate analysis, beyond the limits of this paper.

At NerdCorps events, Free-for-All (or FFA) play involved up to eight players in a single map fighting one another; the organizers regarded it as a means to hone players’ game-based skills.

“Bird” in this context is a euphemism for penis.

My primary reason for not discussing this role is because I only observed them at the MLG event I went to, and not at NerdCorps tournaments or the World Cyber Games.

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Voorhees, Gerald A. (Editor); Call, Joshua (Editor); Whitlock, Katie (Editor). Approaches to Digital Game Studies: Guns, Grenades, and Grunts: First-Person Shooter Games. New York, NY, USA: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012. p 282.

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Games
