

Comparative Analysis

Authenticity in Counter-Strike and Red Orchestra

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Introduction

In this paper, I will look at how Counter-Strike and Red Orchestra create a sense of authenticity to the situations in which they're set. I'll start by comparing their iconographies to determine their settings, then I'll analyse how a degree of authenticity is achieved through the specific mechanics of the game design. The way I use the terms mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics in this paper is taken from the MDA model by Hunicke, LeBlanc & Zubek, 2001-2004¹.

First, however, an extremely brief explanation of how I use the term "authenticity" in this paper.

Authenticity

I'm purposely avoiding the perhaps more popular term "realism" in this paper, because realism can be used in several very different contexts. It's most often used to describe the visual fidelity of the game, and is used equally for describing the graphical technology powering them or the stylisation degree of the game's artwork. Though the stylisation of the artwork is relevant to the topic of this paper, I'm more interested in how the realism paradigm applies to gameplay: as I use the term "authenticity", it covers the effort to accurately represent (or at the very least invoke) a certain situation through the gameplay mechanics.

Setting

To begin with, I will now take a look at the respective settings of Red Orchestra and Counter-Strike with the central aim of identifying the differences in what the player might expect from each game.

¹ MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research: <http://algorithmancy.8kindsoffun.com>

Red Orchestra takes place on the east front of World War 2, where each map represents a battle between German and Soviet forces. I would expect most players to be familiar with this setting primarily through history classes and documentaries as well as fictional works such as films or books. As such, they might expect very harsh conditions with large forces suffering incredibly high casualty rates on both sides. Players might also expect slow and inaccurate weapons (by modern standards), unless they have been playing certain other World War 2 games, and when it becomes clear that tanks are available in many maps, it would not be unreasonable for players to anticipate that these are powerful but offer their crews very little assistance, and so would be difficult to use.

Counter-Strike is set in the modern day, each map representing a fictional encounter between terrorist groups and anti-terrorist forces. I expect that players' reference frames would be a combination of terrorist fiction a'la Tom Clancy (be it in book, film, or game form) and the occasional news report from the "War on Terror" or events where SWAT teams or similar have been deployed. Whether the scenario is hostage rescue or bomb defusing, players might expect terrorists to strike in small groups, and anti-terrorist assault teams tend to be small and well equipped. Thus, the setting calls for somewhat smaller scenarios than Red Orchestra's World War 2 setting.

Objectives

Both Counter-Strike and Red Orchestra have designed their gameplay mechanics around the paradigm of authenticity. The most straight-forward manifestation of this is the objectives of the different teams: Red Orchestra maps use capture points which either constantly award a team points while they're under that team's control, or start out entirely under control by one team who must then prevent the other team from capturing them. In my own experience, this tends to create a constant back-and-forth between the teams as they struggle for control of all the capture points. It also seems to match the type of conflict we expect from conventional warfare, where largely symmetrical forces vie for dominance over a strategically significant area.

Counter-Strike likewise uses objectives that support the anti-terrorism fiction quite well. Terrorists commonly use explosives to destroy landmarks and kill civilians, and hostage situations occasionally arise when the terrorists are cornered by government forces - these are the two scenario types that Counter-Strike: Source uses by default. Due to the nature of the fiction, scenarios will always be asymmetric: in bomb defusing maps, terrorists must bomb a particular location to win (usually one of a couple of options), while the counter-terrorists must defend this location or move in and defuse the bomb after it's been placed. In hostage rescue maps, the terrorists start near the hostage and must prevent the counter-terrorist team from reaching the hostages and escorting them out to an extraction point. However, in both cases, the game can also be won by simply killing all members of the opposing team. This is possible due to Counter-Strike's spawn system, which I will describe later.

Establishing objectives that make sense within the fiction are a fairly uncomplicated way to encourage certain behaviours in the players and achieve a measure of authenticity, but the paradigm of authenticity can also be found on more fundamental levels of the gameplay. Below, I will focus on specific areas of the core gameplay and analyse how authenticity is encouraged on this low level. I've chosen to divide the core gameplay mechanics into those pertaining to movement, weapons, and health or death.

Movement

Movement speed tends to be a significant factor in shaping how a game is played. Unashamed tournament games such as Quake or Unreal feature very fast and fluid movement, allowing players a high degree of flexibility and accommodating fast response times.

Counter-Strike has three modes of movement: run, walk, or crouch. The fastest mode of movement - running - is the default, and a key must be pressed to slow down. Crouching while moving has the advantage of making your footsteps silent, making it possible to sneak up on enemies. Though Red Orchestra also defaults to running, this isn't the fastest movement mode in the game. Red Orchestra has a grand total of 5 movement modes, in order from fastest to slowest: sprint, run, walk, crouch, and prone. The fact that Red Orchestra does not default to the fastest movement mode seems to encourage slightly more cautious gameplay than Counter-Strike, where fast movement is often of the essence.

Both games have a way to limit your movement somewhat, especially to prevent the infamous "bunny-hopping" manoeuvre whereby players in a multiplayer game can repeatedly jump around their enemy to make themselves harder to hit. Counter-Strike's method is simply yet effectively to slow the player down for a moment when the player lands after a jump. At the same time, the player's accuracy is reduced slightly while in the air by way of increasing the probabilistic projectile spread of the player's weapon, indicated by the slight expansion of the crosshairs.

Red Orchestra's method is a little less subtle, but perhaps somewhat less arbitrary: players in Red Orchestra have a stamina indicator which is filled by physically stressful activity such as jumping or sprinting, while moving slower or standing still will cause it to gradually empty. When the stamina indicator is full, the player will be unable to jump or sprint for some time. Both of these features - Red Orchestra's stamina bar and Counter-Strike's momentary accuracy and speed penalties - serve to discourage grossly unauthentic player movement.

Stance plays an important role in Red Orchestra, mainly because several are included, but also because most of the game's maps feature large expanses of terrain with little cover between objectives, and staying low can be the only way to avoid enemy fire. Much attention has been spent on the details to ensure that the different stances accurately recreate the most important affordances and restrictions that players would expect in real life, and to make sure each stance has its usefulness. For example, when moving while prone - the stance which affords players the smallest chance of being seen (and/or shot) - the player character folds his arms in front of him, making it impossible for players to fire their weapons while crawling. A particularly clever detail is that player characters' heads are raised slightly when crouched and moving compared to when they're crouched and stationary, which lets the players look over obstacles and quickly duck behind it for cover by simply ceasing to move if they come under fire. Aiming down the barrel will similarly raise the player characters' heads a little, allowing the player to shoot from behind cover.

Finally, Red Orchestra has one major functionality in terms of movement which Counter-Strike lacks: leaning. By pressing a button, players can lean their character to the left or right to look around a corner or past a tall obstacle without exposing themselves completely. All these extra options for how to control your character in Red Orchestra support a considerably more slow and cautious play style than Counter-Strike tends to foster.

Weapons

It's clear that a lot of attention has been put into making the weapons in both games look and behave as players would expect. This is most immediately obvious in the fact that they all represent real weapons such as the AK-47 or the MP5 in Counter-Strike or the MP40 or the Mosin-Nagant in Red Orchestra. More importantly, however, the weapons serve the same general purposes in the game that you'd expect them to do in real life (whether based on first-hand experience, war movies, or Wikipedia). In Counter-Strike, shotguns are useful up close but rubbish at a distance, and vice versa with sniper rifles. In Red Orchestra, bolt-action rifles fire far too slowly to be effective in close quarters, for which a sub-machine gun is preferable, but you'll appreciate its range and accuracy if you're fighting across a field.

The really interesting thing is the difference in how each game achieves this authenticity. Because Red Orchestra is so uncompromisingly detailed, it manages to create a lot of its most authentic dynamics by virtue of its simulation, where Counter-Strike must use slightly more artificial means to invoke the same dynamics. Weapon accuracy is a good example of this difference: when a bullet exits a rifle barrel, it will generally do so at a 0 degree angle, unless something is wrong with the bullet or the barrel. Any inaccuracy will be due to poorly adjusted sights, loss of projectile velocity at range, the effects of recoil on rapid fire, or simply bad marksmanship. Whereas Counter-Strike chooses to represent all these factors by the expansion or contraction of the crosshairs, Red Orchestra attempts to simulate most of them. Recoil in Red Orchestra will genuinely shake your aim, bullets will actually begin to drop when fired over great distances, and where the crosshair in Counter-Strike makes it far easier to aim than in real life, Red Orchestra not only provides you with no crosshair if you're not aiming down the sights, your weapon is also slightly detached from your viewpoint, such that you won't always be aiming at the centre of your display. Even when you use the iron sights, your aim shakes slightly to simulate your breathing.

Another ruthlessly authentic detail in Red Orchestra is that the game keeps track of the player's individual clips of ammunition. Where most FPS games (and indeed Counter-Strike) simply divides your ammunition into two bullet "pools" - the bullets in your weapon and the bullets you're carrying with you - which means you'll always get a full clip when you reload your gun, Red Orchestra keeps track of how full your clips are, introducing the risk of working through all of them and eventually reloading only to find yourself with *less* bullets loaded than before.

Finally, I should mention that both games feature several pieces of tactical equipment that help players recreate authentic military tactics. Both games have smoke grenades, which can be especially invaluable in crossing some of those large exposed expanses of land that Red Orchestra usually features. Counter-Strike also gives players access to flash bang grenades, a piece of equipment which is central to modern assault tactics.

Health

The importance of health and death mechanics to shape the pace and feel of a game and to create a sense of participating in an authentic combat situation can probably not be underestimated. Broadly speaking, having more health points tends to make the game seem less realistic (if nothing else then because it encourages reckless behaviour that common sense dictates would get you immediately killed in real combat). Further, locational damage is widely regarded as a base necessity for authentic combat: getting shot in the head *should* have a greater probability of being fatal than being hit in the leg.

Both Counter-Strike and Red Orchestra give their players very little health compared to tournament games such as Unreal or Quake. Rather than dancing circles around your opponents, chipping away at their health, a single hit will often be enough to kill an enemy in Red Orchestra or Counter-Strike. Needless to say, this makes proper use of cover, tactical equipment, and teamwork much more important. As previously mentioned, Counter-Strike does allow players to buy more health in the form of armour, but in Red Orchestra, the only way to survive is not getting shot.

Both games also feature locational damage, though there's a great difference in the fidelity of each game's health systems. Counter-Strike doesn't keep track of the health of individual body parts, but simply calculates damage taken in certain locations differently - a headshot deals substantially more damage than a shot in the chest, and armour that protects the head is more expensive than an armour upgrade that only covers your torso. By contrast, Red Orchestra shows players specifically where they've been shot, and hits to different areas of the player character's body have additional effects such as making players drop their weapons if they're shot in the arm.

Death

The re-spawn mechanics are one of the major differences between the gameplay of Counter-Strike and Red Orchestra. The death mechanics of each game are tied closely into their overall structure: Counter-Strike matches consist of a number of (usually fairly short) rounds, at the beginning of each of which most of the game state is reset - only the money and score of individual players as well as the equipment of players who survived the previous round is carried over. Since players only re-spawn at the beginning of a round, it's not only possible but in my experience quite likely that one team will win the game by simply killing all enemy players.

By contrast, Red Orchestra uses a wave re-spawn system, whereby players are briefly queued for re-spawn such that they'll usually re-spawn in small groups near the frontlines, ready to return to action. It's possible for either side to run out of reinforcements if they die too much, allowing one side to win by killing enough enemy soldiers, but there will never be a situation where a single soldier is left on one side to fight a large group of enemies, which ensures that Red Orchestra always feels like a very large fight. This dynamic also means there's usually a lot less waiting to be done in a Red Orchestra match than in a Counter-Strike match, where a spectator mode is all that keeps you in the game while you wait for the round to end so you may re-spawn.

Conclusion

It's immediately obvious that Counter-Strike is a faster and in many ways simpler game than Red Orchestra. The difference is great enough that if you only look at these two games, you might even forget that Counter-Strike is meant to be realistic at all. I believe Counter-Strike was designed with enormous concessions to fun and accessibility, whereas Red Orchestra's design is far more uncompromisingly authentic. However, my analysis of both games has confirmed my early impression that the fundamental difference between Counter-Strike and Red Orchestra is the detail level. The feature set of Red Orchestra is considerably larger than Counter-Strike, which a simple look at the key bindings of each game should be enough to reveal. This fact means that Red Orchestra's simulation naturally produces a highly authentic aesthetic that the designers of Counter-Strike have had to "brute-force" into the system by introducing somewhat arbitrary features. Of course it seems likely that the authenticity Counter-Strike strives for is less to do with the real world and more to do with the worlds of action films and spy novels.