

CONTEXTUALIZATION CUES AND TEAMWORK IN ONLINE VIDEO GAME  
GAMEPLAY DISCOURSE

By

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To my loving wife Katherine

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This study provides an interactional sociolinguistic account of how gamers playing team-based first-person shooter (FPS) video games successfully manage participation and cooperation across shared virtual environments. Recorded utterances of gamers during online gameplay are subjected to discourse analysis in order to answer two questions: 1) what features clearly mark utterances in video games as cooperative gameplay-relevant communication; and 2) how do gamers take advantage of these features as tools for managing participation and cooperation? The recorded interlocutors are players of two popular FPS titles on a home video gaming console: Halo<sup>®</sup>: Reach and Battlefield 3<sup>™</sup>.

In order to answer the first question, recordings are searched for the presence of callouts, a term used by online gaming communities to refer to distinct utterances that communicate information and commands relevant to the ongoing video game match. Callouts are compared with other utterances to uncover potential contextualization cues and other properties of their use. This study shows that common cues include repetition, rapid speech, relatively flat intonation, and the use of abbreviated and specialized lexical items. The second question is pursued through discourse analysis of selected recordings, drawing on my own expertise as an active member of communities of practice associated with FPS video games.

The linguistic and social interactions between players during gameplay are a regular part of the lives of an ever-growing population, but these particular interactions are rarely the focus of sociolinguistic inquiry. This study contributes to filling the gap in sociolinguistics' understanding of these increasingly relevant yet understudied interactions.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The use of multiplayer video games for entertainment and socialization is becoming increasingly prevalent as more people have access to high-speed internet and video game consoles. Social interactions in gaming, however, are currently underrepresented in linguistic literature. This study attempts to apply the interactional sociolinguistics paradigm to a relatively novel but growing interactional context: the communication of gamers in a shared virtual environment and disparate physical environments during goal-oriented gameplay, without a face-to-face component of interaction. This research paradigm is primarily realized through an investigation of how contextualization cues (Gumperz 1982) are utilized as a multi-purpose resource by interlocutors during online gameplay of popular first-person shooter (FPS) video games.

### **Video Games as a Common Setting for Interaction**

Video games are increasingly relevant to the average person. According to the most recent results of a survey released by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), 49% of households in America have at least one console for gaming; those households that fall in this group actually contain two consoles on average; 62% of gamers play with others; the average gamer age is 30 years old; and the average adult gamer has been playing video games for about 14 years (2012). The ESA also reports industry sales data from the NPD Group (formerly National Purchase Diary) indicating that the gaming industry was responsible for about \$24.75 billion in revenue for the year 2011. Due to rapid increases in technology, gaming is swiftly becoming one of the dominant forms of entertainment in American life; whereas gaming once required both a television and a dedicated game console—along with games purchased on

physical media—a new generation of smartphones, tablets, and other devices has brought ever more flexibility to increasingly complex games.

Video games and gamers, perhaps unsurprisingly, are increasingly the focus of research and discussion in many branches of science. McGonigal 2011 reports the application of video games and their design to real-world problems, where researchers in the applied sciences use video games as a method of “crowdsourcing;” with the participation of gamers, these video games can run simulations and test models faster and more effectively than high-powered supercomputers. Gee argues that socialization into the discourse of video games, and participation in their communities of practice, requires and develops skills that are desirable in the job market (2003). A dissertation by Soares Palmer has even investigated participation in gameplay discourse as a supplement to foreign-language learning (2010). So it is no surprise that online gameplay and interactions are beginning to attract the attention of linguistic researchers.

As discussed in Gee 2003, the process of learning to communicate and cooperate properly in the discourse of a video game requires skills that translate into the educational and business worlds. Unfortunately the state of research on social interaction in video games is such that Gee’s claims have not seen widespread systematic investigation, and as a result there is not much definitive empirical data to corroborate them. However, IBM commissioned a research team to conduct a study investigating the types of leaders and attributes that will emerge in the business world as the landscape shifts toward increasingly virtual and distributed businesses. Reeves & Malone 2007 is a report to IBM which found that online video gamers are uniquely suited to leadership and collaboration in fiercely competitive virtual environments—in other words, in the business world of the very near future.

While this comparison between business and video game environments may seem overly simplistic, Reeves & Malone 2007 evaluated online gamers according to the Sloan Leadership Model developed at MIT and found that these gamers displayed all aspects of leadership expertise delineated by the model but with a different distribution of emphases. Their conclusion supports claims in Gee 2003, stating that video games are a key provider of opportunities to practice the kinds of leadership skills that are becoming more vital in the real world. Rather than working or studying, however, gamers are engaging in this process for entertainment. When gamers interact and collaborate in FPS games, their involvement may be developing skills that confer real-world benefits. It is only natural, then, that sociolinguistics should endeavor to illuminate this understudied community with investigation of the processes that underlie the collaborative efforts of the participants.

### **The Aims of This Study**

The goal of this study is to analyze communication during online matches of competitive FPS games. Of particular interest are those utterances between teammates that are geared toward cooperation and signaling threats to the immediate goals and interests of the team and individuals on the team; these types of utterances are typically termed *callouts* by competitive and team-oriented players, and their proper use is seen as an essential skill of a competent player. Given that callouts tend to be associated with combative encounters with the opposing team, a requirement of these utterances is that they convey appropriate information—such as the number and location of enemies and which weapons they may be carrying—in a very short amount of time. But are utterances related to gameplay produced in the same manner across different FPS titles? If so, this may be a basis for confusion, as some of the most popular FPS games currently on the market offer vastly different gameplay experiences and require players to work toward goals in completely different manners. How do gamers know when they are being given a

callout, and when they are just hearing a teammate complain about the manner of his death? How do callouts help gamers effectively manage participation and activity in a shared virtual environment?

Callouts are of central importance to this study, so I will briefly delineate their form and function here. There is no truly universal, formal definition of a callout, but as they are understood in various FPS communities, callouts communicate information relevant to the team's goals in a particular match. This working definition can be further limited by stating that callouts are used during immediate and ongoing *gameplay events*, such as defending an objective or encountering an enemy player. Collaborative gameplay discourse certainly takes place when there are no immediate enemy encounters, such as drawing up a strategy for holding a defensible position or assaulting the enemy's base, but this kind of talk is not necessarily seen as "giving callouts." For the most part, given the general gameplay goals of FPS video games, callouts frequently communicate information about enemy movements, actions, and locations; callouts are not necessarily limited to these categories, however, and one might reasonably expect some callouts to take the form of reports on a player's ability to come out victorious in a given encounter or an objective's status.

One recognized hallmark of callouts in the gaming community is that they generally use specialized or shortened terms to refer to landmarks in the virtual space, so that team members can swiftly and accurately orient the location of the "called-out" threat in relation to themselves. The exact terms used are not universal across all players of the same game; some organized highly-competitive groups of gamers (typically called *clans*) may develop and adopt a set of terms unique to their group. This lack of uniformity does not prevent randomly-matched players from communicating successfully among themselves, sometimes using a variety of terms for the

same referent in virtual space; this may be a product of the socialization into the norms of the community of practice around a given video game, though investigation of this process is not within the scope of this study.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that on teams where communication (and giving callouts) is expected, a form of *uptake* of a callout is also expected. If a player is warned about an enemy trying to flank a nearby position, it is expected that the player will attempt to neutralize the threat, and may also give a verbal acknowledgement of the callout. This uptake requires teammates to perceive the nature of the *illocutionary force* projected by callouts—that is, a call to action that is not necessarily expressed in the callout’s linguistic content—and the actions they take in response to the callout can be described as the callout’s *perlocutionary effect* (Searle 1975). The term *uptake* is used here to refer to a callout’s perlocutionary effect. Uptake of a given callout is usually apparent in the audiovisual data recorded for this study, and monitoring player uptake and responses can provide support for whether a given utterance was intended (or at least interpreted) as a callout. I describe the actions of avatars in the virtual environment when relevant to my analysis.

The concepts of *frames* and *contextualization cues*, from Goffman 1981 and Gumperz 1982 respectively, offer a potentially fruitful method of analysis in investigating this form of communication. This study examines utterances to determine possible contextualization cues that may signal a “callout frame.” This study draws heavily from concepts in interactional sociolinguistics and applies those concepts in keeping with the examples of past research that has shown success in analyzing gameplay interactions under this descriptive framework (e.g. Aarsand & Aronsson 2009, Keating & Sunakawa 2010, Piirainen-Marsh 2010, Piirainen-Marsh & Tainio 2009). In the process of analyzing video game interactions, this study sheds light on the

nature of contextualization cues in a multiplayer online gameplay environment, and how players use these cues as interactional resources for teamwork. An analysis of communication during the online play of two different FPS games will attempt to answer two research questions: 1) how do gamers contextualize their utterances to clearly mark callouts; and 2) how do gamers manage the participation and non-participation of themselves and others in ongoing gameplay events? To answer these questions, this study undertakes a discourse analysis of audiovisual recordings of first-person shooter gameplay, relying heavily on the interactional sociolinguistics framework of analysis.

## CHAPTER 2 BACKGROUND

Within the tradition of sociolinguistics, there is a rich and diverse body of work that examines interactions between many different types of interlocutors in different contexts. Even computer-mediated discourse is seeing a great deal of attention. However, a review of the available literature quickly shows that oral communication between online gamers is almost completely and entirely unstudied in the most prominent linguistic academic journals, with only a few scattered, online-only journals that regularly treat the subject of video games and communication, e.g., *Game Studies*, *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* (see O'Connell, Grantham, Wong, Workman, & Wang 2010, Wright, Boria, & Breidenbach 2002). Publications from both lesser-known and well-known print journals do focus on communication in the context of gameplay, but typically with the focus on interactions between interlocutors sharing a physical environment (e.g. Aarsand & Aronsson 2009, Keating & Sunakawa 2010, Piirainen-Marsh 2010, Piirainen-Marsh & Tainio 2009).

Lacking a descriptive framework that is explicitly optimized for studying this type of online collaborative communication in a virtual environment without the potential for face-to-face interaction, this study draws on Goffman's concepts of *frames* and *participation frameworks* (1981), and especially the concept of contextualization cues (Gumperz 1982). I have chosen this interactional sociolinguistic framework for its potential for fruitful application to the type of data I have collected, building on the examples set by the work of Aarsand & Aronsson 2009 and Keating & Sunakawa 2010. The rest of this chapter will briefly discuss these basic concepts and highlight their application in related studies on interaction and video games. The chapter will then close with a brief overview of FPS games and their mechanics, to familiarize the reader with concepts that gamers take for granted when communicating.

## **Interactional Sociolinguistics**

The interactions that occur between gamers while playing video games are a rich resource for a research focus on interaction and contextualization. Interactional sociolinguistics is a framework espousing such a focus, stemming from important contributions from Goffman 1981 and Gumperz 1982 among others.

Goffman 1981 discusses frames by describing how people develop interpretive schema through repeated and shared interactions and contexts and how they use these schema as frameworks for interpreting messages. The intended frame of an utterance is a vital component of that utterance's message, as people rely on frames to correctly interpret the intended meaning and force of the utterance. Goffman also introduces the concept of a participation framework, which can be used to describe the shifting positions taken by participants in social interaction. These relationships between messages and their context are not expressed overtly in explicit statements, however. The linguistic information people transmit and receive during interaction is underspecified, but they must have a way of expressing or understanding intended frames and meanings.

Good players generally have a finely-honed sense of situational awareness, gleaned from the information-rich virtual environment of FPS games. Integrating their knowledge of gameplay with awareness of the flow of the match and the capabilities of their teammates can be essential. Part of this situational awareness must include the activities of their teammates, and so keeping track of changes in the participation framework becomes an important skill. This study shows that players use features of their speech to signal their participation (or non-participation) in ongoing gameplay events.

Writing about how people make sense of utterances when it can seem that the linguistic signal itself contributes so little information, Goffman states:

A presumed common interest in effectively pursuing the activity at hand, in accordance with some sort of overall plan for doing so, is the contextual matrix which renders many utterances, especially brief ones, meaningful. (1981:143)

Talk situated in an activity certainly relies on context for proper interpretation of meaning and intent. A string of utterances between teammates playing a video game, taken completely out of context and presented to a person unfamiliar with gaming, will lose much if not all of their intended meaning. Video game discourse is far from unique in this regard; context plays a critical role in evaluating meaning during much communication. A central component of interactional sociolinguistics is analysis that takes into account the contexts, activities, and communities within which discourse is situated. Not all talk situated in a given activity need necessarily relate to that activity directly, however, and there is still much about the meaningful context of an utterance that interlocutors appear to grasp without the aid of environmental or linguistic information. Gumperz 1982 introduced the concept of contextualization cues, which are linguistic and extralinguistic features such as lexical choice and prosody, to describe the apparent mechanism by which interactants correctly infer the frame of an utterance.

According to Gumperz 1982, contextualization cues signal a set of contextual knowledge or activity type by which an utterance can be interpreted. In this way, Gumperz' concept of contextualization cues is closely linked to that of frames (Goffman 1981). The critical aspect of this paradigm is that the appropriate contextual presuppositions are signaled by surface features of the message, and not directly by the semantic meaning of the message or indirectly through the activity or setting the message is situated in. The correct interpretive frame must be constructed between interlocutors; one must be able to supply the correct contextualization cues, while the other must have sufficient knowledge to know which interpretive frame is being signaled by the cues. Gumperz illustrated the importance and function of contextualization cues with examples of miscommunication that arise from misunderstandings of contextualization

conventions, often because interlocutors from different communities of practice may use contextualization cues that signal different interpretive frames. Gumperz takes care to note that these miscommunications do not register with the interlocutors as linguistic issues but rather as improper social or attitudinal behaviors. In a sense, the interlocutors are correct: a fluent knowledge of the appropriate contextualization conventions for a community requires proper socialization into that community.

Gumperz' use of miscommunication to illustrate and explain relevant contextualization cues is not the only method for uncovering and accounting for these cues. The data I capture do not contain any events featuring miscommunication between participants, so the contextualization cues accompanying a given utterance need to be evaluated by the utterance's effect on other participants. Callouts, the primary type of utterance under analysis in this study, are intentionally produced with an intended effect in mind: when one player alerts his teammates to an enemy threat, that player is likely doing to in order to 1) cause teammates to become aware of the threat and 2) recruit the assistance of teammates in dealing with the threat. The interaction between the utterance's form, context, and meaning is an important focus of the interactive sociolinguistics framework discussed above; the interaction between the utterance's form, context, and effect, however, is central to speech act theory (Austin 1965; Searle 1975). Comparison between utterances with similar linguistic or semantic content but different effects is one strategy employed in this study.

### **Research in Online Gaming Discourse**

Wright et al. 2002 provide an early discourse analysis of messages produced in networked multiplayer matches of a FPS game, Counter-Strike<sup>®</sup>. Wright et al. 2002 proposes a rough taxonomy of game talk seen online matches of the game; the discussion of in-game interaction does not include talk based around cooperation or teamwork, but it demonstrates that

mastery of the linguistic features particular to Counter-Strike<sup>®</sup> discourse served as a distinguishing characteristic that set the inexperienced players apart from the veterans. Certain conventions of communication in a particular game, then, can serve as an index of socialization into that game's community of practice (see Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1996).

O'Connell et al. 2010 is one of the few studies that focus wholly on discourse with participants who are not physically co-present, but instead interact through the medium of a virtual environment. In that study, all analyzed discourse is in the form of text-based chatting. Chat messages, rather than vocal speech, also form the text of analysis in other studies involving video games (e.g. Soares Palmer 2010, Steinkuehler 2006, Wright et al. 2002). The authors analyzed messages produced during an interactive, cooperative, competitive, multiplayer puzzle game developed specifically for the study. They found that messages produced during gameplay sessions tended to differ from social usages, and were generally serious, short, and not particularly well-formed. These messages were intended to fulfill a cooperative function, and the authors report that such communication was associated with success in their results. In this sense the messages produced in O'Connell et al. 2010 bear some similarity to the callouts produced during online FPS gameplay in this study. O'Connell et al. 2010 utilized text-based rather than vocal data, however, so one should be careful when drawing parallels between the two. Nevertheless, these features do correspond roughly with features of callouts discussed in this paper.

The interactional sociolinguistics (IS) framework has been helpful in understanding many instances of social interaction, and has also been applied to interactions involving video games. Aarsand & Aronsson 2009 applies another concept from Goffman 1981, *response cries*, in the analysis of how joint attention and cooperation are secured by participants playing video games.

In their data, response cries offer one method of managing participation frameworks, by signaling participation through attention to the video game being played. Their analysis also extends to the level of participation of other people who were co-present during the play of video games. Those who were playing video games had several methods of signaling inclusion in or exclusion from the activity frame. Other co-present interactants could in turn monitor their attention and participation in accordance their desired degree of (non)involvement. How gamers signal their participation in and attention to ongoing gameplay events without the interactional benefits of a shared physical environment will be a crucial aspect of my analysis; this is a logical extension of the investigation of Aarsand & Aronsson 2009.

In their investigation of collaboration in gameplay, Keating & Sunakawa 2010 introduce the term *participation cues*, which take their name from the application of contextualization cues to participation frameworks. Participation cues in their study were an integral part of the discourse that took place during networked gameplay sessions of a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game, or MMORPG. Analyzing these participation cues enables them to track the changing landscape of the participation framework of a group of people engaged in a cooperative gaming session. Since these gamers are simultaneously sharing the same physical and virtual environments, the management of participation across, within, and between environments is a complex task. The authors found that rapid speech and repetition were two common participation cues used to engage the attention of teammates when a player was in danger. While I do not fully adopt the authors' terminology, my study extends and support their work along with the work of Aarsand & Aronsson 2009 by examining contextualization cues as a resource for gamers to manage collaboration and achieve shared goals.

## First-Person Shooter Video Games

In this section, I provide some background information for the particular games used in the analysis and some differences in their styles of play. This information is relevant to my analysis, and I provide it with the understanding that all readers may not be familiar with the knowledge and conventions associated with gaming. This information forms a large part of the contexts and assumptions that players operate under while playing these games. As a life-long member of communities of practice associated with video games, and as a gamer who has played the games under analysis since their release, I am qualified to write as an expert on the characteristics of these games and the communities of practice that surround them. However, a full ethnographic account of the characteristics and practices associated with these games would be overly cumbersome and altogether unnecessary for the scope of this study.

The data under analysis have been captured from the gameplay of two different games, both within the same genre: Halo<sup>®</sup>: Reach (hereafter shortened to Halo<sup>®</sup>) and Battlefield 3<sup>™</sup>. Both of these titles are prominent and highly popular members of the first-person shooter genre—Battlefield 3<sup>™</sup> was the fifth-best-selling video game of 2011 according to the ESA (2012)—and, as a result, they share many basic similarities. They also have key differences, however, which affect the style and content of the callouts in each game.

First-person shooters, commonly abbreviated to FPS in both written and spoken English, are games widely understood to appeal to the “core” gaming audience. This genre is so named because the player assumes the point of view of the avatar that he or she controls and because these games contain gameplay centered on targeting and shooting enemies with an array of firearms. Although this genre could be further subdivided and dissected *ad nauseum*, it is enough to know that modern FPS games feature relatively realistic graphics and physics, online gameplay, and intensely competitive (and predominately team-based) gameplay. FPS video

games can vary greatly in some respects within their genre, and the two most important differences for this study are briefly covered below.

An important feature of FPS games that must be mentioned briefly is the health system. Simply put, in any shooter there is a certain amount of damage a player can take before dying. The amount of damage one can absorb varies across games, and the amount of damage one deals also varies across both games and the weapons used within a game. A typical feature of modern shooter games is a health system where health regenerates over time if the player first takes nonfatal damage and then experiences an uninterrupted period of time where no damage at all is taken. The health system of a given FPS title (in coordination with the characteristics of the weapons used) typically dictates the length and pacing of in-game combat encounters between players.

Halo<sup>®</sup> and Battlefield 3<sup>™</sup> differ in their health systems. Halo<sup>®</sup>, a futuristic science fiction shooter, combines a health system with a regenerating shield system; no damage can be taken by the player until the shield has absorbed so much damage that it collapses. Once the shields are gone, a player may survive multiple shots to the avatar's body depending on the type of weapon used and placement of the shots. Shields can regenerate quickly, and a special ability available in some matches allows a player to temporarily become completely invulnerable (and immobile). Battlefield 3<sup>™</sup>, on the other hand, is a shooter in a setting that closely emulates the sights and sounds of modern warfare. Weapons used in Battlefield 3<sup>™</sup> are directly modeled after current firearms used by real militaries across the globe. Players do not benefit from any regenerating shields, but there is a health system in Battlefield 3<sup>™</sup>. Players can take up to 100 points of damage before death, and a gravely-injured player who escapes combat intact will find his health automatically (but slowly) regenerating after a short delay. Damage in Battlefield 3<sup>™</sup> is

governed by a rather complex set of factors, and a full analysis of the damage models in these games is certainly beyond the scope of this study.

It is enough to state that combat encounters in Halo<sup>®</sup> typically last several seconds longer than those in Battlefield 3<sup>™</sup>, where death at close range can occur seemingly instantaneously. This statement about the pacing of combat in these two titles is not borne directly out of my opinion. Among online communities that discuss various FPS titles, it is a well-known property of these games that is usually taken for granted. Any debate typically centers around which style of gameplay is preferable, not whether Halo<sup>®</sup> is slower than Battlefield 3<sup>™</sup>.

Another important difference between these games is their respective *maps*. The term *map* in FPS games refers to a pre-constructed (not random) virtual space within which a match can take place. Games typically offer many different maps of varying sizes, types of terrain, and themes. One salient characteristic of maps in Battlefield 3<sup>™</sup> is that the maps tend to be very large, and they are much, much larger on average than those in Halo<sup>®</sup>. I argue that these often extreme size differences lead to differences in the strategic utilization of contextualization cues in callouts across these two games.

Callouts are of central importance to this study, so I will briefly delineate their form and function here. There is no truly universal, formal definition of a callout, but as they are understood in various FPS communities, callouts communicate information relevant to the team's goals during the course of a match. Observation and experience suggests that this working definition can be further limited by stating that callouts are used during immediate and ongoing gameplay *events*. Collaborative gameplay discourse certainly takes place when there are no immediate enemy encounters, such as drawing up a strategy for holding a defensible position or assaulting the enemy's base, but this kind of talk is not necessarily seen as "giving callouts."

For the most part, given the general gameplay goals of FPS video games, callouts frequently communicate information about enemy movements, actions, and locations; callouts are not necessarily limited to these categories, however, and one might reasonably expect some callouts to take the form of reports on a player's status or ability to come out victorious in a given encounter.

One recognized hallmark of callouts in the gaming community is that they generally use specialized or shortened terms to refer to landmarks in the virtual space, so that team members can properly orient the location of the "called-out" threat in relation to themselves. The exact terms used are not universal across all players of the same game, however. Some organized highly-competitive groups of gamers (sometimes called *clans*) may develop and adopt a set of terms unique to their group. This lack of uniformity does not prevent randomly-matched players from communicating successfully among themselves, sometimes using a variety of terms for the same referent in virtual space; this may be a product of the socialization into the norms of the community of practice around a given video game, though investigation of this process is not a focus of this study.

## CHAPTER 3 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

### **Participants**

Fifteen total participants appear in the transcripts reported in this study. Participants ranged from random and unknown gamers to gamers I play with both regularly and infrequently. For unknown gamers, there is no systematic and reliable method in the software or hardware of the game for screening my potential teammates by native language, region of origin or current residence, gender, or age. Given the nature of the types of matches played online, where there are only seconds from team assignment to the start of the match, this study did not attempt to collect any sociolinguistic data about its participants. Even participants I play with regularly are not known by me personally, not even their given names. All that can be reasonably determined is that they are adult males, with language backgrounds including predominantly American English varieties, although Canadian English and Australian English speakers were also recorded. Unfortunately, personal experience suggests that there is an extremely low likelihood of encountering vocal female gamers in FPS games, and indeed only one female gamer was recorded during the course of this study.

The potential for variation and inclusion of participants from multiple speech communities and backgrounds is not problematic for this study, however. Those who are active members of the communities of practice under investigation are, by definition, socialized into the expected social and linguistic behaviors that characterize their community of practice, and therefore are reasonably expected to share contextualization cues relevant to callouts regardless of cultural or linguistic background (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992). Any participants who are newcomers or are otherwise not at all socialized into the expected behaviors only increase the

potential for recording instances of miscommunication, which Gumperz found useful in his examination of contextualization cues (1982).

### **Data and Methods**

Two different FPS video game titles, Halo<sup>®</sup>: Reach and Battlefield 3<sup>™</sup>, were played on a single video game platform, the Xbox 360<sup>®</sup>. Two different video games with very different styles of play were used in order to show that the features reported here are relevant for the larger community of practice associated with FPS video games, and not just characteristic of fans of one particular franchise. Both audio and video of participants' utterances and gameplay were recorded, through separate but simultaneous processes to limit the impact of sound effects on the video game on the intelligibility of participant utterances. Video of the online gameplay and the game audio (excluding speech between gamers) were recorded onto a computer using a Dazzle Digital Video Creator<sup>®</sup> 100 DVD Recorder. Utterances from participants, excluding ambient game sound, were recorded into the computer program Audacity<sup>®</sup> through a separate input.

For excerpts where visual data were required for maximum clarity of analysis, the video and audio files were combined. In these cases, editing was only done to align the audio and video, and to reduce the volume of the game's background audio (gunfire, explosions, footsteps, etc.) in order to minimize its impact on the intelligibility of the speech of the participants. No editing was done to alter the audio data from the interlocutors, as these were recorded through a separate channel from the game audio. All speaker interactions are intact and unedited in the recordings, and no adjustments were made that would change the relative speed, volume, or quality of the utterances. To limit the impact of the observer's paradox on speech and behavior, and to prevent my utterances as the primary researcher from guiding and shaping the overall level and tone of communication in these video game matches, I turned off the microphone on

my headset under various pretenses (receiving a phone call, my wife had just gotten home, etc.) at the onset of each match—sometimes before and sometimes just after recording had begun.

Overall, recordings were made of about 24 online matches across both games, totaling just over four hours of recorded audiovisual material. Some matches were virtually overflowing with communication, while others contained long periods of silence. Still others contained interlocutors whose microphones distorted their speech significantly, frequently masking the contributions of other speakers. In a few isolated instances, the recording equipment had to be adjusted mid-recording so that interlocutors could be heard clearly. These setbacks only affected a small portion of the data, leaving plenty of analyzable data for the purposes of this study.

Not all recorded data are transcribed. A great deal of the recorded talk was not relevant to this study's aims. All recordings were screened carefully for contexts and features of most interest to this analysis, and only relatively clear and relevant interactions were chosen for transcription. This excluded interactions such as those containing a great deal of simultaneous speech, both for ease of transcription and for suitability of analysis. While issues such as speaker turn management during simultaneous speech are of interest in sociolinguistics and Conversation Analysis, such issues are not the focus of this study.

Transcriptions follow a modified version of the Jeffersonian system of notation, which is commonly employed in Conversation Analysis. For transcription conventions used in this study, see Appendix A. The transcribed data were subjected to qualitative analysis in keeping with studies in the interactional sociolinguistics paradigm, with particular attention paid to contexts and features relevant for the identification and analysis of contextualization cues. For some recorded data, the computer program Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2012) was used as a tool to

confirm analyst judgments about the use of pitch in and across utterances; pitch contours of such utterances are extracted from Praat and appear where appropriate in the analysis.

### **Privacy Concerns**

During data collection, participants did not know that they were being recorded. There is no reliable way of sending or receiving written or oral consent for recording either prior to or after online matches. Recording online gameplay and communication is a relatively common practice among gamers, however, and such videos are often posted online where they can be viewed and discussed. Prior to gathering data, I reviewed the legal policy governing the online gaming service Xbox LIVE<sup>®</sup>, which is the service used by any and all gamers who use an Xbox 360<sup>®</sup> to play games over an internet connection. The following paragraph, quoted from the Xbox LIVE<sup>®</sup> Terms of Use section 12 (updated October 2012), notifies subscribers that they should not consider any communication over the Xbox LIVE<sup>®</sup> service to be private; these terms must be agreed to before the service can be used:

You should not expect any level of privacy concerning your use of the live communication features (for example, voice chat, video and communications in live-hosted gameplay sessions) offered through the Xbox LIVE/Games for Windows Live Service. We may monitor these communications to the extent permitted by law. However, we cannot monitor the entire Service and make no attempt to do so. You understand that others can record and use these communications. Communications in live-hosted gameplay sessions may also be broadcast to others. Some games may use game managers and hosts. Game managers and hosts are not authorized Microsoft spokespersons. Their views do not necessarily reflect those of Microsoft. (Available at <http://www.xbox.com/en-US/legal/livetou>)

Gamers on Xbox LIVE<sup>®</sup> are recognizable only by their *gamertags*, self-selected pseudonyms composed of an alphanumeric string of up to 15 characters and which typically contain no personally identifiable information. Risk of compromising the anonymity of participants is extremely low, and the University of Florida Institutional Review Board exempted the collection of data for this study from needing an informed consent process on the basis of the

data being considered public behavior (IRB Protocol #2011-U-1155). As an extra precaution however, the gamertags of participants represented in the transcribed data have been abbreviated and altered to protect the participants' anonymity.

## CHAPTER 4 FEATURES OF CALLOUTS IN GAMEPLAY DISCOURSE

Recall that O’Connell et al. 2010 described cooperative discourse in an online video game as serious, short, ill-formed, and otherwise different from more social utterances. While these features describe text-based communication in that study, callouts can also be generally described in these terms in the audio data collected for this study. In this chapter, I present transcribed data from two FPS video games to give descriptive examples of various features associated with callouts. I argue that these features can act as contextualization cues to signal a “callout frame” of sorts; and although this chapter will try to focus on describing one potential contextualization cue per section, I do not necessarily argue that these features necessarily act as cues individually. In fact, Auer states that contextualization cues most effectively signal a frame when bundled together (1992).

Judgment of whether an utterance can be properly labeled as a callout largely stems from my own knowledge as an expert member of the relevant communities of practice, and further confirmation can be reached from any observed effect on the speech or behavior of teammates. Questionable cases are marked as such, or are not considered altogether.

### **Relevant Information**

Callouts must, of course, contain information relevant to the team’s goals and to the gameplay event that is the subject of the callout. Information that is typically relevant to an encounter with an enemy might include enemy player location, numbers, and equipment; the status of the enemy player(s) or the player issuing the callout (alive, dead, low health, etc.); and the apparent actions or intentions of enemy combatants. The brief excerpts in this section illustrate the types of information that can be provided in callouts.

Excerpt (1) was recorded in Battlefield 3™ and features only one speaker. The speaker gives callouts as he works to accomplish an important objective for his team (in this case, safely reaching the objective marked “A” and “planting” a bomb on it). The information provided in each callout is relevant to his progress in accomplishing this objective, and such information includes enemy number and location, enemy status, the status of the objective, and the speaker’s own actions and status relative to the objective.

#### EXCERPT (1)

1→ AC: Got one on A  
2→ He’s down  
3 Aw this scope is awesome.  
4 ((pause))  
5→ A’s looking clear, I’m gonna plant  
6 ((pause))  
7→ Planted

Line 3 is the only one of AC’s utterances which is clearly not a callout. AC’s opinion of his gun’s current optical sight may be of interest to another player, but it is not information that would be useful to his teammates in the context of this particular gameplay event. Useful information is contained in the clearest callouts, which are marked with an arrow →. The information he communicates in these lines might be vital to nearby teammates in the event that he fails his assault on the objective. He details the amount and location of enemy resistance at the objective A in Line 1, the subsequent removal of the enemy threat in line 2, and status of the objective A and his actions toward it in Lines 5 and 7.

The following example Excerpt (2), recording during a match of Halo®, is a little more complex. Three interlocutors give and respond to callouts, and these callouts report a variety of information. Enemy numbers, position, status, movement, and even weaponry are reported. The interlocutors also report their own status and level of threat, as well as the status of a hotly-contested weapon. It is important to note that all of the callouts are relevant to ongoing events as



threats. The information contained in these utterances is relevant either to other (possibly nearby) teammates, or to the overarching objectives of the team (as in Excerpt (1)).

### **Abbreviation and Special Terms**

The life of an avatar in the two video games recorded for this study can be “nasty, brutish, and short,” as Thomas Hobbes famously described the life of warring humankind in *Leviathan*. A player giving a callout while under attack is not necessarily just reporting information to keep the team up to date; the callout itself—especially when it relays a location—may also function as an indirect request for any nearby players to lend their assistance. Given how quickly a battle can be won or lost in FPS video games, an embattled player may not have much time to relay precise information. O’Connell et al. report brevity as a prominent characteristic of the cooperative gameplay-oriented discourse that occurred in their study, and the authors comment that short and effective communication likely arose from time constraints on the teams in the study, which required teams to complete a virtual puzzle in a certain amount of time (2010). This abbreviation in communication proved effective; the authors report that “The most successful team, Delta, were the most efficient communicators, e.g., with the most lexical deletions, [and] lexical truncations” (2010:31). Another source of abbreviation can be found in specialized terms used by players in callouts. As mentioned in Chapter 2, skilled players who are active members of a community of practice related to a game are expected to be familiar with the maps found in that game. Part of this familiarity involves knowing and using certain terms that, in the context of gameplay on a particular map, refer to a specific place or area within that map—a much faster and more efficient method of relaying information than a detailed description of the surrounding area’s physical features. This section contains transcripts that show such abbreviation and specialization in lexical and syntactic forms.

The following Excerpt (3) is brief, but gives a clear example of the kind of effective abbreviation used to communicate information in callouts. This was recorded during a match of Halo<sup>®</sup>, and the callout reports the arrival of two enemies at a specific location on the map. This callout is characterized not only by dropped syntactic elements, but also by a two-word term that is used to refer to this precise location.

EXCERPT (3)

1 PH: Shoot I don't have jetpack anymore.  
2 Ah crap  
3→ RM: Uh: one top yellow (.) two top yellow

RM's utterance in Line 3 is the only callout in this excerpt, and it contrasts tellingly with PH's (non-callout) utterances. As two enemy players attack and kill RM, he narrates their arrival and the relevant location. He does this in a highly abbreviated utterance, which gives a simple number and location as the enemies arrive sequentially. "Top yellow" as used here is a term that applies only to a specific room on this particular map—a room on one of the highest floors of the virtual space, connected to one of the lowest floors by a tube filled with glowing yellow-green energy; a player stepping into the open end of the tube at the bottom will be swiftly lifted to the top room. The bottom room, as one might guess at this point, may be called "bottom yellow." Both rooms are pinpointed precisely by their designations, characterized by its relative height in the virtual space and the yellowish glow that spills out from the ends of the one-way lift. Although it was not captured in my recordings, I have also heard the same two rooms referred to as "top lift" and "bottom lift." RM's callout does not receive verbal uptake, but in the video of the match, his teammates gather at the lower end of the lift (bottom yellow) immediately following his utterance. Their reluctance to rush to his aid likely stems from the fact that RM has already died at this point, and also because the narrow unidirectional lift empties into a rather small room and is a natural chokepoint for enemies to defend.

The utterance in Line 3 would likely fail a syntactician's grammaticality judgment of well-formed American English, especially when presented devoid of context. This contrasts with PH's utterance in Line 1, which is not a callout and does not appear to be directed at any particular player; he simply appears to be chastising himself for forgetting to equip the jetpack ability, which is favored by PH, on his avatar. PH's utterance in Line 1 appears relatively well-formed, without so much as a dropped pronoun to shorten his message.

Specialized terms for referencing locations seem a little less abundant in recordings of Battlefield 3™ than they do in recordings of Halo®. This may be because Battlefield 3™ maps are larger by a great magnitude, and meant to represent urban or natural environments realistically; as a result, there might be many nondescript buildings with similar layouts in a small area or scattered all over the map. Prominent, colorful, otherworldly features are commonplace in the science fiction futuristic virtual universe of Halo®; this, combined with the relatively smaller map sizes, contributes to a relative ease of labeling specific places in each map. In Battlefield 3™, concise labels that reference very specific places (such as “top yellow”) are much less common. Player attention tends to gravitate toward the objectives, which always appear in the same place on a given map and are marked by brightly-colored, floating letters; these letters are always visible to the player regardless of distance from the objective or intervening objects which might otherwise impede the player's vision.

Given the visual prominence of these objective letters and the importance of the locations that they mark, it is common in my recordings and my experience for players to use the letter marking an objective as a reference to that objective's general location. This usage is illustrated in Excerpt (4):

EXCERPT (4)

1 → LV: [Losing D.

2        ??:    [(        )  
3→     MD:    I don't know I'm here at Bravo but there's definitely a guy here, though.  
4                (1.0)  
5→                >Oh oh< D, D as in Delta, gotcha.  
6        QM:    Where where where  
7                (1.0)  
8                I see him.  
9                ((Gun firing))  
10→                He's gone (.) D is good

Note MD's preference for "military-style" pronunciations of the letters (Alpha, Bravo, Delta, Charlie, Echo, etc.). This is not altogether uncommon, especially during matches in which active objectives include B, C, D, and E—all letters that might sound identical due to channel distortions and background noise. In Line 3 MD actually misinterprets LV's callout (Line 1) as referring to B; after a moment he realizes his mistake, verbalized in Line 5. MD also lets his teammates know that he thinks an enemy player is in the same objective area (Bravo), but he gives no indication that he has yet encountered the enemy. In this instance, "Bravo" is used to refer to a general area surrounding the actual objective, a flagpole.

The excerpts in this section provide a small sample of the ways that utterances can be abbreviated and marked with special terms during callouts. Novel lexical items, or novel uses of existing items, are not limited to video game communities of practice. Indeed, one would expect a given community of practice to appropriate or innovate words according to its needs. What is unique about this particular case is that the use of specialized terms, especially those that index a particular location on a map, is consciously associated with "doing callouts" in the FPS-playing community. When these specialized terms are used because the speaker wants his or her utterance to be taken as a callout, then they are being used as contextualization cues.

### **Repetition and Rapid Speech**

Repetition and rapid speech can potentially act as contextualization cues, signaling an utterance as a callout. Keating & Sunakawa describe rapid speech (usually accompanied by

repetition) as characteristic of “gaming talk which cues team participation around avatars encountering threats in space” (2010:339). While Keating & Sunakawa view these as participation cues in their terminology, their study—also of cooperative communication during the play of video games—finds these cues during ongoing threatening encounters. My data agree with theirs about the co-occurrence of threatening events and utterances with repetition and rapid speech. While I do not adopt their terminology of *participation cues*, my analysis does not differ significantly from theirs (discussed further in Chapter 5).

Excerpt (5) illustrates this theme of rapid speech and repetition in conjunction with immediate threats. In this example from Battlefield 3™, the interlocutors are defending a lone objective from waves of enemies. One interlocutor is killed; frustrated, he calls out his killers’ location and actions, and his teammate responds to his callout swiftly. Notice that when repetition and relatively rapid speech occur in this example, the players are in a threatening environment:

EXCERPT (5)

- 1→ GW: °(Spawn) on me >spawn on me<°
- 2 ((GW dies))
- 3 They’re sniping
- 4 AND shooting an LMG down that hall[way.
- 5→ AN: [>I got ‘em< (.) >I got ‘em<
- 6 GW: Nice.

GW quietly utters Line 1 just before being killed by the enemies he subsequently describes in Lines 3-4. The urgency communicated by his tone and repetition in Line 1 is completely absent in 3-4, but this urgency is certainly present in AN’s uptake. AN’s response is certainly a callout, and the repetition and rapid speech are cues that he is participating in an ongoing threatening event of some sort. This is confirmed by the video recording of the event, which shows that AN is still killing enemy players in the area even after his callout in line 5. This example supports

Keating & Sunakawa's description of pressured speech during threatening encounters in video games (2010).

### **Intonation**

This final section of Chapter 4 describes the use of intonation in callouts. The use of relatively “flat” intonation in callouts, while certainly noticeable to me during my analysis of the audio data, is not constant. This particular aspect of callouts also merits some acoustic analysis beyond my own impression. This was achieved by tracking and comparing pitch levels within and between utterances in the program Praat; data and visual representations of these pitch levels are provided in this section in addition to the transcripts of the utterances themselves.

Trying to compare intonation across players would likely be somewhat problematic, at the very least due to potential idiolectal variation between different players. I have observed in the data that callouts are at times delivered in a flat intonation, relative to that speaker's “normal,” more varied intonation in discourse; this relatively narrow-ranged prosody also seems more likely during the tense and dangerous situations described for repetition and rapid speech. For an example, first I return to Excerpt (3). Recall that in this excerpt, player RM quickly gives a simple callout narrating the sequential arrival of two enemy players. The pitch of his voice during the callout does not appear to vary greatly:

#### **EXCERPT (3)**

1 PH: Shoot I don't have jetpack anymore.  
2 Ah crap  
3→ RM: Uh: one top yellow (.) two top yellow

RM provides this callout just as he is confronted (and overwhelmed) by two enemies, but he does not make use of repetition or relatively rapid speech. He does, however, supply a callout characterized by markedly flat prosody; his utterance does not include a pronounced statement-final fall in pitch common to English. Analysis of the utterance in Praat indicates that the

minimum and maximum pitch levels over the course of Line 3 were 113.554 Hz and 145.844 Hz, respectively, meaning his pitch stayed within a range of 32.29 Hz across the utterance. For a visual representation of the pitch contour, see Figure 4-1. To get a better idea of whether this degree of pitch variation is common for this speaker, I turn to another utterance by the same speaker in a frame that does not indicate a callout.

During the same match as Excerpt (3), RM makes a comment about a quick enemy encounter that has just concluded. The utterance is most definitely not a callout, and the overall intonation is much more expressive than that of Line 3 in Excerpt (3). Both the context of the utterance and its lexical content indicate that he is griping about an apparent slight by the game itself in not appropriately recognizing his contributions to the preceding battle. The incident is transcribed in Excerpt (6) below:

EXCERPT (6)

1 ((PH is attacked by player from opposing team))  
2 PH: WOAHH  
3 (3.9) ((MI and RM fight and kill the attacker))  
4 MI: Got you=  
5→ RM: =Ah sure I get the assist outta that. Jee:pers.

RM's utterance in Line 5 is a mild complaint about being awarded an "assist" rather than a "kill" against the enemy player who attacks PH. My recording of the incident shows that RM and MI both shoot at the enemy player at about the same time, and both players likely contribute roughly equal amounts of damage. Whether by luck of the draw or complicated calculations hidden in the game's software engine, MI is awarded the kill—indicated by Line 4's "got you"—a state of affairs lamented by RM. Line 5 seems to be more expressive and does not display quite so narrow a range as that discussed for Excerpt (3) Line 3 above, and pitch analysis in Praat confirms this assessment. Across the 2.61 seconds of the utterance, RM's pitch varies between a maximum of 193.068 Hz and a minimum of 78.664 Hz. This range of 114.41 Hz shows

somewhat more variation in pitch across the utterance in Line 5 than that showed by Excerpt (3) Line 3's range of 32.29 Hz. See Figure 4-2 for the graphical representation of the pitch contour in Line 5.

There are ample examples detailing such narrow-ranged intonation in conjunction with callouts in the data, but I do not list them all here. Where my analysis characterizes an utterance as having flat intonation in Chapter 5, I show support for such claims from Praat's pitch-tracking capabilities.

### Summary

Excerpts in this chapter demonstrate some of the common features associated with callouts in FPS titles. In addition to the style of delivery—flat intonation, utterances marked by abbreviation and special terminology, relative urgency communicated by speech rate and repetition—callouts also tend to communicate only certain types of information, such as enemy position and status, player progress toward a goal, player status, and ongoing events relevant to the goals of the team and of individual players on the team. I argue in this study that these features act as contextualization cues, used to mark utterances for interpretation in a callout- or teamwork-based frame. In other words, a *complaint* about an enemy's hiding place and tactics will differ from a *callout* of an enemy's hiding place and tactics, both in how they are uttered and in the responses of teammates.

As a baseline for comparison with the callouts analyzed in this study, Excerpt (7) shows a collaborative exchange between teammates that is devoid of callouts and many of the features associated with callouts. The immediate and threatening nature of the gameplay context that typically results in a callout may have something to do with the nature of the features associated with callouts. When events or concerns are either long-term or past, the style of the utterances is

very different. The excerpt below shows utterances that lack the abbreviation, seriousness, and marked intonation seen in callouts.

EXCERPT (7)

1 MI: Hey I- (.) hey let's hold down this ramp dude,  
2 I have (.) crazy good success when we hold this down.  
3 Who's got a jetpack on?  
4 And a shotgun.  
5 PH: I've got a jetpack=  
6 RM: =Uh, >I got I got< [shotty.  
7 MI: [Go up here,  
8 Go up here to this little spot right here,  
9 And you can sit right on top that ledge  
10 And they won't even see you comin' in the door.  
11 (1.1) ((PH goes to the indicated position))  
12 RM: ((laughter))  
13 (1.2)  
14 PH: Done.  
15 (1.5)  
16 RM: [( )]  
17 MI: [That's what I call that shit the] Batman right there.

With the exception of Line 6, the above exchange lacks the features of collaborative discourse and callouts from the studies and examples discussed above. Although this is a collaborative event—a strategy is presented by MI, utilizing the tools possessed by PH and RM—MI's utterances are fully realized without the heavy ellipsis predicted by O'Connell et al. 2010. Pronouns are retained, and he even engages in a little joking in line 17. None of the utterances are interpreted as a callout, even though the exchange is given in the interest of obtaining collaboration to achieve the team's long-term goal of holding a defensible position. The key here appears to be the level of danger experienced by the team from their enemies; during the entirety of the exchange, the teammates are undisturbed and under no immediate threat. The lack of callouts here, and the abundance of callouts during combative situations, may suggest that the use of callouts is encounter-based or associated with immediate and ongoing threatening events.

The ostensible, community-acknowledged purpose of giving callouts is to foster informative, cooperative communication among teammates so that the team will be up to date on various events and able to respond to threats in a swift, coordinated, and efficient manner, thereby increasing the possibility of winning the match. Callouts, then, are viewed by gamers as tools that can help maximize a team's impact on the virtual battlefield. While gamers may conceive of callouts as tools, what they may not realize is that they are using contextualization cues themselves as linguistic tools, shaping the flow of participation and activity throughout a match. Callouts are licensed in the context of a threatening gameplay event; players may at times need to coordinate and signal their participation (or nonparticipation) in such events, and Chapter 5 will explore how players manipulate previously-discussed features to achieve this.

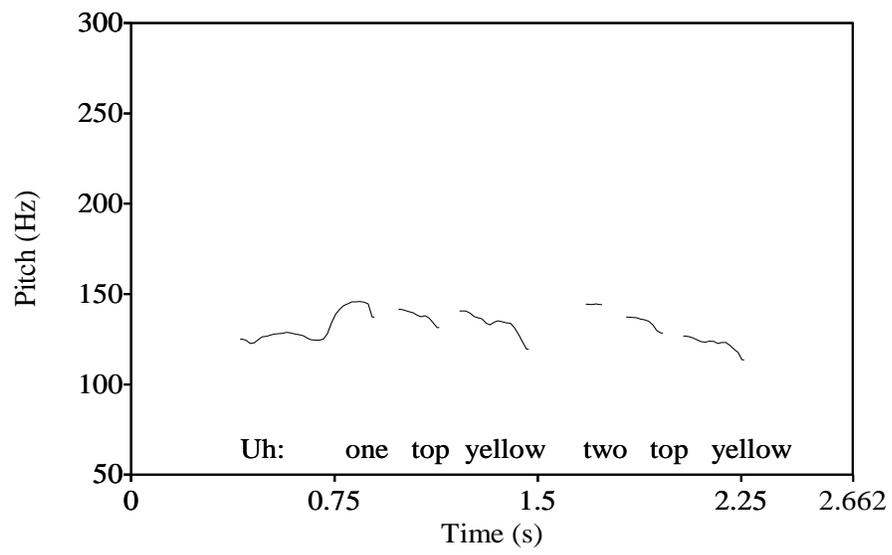


Figure 4-1. Pitch contour of Excerpt (3) Line 3.

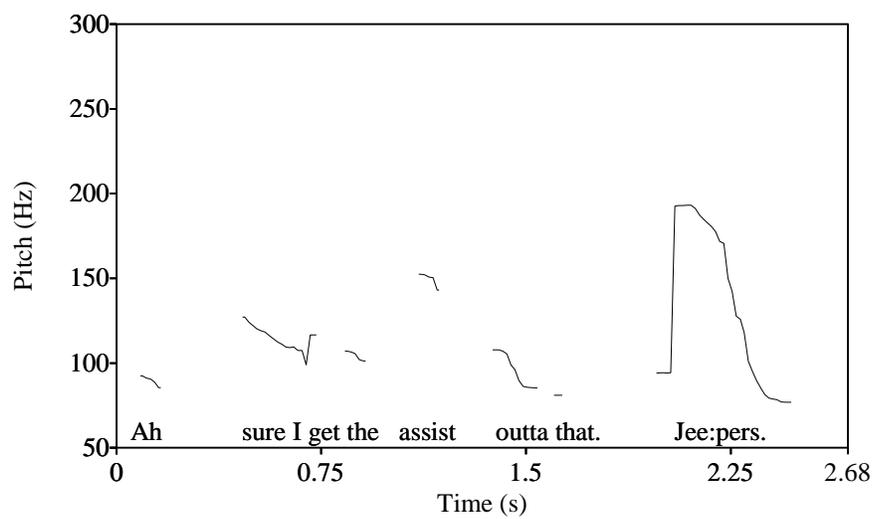


Figure 4-2. Pitch contour of Excerpt (6) Line 5.

## CHAPTER 5 MANAGING PARTICIPATION

To this point, discussion of contextualization cues and the kinds of utterances seen during online gameplay has focused on description of these meaningful devices. This is the first aim of my study, to describe the type and form of the interactional resources available to interlocutors in a virtual environment. The next important step is to examine how these resources are meaningfully applied in interaction and how they function in shaping the discourse and actions of the participants.

### **Participation Frameworks**

One of Goffman's contributions to studying interaction is the concept of *participation frameworks* (1981). Talk and interaction is not so simple as having a "speaker" and a "hearer," according to Goffman; especially in contexts of group interaction, there will be bystanders and participants of various degrees. The participation framework of a given interaction—co-constructed by its interactants, and ever changing—helps identify the status of each person in relation to that interaction. Not all are equal participants, and this can change over the course of the interaction. This actually has implications for this study. When gamers use cooperative communication, they can draw on their knowledge of contextualization conventions in a strategic manner for various effects. One of these effects is in signaling one's level of participation in a gameplay event. What happens when a player encounters an immediate threat that is not relevant to his teammates?

Goffman distinguishes between participants who are or are not *ratified* in the various interactive relationships contained within a participation framework (1981). A person may become a ratified listener, for example, by having an utterance addressed to them. Gamers exploit the assumptions borne out of contextualization conventions so that the features of their speech

updates their status within the participation framework of the team during a match. During Excerpt (8), recorded on one of the larger maps of Halo<sup>®</sup>, the video shows HA driving in the enemy's territory, separated from his teammates. Enemy players begin to *spawn* (appear in the virtual space, usually a few seconds after dying) around his location and begin targeting him. Other members of the team do have a visual of HA and his predicament, but are too far away to assist him. The ensuing exchange contains complaints, laughter, and encouragement, but nothing that would count as a callout.

#### EXCERPT (8)

1 ((HA driving and surrounded by enemy players))  
2 PH: Get out of there I'll spawn with you.  
3 HA: >Geez really c'mo:n!<  
4 (2.2)  
5→ PH: There we go HA  
6→ Drive like I know you can.  
7 HA: ((laughter)) ( )  
8 ((HA dies))  
9 Aw, this is [garbage!  
10 PH: [O:h, never mind.  
11 HA: I hate life.=  
12 AL: =Wo:w.  
13→ How are they getting there so fast?

At this point in the match, the score is heavily lopsided in favor of our team and the in-game clock is winding down. The enemy team has almost no chance of winning this particular match. PH momentarily aligns himself as a potential participant in HA's situation in Line 2, offering aid if HA can escape. There are too many dangers and obstacles however, and PH shifts from offering assistance to offering encouragement in Lines 5-6 with a reference to HA's known proficiency as a driver. PH avoids all of the contextualization cues associated with callouts and threats to the team's goals, effectively excluding himself as a potential participant. It may be that HA's situation, while certainly frustrating and not desirable to him, is not seen as relevant to the team's goal (winning the match). He is personally under immediate threat, but neither his

survival nor his defeat will change the outcome of the match. HA likely realizes this as he fails to directly or indirectly ask for assistance through callouts. It could also be that he judges his teammates as too far away to assist him; this possibility is supported by AL's incredulity (Line 13) as a commiserating response to HA's complaint (Line 9).

### **Response Cries**

Response cries are not callouts, but they do have the potential to shape interaction in similar ways. My data indicate that response cries have the potential to be useful tools for securing and signaling joint attention and participation for in-game encounters, a finding which agrees with Aarsand & Aronsson 2009. These response cries are less useful as a cooperative tool, however, in situations where surprise encounters end too quickly for even response cries to effectively secure the attention of nearby teammates in time. A player's choice to use a response cry seems not to depend wholly on his or her surprise, but rather on knowledge of the nearness and orientation of teammates and their ability to help (or be helped) with the sort of situation that would typically trigger a response cry.

In the context of an enemy encounter, especially a sudden one, a response cry could be a potential method of securing the team's attention and collaboration in the same manner as a callout. Response cries are most definitely not callouts however, in that they give no actual overt information about the immediate gameplay event that prefaces the cry. In the recorded video data, response cries only seem to occur when teammates are in close proximity; this falls in line with a previous analysis of response cries during gaming as devices for alerting and gaining the attention of others in a participation framework (Aarsand & Aronsson 2009). Excerpt (6) in particular provides an example of very effective use of a response cry. Ambushed by an enemy player in close proximity to his teammates, PH uses a response cry to gain his team's attention in a very timely manner.

EXCERPT (6)

1 ((PH is attacked by player from opposing team))  
2→ PH: WOAAH  
3 (3.9) ((MI and RM fight and kill the attacker))  
4 MI: Got you=  
5 RM: =Ah sure I get the assist outta that. Jee:pers.

PH's response cry in Line 2 is issued as his avatar is attacked while standing near MI and RM in one room, while my avatar is in the adjacent room with a clear line of sight to the others. All teammates' attentions are directed elsewhere, as the game has been calm and encounter-free in the moments leading up to the attack. The attack comes as a complete surprise; the enemy is able to enter the relatively small room and begin hurting PH before any teammate notices. As soon as PH's cry of "woah" is delivered, video from the encounter shows his teammates all immediately redirect their gaze to his location. RM and MI, the two closest players to PH's position, take care of the offending enemy before PH is killed. Completion of this action is indicated in Line 4 by MI's "got you." MI's statement can be seen as either a taunt toward the enemy player he just killed or a callout uptake of sorts to PH so that PH knows the threat is over. The calm, short delivery of MI's utterance suggests it is likely intended as uptake on PH's response cry rather than as a taunt.

PH's response cry in Excerpt (6) immediately secures his teammates' participation in defending him from an imminent threat. The response cry even seems to function like a standard callout in this regard. The response cry not only carries the perlocutionary effect of diverting his teammates' attention and action to his defense, it even comes complete with a verbal uptake by MI in Line 4. The response cry here does not really meet the criteria for a standard callout; the cry supplies no overt information about a threat or gameplay event. The uptake of the teammates during this event unambiguously shows that this response cry is skillfully used as a tool similar to callouts. They co-construct this interaction through their willing participation in this rapid call

and response. Other recordings show that response cries given by threatened teammates at a greater distance rarely receive this level of collaboration; they must be employed strategically in situations where they alert teammates who become ratified participants in the activity by virtue of their proximity and ability to take some sort of cooperative action.

### **Rate of Speech and Repetition**

Keating & Sunakawa 2010 characterizes rapid speech and repetition in gaming communication as aspects of pressured speech during a threatening encounter. In the authors' analysis, rapid rate of speech and repetition are participation cues that spur collaborative action centering on the threatened avatar. Excerpt (9) illustrates a similar dynamic during a match of Halo<sup>®</sup>. One player is covering the team's territory from the right flank with a powerful weapon, and suddenly spots an enemy near his position rather than his team's base. He begins the exchange with a callout detailing the enemy's location, and immediately updates his callout with rapid speech and repetition as the enemy becomes a threat in his personal space. The remainder of the exchange is characterized by further repetition of his callout, both by the player and by his teammates.

#### **EXCERPT (9)**

- 1→ PH: Guy coming around by our teleport? on the >right side right side<.  
2 (4.4) ((PH attacked, trying to stay alive))  
3→ [Need help right side.  
4 AL: [(Yeah) we got it  
5 HA: (He's right there) (.) >°oh god°<  
6→ PH: Need help right [side.  
7→ AL: [on the] right side=  
8→ VB: =Right side [right side, on it] on it  
9 CH: [You need help?

PH's use of repetition and sped-up speech in Line 1 indicates he is updating the original callout to his teammates with some urgency due to the nearness of the threat. When he falls under attack and doesn't receive any uptake for a few seconds, he repeats the callout with a request for

assistance in Line 3. His teammates at first appear to acknowledge and take action on his call-out, indicated by AL's response (Line 4) and HA's direction-giving to AL in Line 5. PH, scrambling rather heroically to stay alive for so long, repeats his callout in Line 6 because he still has not received any help. Video footage of the event shows that VB, myself, HA (driving a vehicle), and AL (his passenger/gunner) all focus on an enemy to the right of our team's base at about the time of AL's uptake in Line 4. PH repeats his callout in Line 6 with noticeable emphasis on "right." It is then that his teammates realize that the enemy attacking PH is not the one they have targeted, and that PH's attacker is, indeed, located further to the right of their initial focus. Since PH is holding a powerful and strategic weapon, the initial target is immediately abandoned in favor of the most immediate threat to PH. Realization of this gaffe is indicated by VB and AL's repetitive uptake of his callout in Lines 7-8, which coincides in the video with the shift of attention toward the true threat. While PH does not give additional lexical locative information in his repetition, his use of emphasis indicates the relative location of the ongoing threat with an awareness of his mistaken teammates' positions.

The second and correct uptake of PH's callout occurs in Lines 7-8. The immediacy of the uptake—directly after emphasized "right," before PH even finishes his utterance—indicates that emphasis was the primary signal used to correct the wayward teammates and steer them in the appropriate direction. The timing of the second uptake is not the only significant factor, however. The form of the uptake is in repetition of the location given by PH, "right side." VB even extends the repetition to his own words in Line 8, "on it on it." Their use of repetition in this uptake not only confirms to PH that they indeed now have the correct location (differing from the initial uptake in Line 4), it also communicates a sense of urgency that aligns them more properly as participants in the threatening event to PH, who has been under attack for a relatively long

amount of time by this point. By using repetition to display levels of urgency matching PH, AL and VB have contextualized their utterances to signal that they have truly placed themselves in the same communicative frame as PH.

PH's use of repetition is in agreement with observations by Keating & Sunakawa 2010. In their primary framework, PH, AL, and VB all use repetition and rapid speech as cues for the appropriate participation frame. Effective communication and interaction (modeled in this study as teamwork) does not occur until all of the interlocutors have cued the same participation frame. This analysis does not differ significantly from mine except in terminology. Keating & Sunakawa might say that the interlocutors used participation cues to signal the appropriate participation frame through which they could co-construct a successful interaction; my analysis is that the interlocutors used contextualization cues to signal the appropriate interpretive frame through which they could successfully understand their interaction. Both interpretations appear to be valid judging by the events in Excerpt (9). My analyses in this study take advantage of this by assuming somewhat equivalent roles for contextualization and participation cues and frames; given that these powerful tools for understanding are somewhat underspecified concepts in the literature (Goffman 1981, Gumperz 1982), they license a wide degree of interpretive power—a not altogether undesirable state of affairs for microanalysis. As a result, I use whichever terms and concepts are most suitable for interpreting a given interaction, while assuming a large degree of similarity in how these processes are pragmatically realized by interlocutors.

### **Intonation**

Flat intonation may be one of the least obvious cues signaling a callout in a threatening gameplay event. Intonation has scalar rather than binary values, and not all interlocutors express the same degree of variety in pitch across similar utterances. There do appear to be contextualization conventions relevant to the degree of pitch variation in signaling an utterance

as a potential callout. Utterances given in a narrower pitch range appear to be associated with giving callouts. Callouts do not necessarily require a relatively flat intonational delivery, however, so what is the purpose behind it? I argue that it is another tool for efficiently navigating this information-rich environment, used to help manage teammates' knowledge of each other's relevant positions in the participation framework of a given gameplay event. Gamers who communicate effectively can manipulate intonation across an utterance to create fine-grained distinctions in how they relate to ongoing gameplay events. Young Greek women studied in Archakis & Papazachariou 2008 similarly take advantage of prosodic contextualization conventions in peer interactions. In their case, they may manipulate intensity rather than pitch in order to signal their degree of involvement in the interaction.

Excerpt (10) shows a gamer in Battlefield 3<sup>TM</sup> using variation in pitch range across his utterances to signal different degrees of his participation in ongoing events relevant to the goals of his team. He has just recently begun using a MAV, an in-game miniature remote-controlled hovering drone that can be used to scout objectives and enemy positions without putting oneself in danger. In this excerpt, GW is able to inform his teammate AN about enemy positions lexically while simultaneously informing AN about his participation status prosodically.

#### EXCERPT (10)

1 ((GW is piloting a small airborne spy drone))  
 2→ GW: There we go ↑I'm kinda ↓getting the hang for it ↑now  
 3→ There are four of them (.) by B they're in the rocks and treeline  
 4 AN: >Alright ten four<  
 5 (1.0)  
 6 On my way over there [now  
 7 GW: [U::m,  
 8 (1.4)  
 9→ You're looking pretty good on A.

GW's first utterance in Line 2 is not a callout at all, but provides a representation of his prosody when giving enthusiastic meta-talk about his ability to control his avatar's new device.

In Line 2, there is a markedly steep intonational rise and fall after “there we go,” and the low pitch continues until it rises again at the tail end of his utterance. Pitch analysis in Praat shows that the pitch during the utterance peaks at 273.125 Hz on “kinda,” and the lowest pitch in the utterance (112.524 Hz) is located soon after on “the.” This shows a range of 160.601 Hz across the whole utterance, and this variation is not limited to a sharp rise-fall in the middle; GW’s pitch climbs back to about 220 Hz on the last word of Line 2 “now” (see Figure 5-1). GW’s highly variable pitch in Line 2 is juxtaposed with relevantly much more level intonation during his callout in Line 3; there is almost no pause at all between Lines 2-3. This close temporal proximity makes the differences between the utterances’ pitch contours all the more noticeable.

Line 3 is unmistakably a callout. GW is informing his teammate AN that he sees four enemies keeping watch over the objective B that AN is approaching, a roughly man-sized communications “crate” (called an MCOM in the game) that must be destroyed by planting a bomb on it, as in Excerpt (1). It takes time to successfully arm the bomb once the crate has been reached, and then the attackers briefly become the defenders as the MCOM begins blaring an alarm while the opposing team has a limited amount of time to defuse the bomb on the MCOM. Since it will take some time before the bomb detonates, this callout relays important information about a gameplay event highly relevant to AN; if he wants to successfully destroy objective B, he will first have to eliminate the four enemies guarding it. For Line 3, Praat’s pitch analysis shows a maximum pitch of 227.281 Hz on GW’s emphatic “four” and a minimum of 95.630 Hz on “them,” just before the brief pause. This represents a range of 131.651 Hz, a difference of almost 29 Hz compared to the pitch range of Line 2. The visible pitch contour in Figure 5-2 shows that most of the pitch variation in Line 3 is from the heavy emphasis on “four” (emphasis tends to raise pitch in addition to amplitude) and the falling intonation before the pause. The

pitch after the brief pause occupies a narrower range, and represents the majority of the utterance. Since most of the pitch variation occurs during the first second of an utterance that lasts about four seconds, interlocutors during the match would hear the callout in Line 3 as possessing a flat intonation relative to the non-callout in Line 2.

The third utterance of interest here is Line 9. As AN reports that he is on his way to objective B, GW takes a moment to check the status of objective A and finds that it is relatively free of enemies. His utterance communicates information relevant to an ongoing in-game event (attacking the objective) and is therefore a callout, but its intonation is somewhat different from the callout in Line 3; it would be somewhat ambiguous as an example of either flat or expressive intonation. The information GW reports in Line 9 definitely rates the utterance as a callout. The intonation in Line 9 is not as expressive as Line 2, which is apparent in the pitch contour in Figure 5-3; if anything, it is closer to the flat intonation of Line 3. Pitch analysis in Praat shows maximum and minimum pitches of 258.419 Hz and 116.68 Hz respectively, which is a range of 141.789 Hz: narrower than that of Line 2, and only a little wider than that of Line 3.

In Excerpt (10), G is controlling an airborne reconnaissance vehicle that looks like a miniature helicopter, and is called a MAV. The vehicle in this game is controlled remotely, so a pilot using the MAV from his team's base or a well-concealed place is relatively free from danger. This likely accounts for the lack of urgency in G's tone as he communicates the status of the enemy's defenses in lines 3 and 9. These utterances are still callouts—they communicate information that is invaluable to the teammates who are attacking the A and B objectives—but they feature associated with a threat to the speaker, such as repetitive, abbreviated, or rapid speech. AN's uptake in Line 4 does contain such features, however. AN is signaling his participation in an attempt to attack the B objective, an event which he knows (thanks to GW's

callout) will involve fighting at least four enemy players. This certainly qualifies as an imminent threat relevant to AN.

GW uses his control of intonation to contextualize his unique role as a participant in the same event as AN. By adopting pitch ranges in his callouts that are narrow relative to his non-callout, GW aligns himself as a relevant participant in a threatening gameplay event. The event is not threatening to *him*, however, and this is marked by his calm delivery and more fully-realized, unabbreviated utterances. He is not indicating that he is a non-participant in the event; rather, he is communicating that the only support he can provide is informational, as his avatar is distant from the action. In this way, GW skillfully manages intonation along with other contextualization cues to supply the maximal amount of relational and tactical information to his teammate.

### **Summary**

Gamers who play together over an Internet connection may not share the same physical space, and avatar interaction within the virtual environment is quite limited compared to the complex range displayed by humans in everyday face-to-face interaction. Communities of practice centered on first-person shooters have developed rather effective linguistic and paralinguistic tools for use in interaction through a persistent virtual environment, however. Gamers can take advantage of their shared knowledge of a cooperative gameplay frame by manipulating certain features of their utterances to continually manage participation of themselves and others throughout the activity. Threatening gameplay events can crop up at a moment's notice and require swift action, so this is quite an efficient use of discourse by video game players.

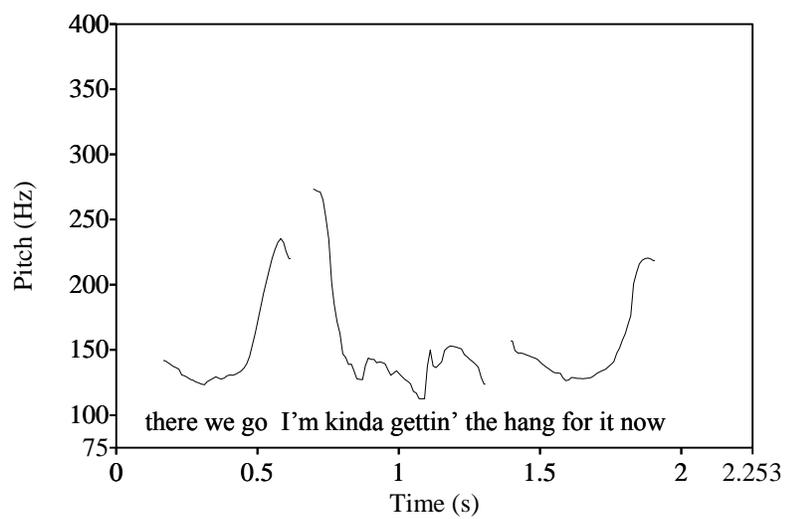


Figure 5-1. Pitch contour of Excerpt (10) Line 2.

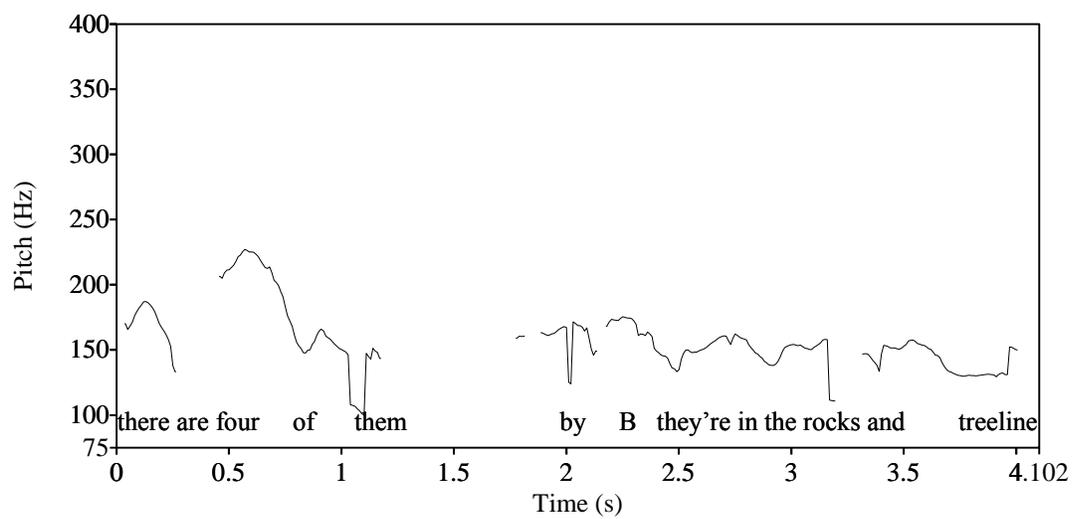


Figure 5-2. Pitch contour of Excerpt (10) Line 3.

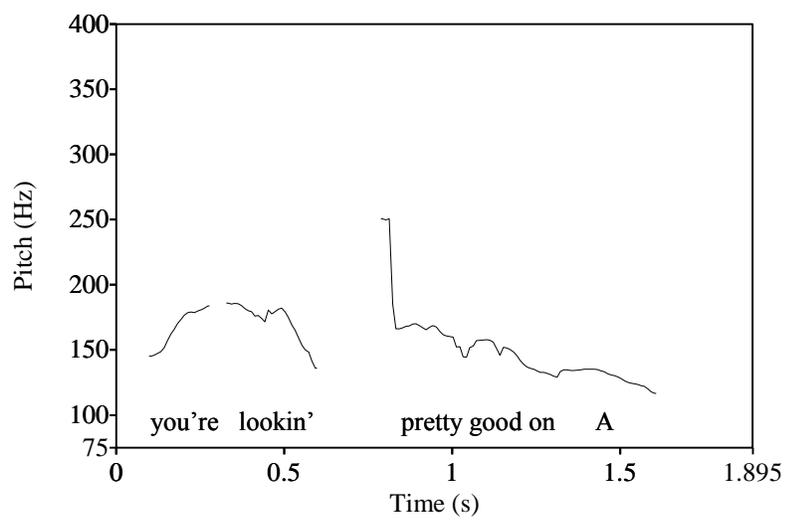


Figure 5-3. Pitch contour of Excerpt (10) Line 9.

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

To this point, various examples from two different video games have shown the following characteristics to be associated with callouts: flat intonation, abbreviated and specialized utterances and terminology, lexical information specifying self or enemy location and status, rapid speech, and repetition. Several examples were presented, however, where utterances were rated as callouts but lacked some of these features. A gamer has a variety of choices when deciding how to signal the communicative intent of an utterance; what is being signaled when some features are chosen instead of others?

It is important to consider that the contextualization cues associated with pressured speech (repetition, rapid speech, brief utterances) are conflated with callouts. A great many callouts occur during events that have an elevated level of threat to either the individual players or the team's goals. Conversely, not many players in high-pressure situations would use such pressured speech to ask their teammates how their work or family lives are going. It is important to remember that contextualization cues alone did not result in a given speech sample being rated as a callout; callouts were also determined on the basis of their apparent functions and uptake by teammates. Further directions for this research would certainly include comparison to the features of discourse during other high-pressure situations, such as between law enforcement officers or armed service members, or even between participants in a high-pressure environment that does not involve combat, such as air traffic control rooms.

So are these particular cues nothing more than the natural by-products of high-pressure situations? Recall Excerpts (8-10); the presence or absence of such pressured speech appears to fulfill an important function: marking one's participation (or non-participation) in a gameplay event. The type of information being transmitted by players is important, but so too is the

relevance of the ongoing situation to each player on the team. In this way players are able to manage their participation in various events as the game progresses, an important skill for the great deal of collaboration necessary for a successful team. Body orientation in space relative to other gamers fulfills this function in Keating & Sunakawa 2010, but the gamers recorded in this study were unable to rely on such cues to participation frames since they did not share the same physical space during gameplay. Instead, the orientation of avatars relative to the action and the cues of pressured speech and callouts supplied by the players give a relatively detailed representation of the changing participation frameworks across the match.

My data indicate that response cries are useful tools for securing and signaling joint attention and participation for in-game encounters, a finding which agrees with Aarsand & Aronsson 2009. These response cries were less useful as a cooperative tool in situations where surprise encounters end too quickly for even brief cries to effectively secure the attention of nearby teammates in time. A player's choice to use a response cry seems not to depend wholly on his or her surprise, but rather on knowledge of the nearness and orientation of teammates and their ability to help (or be helped) with the sort of situation that would typically trigger a response cry.

My study does have several limitations. This is not a quantitative analysis, and the speech and behavior patterns described here cannot therefore be generalized onto the larger population. These online gaming interactions are a great source for future work with a focus on quantitative analyses. Another limitation is a relatively small number of participants; there were many players over the course of the recorded games who were participants in the in-game actions but did not wear a microphone and were therefore extremely limited in their communication, and wholly invisible in this analysis. Still more participants were recorded giving callouts or just engaging in

social chat, but the total number of participants in the excerpts analyzed here is fifteen. Of those fifteen participants, several appear in multiple excerpts in this study. Since excerpts were selected for analysis based on their clarity and relevance to the features under investigation, the clearest communicators became powerful voices in this analysis. The communicative styles described here are common throughout first-person shooter communities of practice however; further analysis featuring a broader participant base should confirm the features discussed here.

In the work and social arenas, successful interaction and cooperation is greatly affected by effective communication and management of participation and footing toward certain situations. This is also true in the arena of online gaming, which is increasingly an important site for social interaction for both adults and children. In light of the sparse (but growing) attention paid to this area and type of interaction, the goal of this study has been to examine callouts and contextualization cues in the context of gameplay during two different FPS video games. Further studies in this area could have important consequences for our understanding of how interlocutors manage participation and communication across multiple events, especially without a face-to-face component of interaction; in today's increasingly digital and remote workplace, the communicative skills and resources utilized during online gaming could find application to our understanding of successful interaction in a changing workplace environment that is becoming increasingly based in the virtual world.

APPENDIX A  
TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

[	Indicates the beginning point of overlapping speech
=	Indicates no pause from one utterance to another
(.)	Used to indicate a very brief pause
(0.0)	Numbers in parentheses indicate the length of a pause (in seconds)
( )	A closed set of parentheses with no text indicates unintelligible words
(text)	Text in parentheses is used for unclear speech
-	Indicates the previous sound is cut off
:	Colons are used to denote prolongation of the preceding sound
>text<	Text between angled brackets is produced relatively rapidly for that speaker
°text°	Text between degree signs indicates relatively quiet speech
<u>text</u>	Underlining indicates emphasized speech
TEXT	Text in all capitals indicates loud volume
.	Used for falling intonation
?	Indicates rising intonation
,	Indicates a continuing intonation
((text))	Text in double parentheses indicates the analyst's notes, such as descriptions of non-verbal actions
→	This arrow indicates a line in the transcript that is of particular relevance to the analysis
↓	A downwards arrow precedes a particularly marked fall in pitch
↑	An upwards arrow precedes a particularly marked rise in pitch

APPENDIX B  
TRANSCRIPTS

EXCERPT (1)

1 AC: Got one on A  
2 He's down  
3 Aw this scope is awesome.  
4 ((pause))  
5 A's looking clear, I'm gonna plant  
6 ((pause))  
7 Planted

EXCERPT (2)

1 CK: They got a snipe at high snipe.  
2 (7.8) ((Called-out enemy is killed))  
3 PH: High snipe (is) down.  
4 HR: Two on me on the stairs, one's one shot.  
5 Comin' down towards [rockets  
6 PH: [(Gus)  
7 (They're) comin' down to you, Gus.  
8 To your left Gus  
9 ((Gus and PH die))  
10 I just lost snipe

EXCERPT (3)

1 PH: Shoot I don't have jetpack anymore.  
2 Ah crap  
3 RM: Uh: one top yellow (.) two top yellow

EXCERPT (4)

1 LV: [Losing D.  
2 ??: [( )  
3 MD: I don't know I'm here at Bravo but there's definitely a guy here, though.  
4 (1.0)  
5 >Oh oh< D, D as in Delta, gotcha.  
6 QM: Where where where  
7 (1.0)  
8 I see him.  
9 ((Gun firing))  
10 He's gone (.) D is good

EXCERPT (5)

1 GW: °(Spawn) on me >spawn on me<°  
2 ((GW dies))  
3 They're sniping  
4 AND shooting an LMG down that hall[way.

5 AN: [ >I got 'em< (.) >I got 'em<  
6 GW: Nice.

#### EXCERPT 6

1 ((PH is attacked by player from opposing team))  
2 PH: WOAHH  
3 (3.9) ((MI and RM fight and kill the attacker))  
4 MI: Got you=  
5 RM: =Ah sure I get the assist outta that. ↑Jee: ↓pers.

#### EXCERPT (7)

1 MI: Hey I- (.) hey let's hold down this ramp dude,  
2 I have (.) crazy good success when we hold this down.  
3 Who's got a jetpack on?  
4 And a shotgun.  
5 PH: I've got a jetpack=  
6 RM: =Uh, >I got I got< [shotty.  
7 MI: [Go up here,  
8 Go up here to this little spot right here,  
9 And you can sit right on top that ledge  
10 And they won't even see you comin' in the door.  
11 (1.1) ((PH goes to the indicated position))  
12 RM: ((laughter))  
13 (1.2)  
14 PH: Done.  
15 (1.5)  
16 RM: [( )]  
17 MI: [That's what I call that shit the] Batman right there.

#### EXCERPT (8)

1 ((HA driving and surrounded by enemy players))  
2 PH: Get out of there I'll spawn with you.  
3 HA: >Geez really c'mo:n!<  
4 (2.2)  
5 PH: There we go HA  
6 Drive like I know you can.  
7 HA: ((laughter)) ( )  
8 ((H dies))  
9 Aw, this is [garbage!  
10 PH: [O:h, never mind.  
11 HA: I hate life.=  
12 AL: =Wo:w.  
13 How are they getting there so fast?

#### EXCERPT (9)

1 PH: Guy coming around by our teleport on the right side >right side<.

2 (4.4) ((P attacked by enemies))  
3 [Need help right side.  
4 AL: [(Yeah) we got it  
5 HA: (He's right there) (.) >°oh god°<  
6 PH: Need help right [side  
7 AL: [on the] right side=  
8 VB: =Right side [right side, on it] on it  
9 CH: [You need help?]

EXCERPT (10)

1 ((GW is piloting a small airborne spy drone))  
2 GW: There we go ↑I'm kinda ↓getting the hang for it ↑now  
3 There are four of them (.) by B they're in the rocks and treeline  
4 AN: >Alright ten four<  
5 (1.0)  
6 On my way over there [now  
7 GW: [U::m,  
8 (1.4)  
9 You're looking pretty good on A.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Luke Breland was born in 1985 and grew up in West Virginia and Alabama before graduating from the University of Alabama with a degree in anthropology in 2007, marrying his wife and best friend Katherine soon after. After a year in Arkansas and two years in China teaching English with his wife and brother, Luke enrolled in the graduate linguistics program at the University of Florida, where he finally feels at home. Luke received a Master of Arts in linguistics at the University of Florida in 2012, and is currently enrolled in the linguistics program as a doctoral student. He probably plays video games a little more often than he should, and he would really, really like to have an authentic Chinese meal again.