

AFK *(Away From Keyboard)*

Embodiment of militarized hegemonic masculinity within first person shooter games

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(above) Screenshot of CS2 gameplay video *UG Counter Strike*

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Preface

First person shooter games like Counter-Strike are designed around hegemonic masculinity, prioritizing aggression while reinforcing dominance over women and other marginalized groups. While gaming involves the embodiment of a character, these characters are often idealized versions of militarized masculinity.

As a teenager, both my brother and some of my friends played a lot of first person shooter games around me. This period of my life also coincided with struggles around masculinity and sexuality, and embodying these hyper masculine characters never made me feel more confident.

The installation consists of three looping animations made using 3D models from Counter-Strike. I used 3d models of characters from both the "Phoenix Connection" terrorist group and the "FBI" counter-terrorist group. I animated the characters with subtle gestures that disrupt the hyper masculinity usually portrayed in the game, implying queerness through movement. Another part of the installation focuses on the skin market within the game. Skins are cosmetic weapon decorations that hold real monetary value and are traded through online marketplaces. I replicated the gloves used in the game and designed my own skin using a camouflage pattern made from homoerotic imagery. The use of homoerotic imagery within a camouflage pattern is a contradiction of militarized visual codes. Camouflage is traditionally designed to conceal the body and align it with structures of uniformity, and heteronormative masculinity. By embedding homoerotic content into this pattern, the work disrupts that.

The robotic arms in the installation perform a gesture inspired by the in game "inspect skin" animation, a movement that also reminds me of the gesture of looking at a fresh manicure.

This publication serves as an extension of the project, bringing together the research, critical reflections, and design outcomes that informed its development.

Research question: *How do first-person shooter interfaces construct the embodiment of militarized masculinity, and how can this be exposed through queer interventions?*











"French toys: one could not find a better illustration of the fact that the adult Frenchman sees the child as another self. All the toys one commonly sees are essentially a microcosm of the adult world; they are all reduced copies of human objects, as if in the eyes of the public the child was, all told, nothing but a smaller man, a homunculus to whom must be supplied objects of his own size."

- Roland Barthes *'Toys'*

You could argue that first-person shooter games are also a toy that kids play with. Like the toys Barthes describes in Mythologies (1957), FPS games simulate warfare, dominance, and militarised masculinity, yet function as routine leisure objects within adolescent life. Przybylski and Weinstein (2019), in their nationally representative study of British 14 and 15 year-olds, found that violent video games, coded using the official PEGI rating system, are a normalised feature of teenage play, embedded in daily recreational habits rather than occupying any exceptional or transgressive space (Royal Society Open Science, doi: 10.1098/rsos.171474). This normalisation is also reflected institutionally: the United States Supreme Court ruled in 2011 that there was insufficient evidence of harm to justify restricting minors' access to violent games (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2019), effectively making these products culturally legitimate objects of childhood consumption. What Barthes identified in the toy soldier, the mythological laundering of violence into play finds its most recognisable expression in the first person shooter game, where the child does not only holds violence in their hands, but enacts it.



(above) Screenshot of CS2 gameplay video *UG Counter Strike*



(above) Screenshot of CS2 gameplay video *UG Counter Strike*

The role that military themed games play in the wider societal process of "militarization"

Games with a military theme comliment the already powerfull social, political and cultural forces at work in American society, as well as in other Western societies which position and privilege the military as one of, if not the most influential institutions within those societies.

Gaming involves a type of performance, an embodiment of feeling in the body's expression through animation. "the exaggerated expressiveness and hyperactivity associated with animatedness... draws our attention to the politically charged predicament of suspended agency from which all of these ugly feelings ensue

“Video games are inescapably masculinized space, with advertising and marketing messages that emphasize a default young male identity.”

In “Masc Affect: Affective Masculinity in Video Games Research,” Joshua Foust argues that first-person shooter (FPS) games consistently reproduce a narrow form of hegemonic masculinity, presenting it as both natural and desirable. He describes how these games construct masculinity through affect particularly through feelings of control, aggression, and dominance. Within many FPS environments, the player embodies a soldier whose emotional range is limited to intensity, focus, and violence, reinforcing what Foust identifies as an “affective structure that privileges toughness and suppresses vulnerability”. This repeated framing normalizes a specific ideal: the disciplined, weaponized male body as the default mode of interaction with the world. As a result, hegemonic masculinity is not only represented but felt through gameplay, becoming an embodied experience rather than just a visual trope. Foust’s analysis highlights how these affective mechanics subtly train players to internalize militarized masculinity as both effective and desirable.

Gamergate

Gamergate was an online harassment campaign that started in 2014, mostly directed at women and queer people working in or writing about the video game industry. What started as a controversy about "ethics in games journalism" became an effort to drive certain voices out of gaming spaces. Game developer Zoë Quinn, feminist gaming critic Anita Sarkeesian, and game developer Brianna Wu were among the primary targets, receiving rape and death threats, and having their personal information publicly leaked by anonymous attackers. Sarkeesian, who had built her platform critiquing the sexist portrayal of women in video games, was threatened with a massacre at Utah State University when she was scheduled to speak there in October 2014. Wu fled her home with her husband after her address was posted online and she was bombarded with rape and death threats on Twitter. Salter (2018) frames this as a direct expression of what he calls "geek masculinity", a possessive identity built around gaming culture that perceived women and feminist criticism as an existential threat to its territory (Crime, Media, Culture, 14(2), 247–264). It showed pretty clearly that the culture around gaming, particularly around the kind of hyper-masculine games like first-person shooters, had developed a deeply hostile relationship with anyone who challenged what games were or who they were for.



(above) Photograph courtesy of UN Women/Ryan Brown

Counter-Strike

Counter-Strike is a first person shooter game where players are divided over two teams of five, the team that wins the most out of 30 rounds wins, each round takes 1 minute and 54 seconds.

Per game you choose to be part of either the “terrorists” or “counter-terrorists” they are fictional groups inspired by real world terrorist and counter terrorist groups.



Phoenix Connexion



Elite Crew



Guerrilla Warfare

Terrorists

Win by planting the bomb, which then explodes or by elimanating the other team

(below) Images from COUNTERSTRIKE.FANDOM.COM

Counter Terrorists

Win by disarming the bomb or by eliminating the other team



British Special Air Service (SAS)



FBI



Gendarmerie Nationale

The IDF (Israel Defense Force) was introduced to *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* during its beta phase in the August 10, 2012 update. They served as a map-specific Counter-Terrorist faction primarily featured on Dust II. The faction was officially removed from the map rotations and replaced by general character models when *CS:GO* transitioned to *Counter-Strike 2* in September 2023.

(below) Image from SMASHCS



"I'm going to try and stop saying faggot, but it's one of my favourite words of all time."

"It's not a bad word... it has a lot of meanings."

"I use the word retard to call people retarted."

- Twitch streamer Mohamad Assad during one of his *CS:GO* gameplay streams



(above) Screenshot of CS2 gameplay video *UG Counter Strike*

Why *Counter-Strike*?

as a teenager, both my brother and some of my friends have played a lot of *Counter Strike* in my presence, I was never enjoying it so much so usually I was just observing apart from the few times I actually played with them. Because this time of my life was also a time where I struggled a lot with masculinity and my sexuality, first person shooter games that let you embody this version of hegemonic masculinity were not helping me with feeling more confident. Counter-Strike was somehow the game that I felt the most rejection towards. The specific version of masculinity that is portrayed within the game made me feel very distant to the game. An interest in analysing the combat aesthetics of Counter-Strike and how they influence young men became the starting point for this project.



01



02



03

01
Wild Lotus
Factory new: **$14.048**

02
Doppler Ruby
Factory new: **$1.728**

03
Dragon Lore
Factory new: **$10.678**

04
Hedge Maze
Factory new: **$27.999**

(above) Images from CSGOSKINS.GG



04

Skins

The skin market of *Counter Strike* is essentially a large, player-driven digital economy built around cosmetic weapon items. These “skins” don’t affect gameplay, but they hold monetary value because players trade them through platforms like the Steam Community Market and third-party sites. Prices are determined by classic supply-and-demand dynamics: rarity, wear level and hype all influence value. Skins enter the market mainly through randomized case openings, drops, or trade-up systems, meaning scarcity is partly engineered, which drives speculation and collecting behavior. Over time, this has evolved into a billion-dollar ecosystem where items can range from a few cents to over a million euros, with values fluctuating like stocks depending on updates, trends, and player demand . As a result, the *Counter Strike* skin market sits somewhere between gaming, gambling, and financial speculation turning purely digital textures into highly valued assets within a volatile, largely unregulated economy.









(above) Screenshots from animation on CSGOSKINS.GG





After purcha-
sing a skin for
your weapon or
gloves you can inspect
it in game, by using
a command the hands
out of the POV will use
a gesture to make it look
like you are viewing your
newly bought skin. I found
this aspect of the game very
interesting because there
is a sort of contradiction in
the fact that people in this
hyper masculine space
are willing to spend
thousands of dollars
for a skin which is
purely cosme-
tical.

















(above) Stills of render made using *Blender*






The gesture of inspecting your skin reminds me a lot of the gesture I make when I have my nails done to look at them. In this render I recreated that using the aesthetics of *Counter-Strike*.





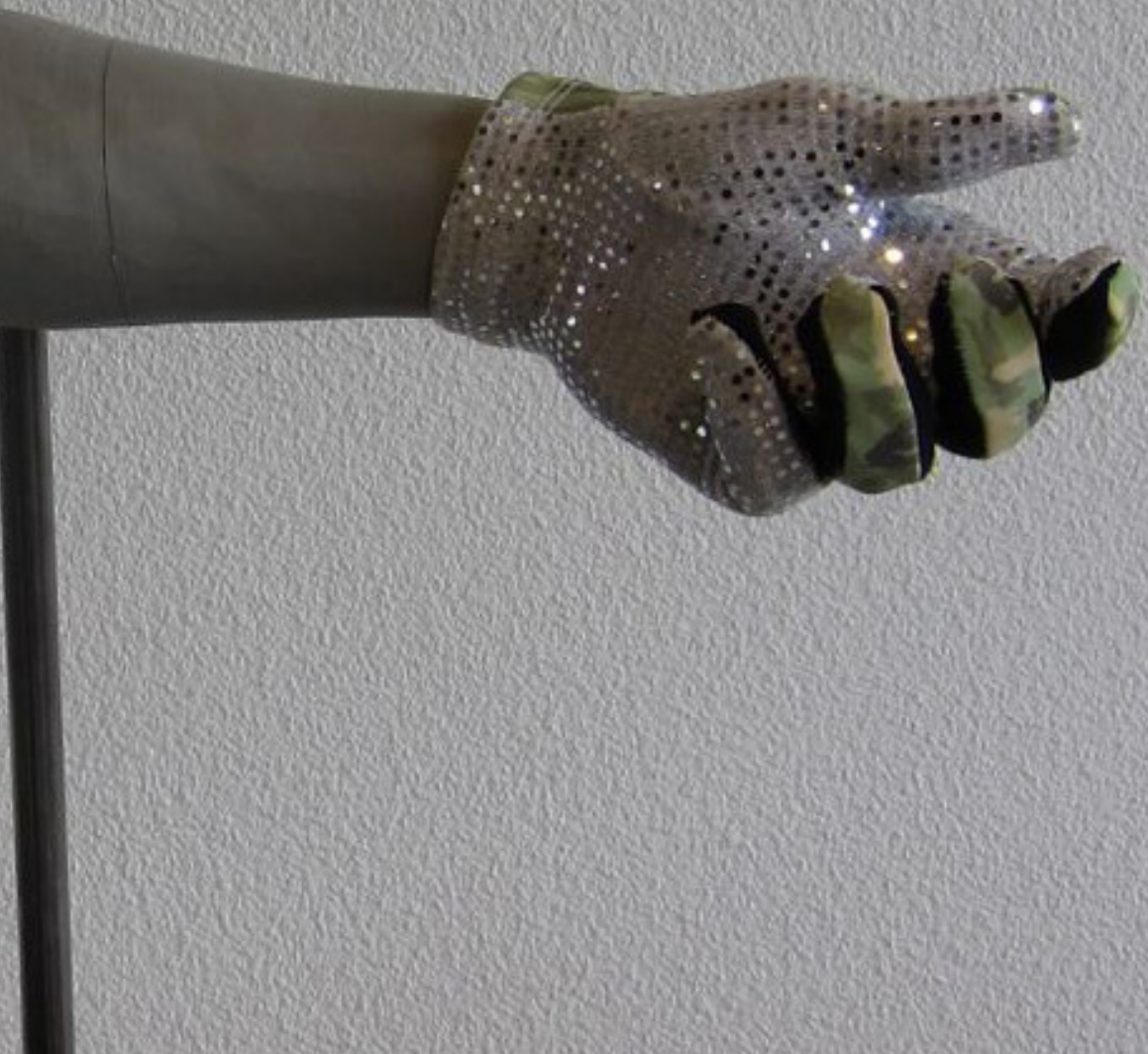



When I found out it is possible to make your own skin for Counter-Strike using digital tools like Blender and Photoshop, I thought this would be a perfect opportunity to explore how such a market could be infiltrated and queered, even if only as a proposition. Rather than submitting the skin to the game's marketplace, this part of the installation takes the form of a physical realisation of what that intervention could look like, a tangible object that imagines itself inside the hyper-masculine space of Counter-Strike without ever having to ask for permission to enter.

The starting point was designing a camouflage pattern consisting of homoerotic imagery found online. The use of homoerotic imagery within a camouflage pattern is a contradiction of militarised visual codes. Camouflage is traditionally designed to conceal the body and align it with structures of uniformity and heteronormative masculinity. By embedding homoerotic content into this pattern, the work disrupts that function. The gloves, modelled on those worn by the characters in the game, become a physical proposal, an object that exists in the real world as a representation of an intervention that the game's infrastructure would likely never allow.







Soldier

The three animations that form part of this installation take Counter-Strike's own visual language and turn it against itself. Rather than introducing new elements, the work operates entirely within the game's existing aesthetic, using official 3D character models sourced online and reanimate them to stage moments the game's design actively forecloses. The intervention is not about destruction but about possibility, asking what these bodies might do if freed from the constraints of the role they were built to perform. The first animation places two male characters in a kiss, one from the Phoenix Connection terrorist faction and one from the FBI counter-terrorist unit. These are the game's two opposing forces, figures whose entire existence within the game is organised around killing each other. By bringing them together in an act of intimacy, the animation collapses the ideological structure that the game depends on. This connects to Judith Butler's theorisation of gender as performative, a set of repeated acts that produce the illusion of a natural, stable identity (Butler, 1990). The soldier's hyper-masculinity is not innate but rehearsed, and the kiss interrupts that rehearsal, if only for a moment. The second animation adopts the first-person perspective that defines the FPS genre, showing a pair of arms admiring a fresh manicure. This is perhaps the most formally precise of the three works. The first-person view is the grammar of the shooter, the point of view through which the player enacts violence and embodies the soldier. Here that same grammar is redirected toward a gesture of self-care and femininity. The form remains while the content queers it from within, which is close to what José Esteban Muñoz describes as disidentification, a practice of working inside dominant cultural texts rather than simply rejecting them, repurposing their structures to produce new meanings (Muñoz, 1999). The third animation shows a character from the Phoenix Connection dancing in a feminine way. The rigid, combat-ready posture that the game assigns to these models is replaced by movement that the game's design never anticipated. Taken together, the three animations propose that the hyper-masculine identity embedded in Counter-Strike and games like it is not a given but a construction, one that can be gently taken apart.



(above and next) Stills of render made using *Blender*


FBI























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