

Nerds With Athletic Capability: An Un-registered Student Organization Ethnography by Phil Rejmer

Presented with having to do an ethnography on some part of the university I couldn't think of anything to do so I fell back on my Plan B. I had, since my Freshman year been part of a group of people that played Capture the Flag out on ISU's quad. This group was not a registered student organization but managed to hold itself together for the last four years as new members came in and old ones had left. I knew that the members of CtF didn't just use it for exercise or fun, but also used it for social purposes (I remember, long before I began my ethnography, an old player had talked about how he had met his best friend at CtF.) So I decided I would look at CtF and how it was utilized as a social tool by the students in the university. By this time my attendance of CtF had become erratic and I often skipped it because I had become bored and no longer got from it the fun I used to. I was at this time the second longest playing member of CtF and because of my lack of attendance the only other person who had been playing longer than me, Chimera, would accuse me, sometimes jokingly and sometimes sincerely, of being a traitor and abandoning the group. There was never any real pressure to come back though and I didn't feel obliged to, until my ethnography that is. So I prepared to begin attending CtF regularly again and begin socializing with the players, something that I had never really done before hand. I had always been relatively avoidant of social interaction at CtF, but now I'd have to break that old habit and immerse myself among the people. I was not looking forward to this since the majority of the players I didn't really like because, in relation to my standards, they were too socially awkward to bother with. But now I'd have to get to know them better and actually talk to them. I was ready to capture the flag again. And then I fractured my kneecap. While chasing another player, a new player who was considered to be incredibly fast, I tried to preserve my mantle as one of the fastest players by catching up to him, and in my haste I slipped on the wet grass and slid full speed into one of the cement lampposts that illuminates the quad. So thus my research began.

Some Background Information:

Capture the Flag, the Rules:

There are two teams and the point of the game is to capture the opponents' flag while protecting your own. It gets more complicated. The quad is cut in half (more or less) by a sidewalk that (more or less) runs in a straight line. This line technically circumnavigates the globe and players are allowed to play anywhere they wish, although it's best to stay near the quad. This line is the neutral zone. Here, members of both teams can stand safely without being tagged. Each side of the neutral zone belongs to one team or another and if a player is standing on his opponents' side he can be tagged and taken to jail, while if he is on his own team's side he can tag an opponent and escort him to jail. Jail is where opponents are taken when they are tagged. It is the only method of defending one's territory since a player in jail is "out of play" unless one of his teammates can make it to him and tag him out of jail without getting tagged himself. The specific rules of jail have changed many times, but the current rules state that an offender can tag two people out of jail and then all three get a free walk back to the neutral zone. The jails are usually somewhere in between the flag and the neutral zone. The flag itself is a piece of cloth lying on the ground. Each team's flag is placed in the same spot every game, although the team's switch sides after every game. If an offender picks up the flag without getting tagged by a defender it is his task to run the flag back to neutral zone to win the game. If he gets tagged while carrying the flag he must drop the flag where he was tagged. Defenders must stay twenty feet away from the flag (in practice usually fifteen)

unless an offender enters the twenty foot perimeter. Players distinguish teammates and the other team with armbands that must be visible between the shoulder and the elbow. Are these rules complicated and hard to remember? Perhaps a bit. Perhaps no. Well there's more, lots more, rules that get very specific about very specific situations. It was one of the complaints I heard in conversation from someone who had quit playing after a few games. There were too many rules, too hard to remember them all, and you got yelled at when you didn't follow the rules you couldn't remember.

The game is played on Mondays and Wednesdays at ten o'clock (since this is the latest any class will last) and will last usually past midnight.

History and Nomenclature:

Capture the flag started about a year or so before I started playing so at the writing of this ethnography it would be about five years old. It was started by a group of friends who lived on one floor in the Isengard Residence Hall. They eventually moved to apartments but kept playing and inviting people to join them. There was very little leadership at first since all the friends were equals but as some of these original "bros" started graduating and/or leaving and as there were more new people, leadership fell to Longjohn. Longjohn was a brash, loud, foul mouthed sort of fellow who generally spent his time talking to people in the neutral zone during the game and calling people idiots in between games when everyone was at the neutral zone. Somehow his calling people idiots and his swearing at people came off in a quasi-good natured way. Eventually, academic duties began drawing him away and a steady integration of a new leader began. This new leader was Cyclopes and the older players of capture the flag generally divide the timeline into two eras: Cyclopes' days and Longjohn's days. It was during the transition between Longjohn and Cyclopes that people started playing through the winter and it was during Cyclope's time that people started playing the not just on Wednesdays but also on Mondays.

There are many words or phrases used in CtF that are specific to that community that would help readers understand what's going on.

Veteran: A person who has played an arbitrary length of time until being awarded veteran status by other veterans. Usually this involves playing through the winter.

Newb (newbie, newcomer): Internet slang; used to refer to someone new to the game.

Capture: 1) A successful score with the flag. 2) Also can refer to capturing a person for jail. 3) Also can refer to picking up the flag, without necessarily scoring with it.

Jailbreak: An offensive mission to get teammates out of opponents' jail.

Bumrush: An offensive act of rushing at the flag up the middle of the quad in the hopes that superior numbers will overwhelm the defenders.

Solo: Going on offense by oneself.

Stealth: Going on offense with teammates or solo with the intention of not being seen until close enough to the flag to capture it.

Off the quad: Going outside the bounds of the quad marked by the academic buildings.

On the flag: The act of guarding the flag.

Strike Team: A group of skilled, fast, usually veteran players that go on a coordinated assault on the flag. Usually stealth (rarely used now).

Trench: A trench between a sidewalk and a campus building used for an offensive maneuver.

Trenchrun, Thundercats, Art Girl Make Out Session: Offensive maneuvers specific to a certain area of the quad (rarely used now).

Dragonriders, Elephant Riders. Phalanx, X-Wings: Offensive maneuver not intended to capture the flag but meant to entertain the offenders after a series of boring games.

The Demographics:

The title of my ethnography is the description of the main type of people that play CtF. It comes from an interview with Chimera in which he said, "We're just nerds with some athletic capability." The majority of people that play are nerds, in some way or another. Nerds is a difficult term to define but here are some things that should help the reader understand. Almost every single person who plays CtF also plays computer and video games and these are often the topic in the conversation of members. Players are familiar with comic book characters and super-heroes as well as sci-fi and fantasy topics such as Star Wars and Lord of the Rings, which are also topics of conversation but not as much so as video games. Many of the jokes made in capture the flag are based off of recognizable aspects of these topics. Several players also are part of a club that plays the video game Dance Dance Revolution. This should give a general idea of the genre of people meant by "nerd."

Also, the gross majority of players, are Caucasian-American Males, and this has been the case throughout capture the flag's history. Currently, if you were to play capture the flag you would most likely see one or two African-American male, several Asian players, no Latino/a players, one to three female players, and the rest (10-20 players) being white Male.

The majority of players are residents in the University Residence Halls. This makes sense since the quad, where CtF is played, is located roughly in the middle of all the residences (except one that is located further away than the rest.) Generally, but not always, players that move into apartments are too busy with jobs and high level classes or live too far away to make the trip to the quad worthwhile.

The Methods of Research:

I interviewed four veteran members of CtF from whom I gathered the majority of my data. I also relied on my own memory, of both playing and conversing with people about CtF, as well as a few casual conversations with people who had played CtF. The four interviewees had played for various lengths of time and had participated in a variety of ways. Chimera, had played longer than anyone who still attended Capture the Flag. He was a primarily a defenses player, often guarding the flag or jail and keeping the troops in line. Puff Snake had played Capture the Flag almost as long as Chimera and I, but had quit to play in a dodgeball club. The Scarlet Prince had been playing, not quite as long as I, but long enough to be a well respected veteran, he was a primarily offensive player, specializing in solo stealth missions. Anger Bloodthirst had not been playing for very long, only a year compared to my three, and was primarily on offensive player who liked to run fast and goof around. All four interviews were people I enjoyed talking to at CtF and were people I consider friends. I did not interview anyone I disliked having conversations with. Also, my four interviewees are considered very skilled players at capture the flag and are well respected.

Along with the interviews I attended CtF with open eyes and with crutches. I had to observe the game differently than before. I couldn't tune out other peoples' interactions but now had to pay attention. I couldn't run off by myself to try to capture the flag, I had to stick with people, usually on defense. I supplemented these observations with my own memories of playing and my own memories of conversations of capture the flag, before my ethnography.

How it begins:

Everyone who started playing CtF began their Freshman year. This occurred while living in the residence halls. People found out about capture the flag from either roommates or floormates who played CtF, from their RAs who used the club as a social program, or through discovering the club by seeing people playing on the quad. All my four interviews mentioned that their first impression of the game was that it was "fun." Their explanations of fun included a jovial and friendly atmosphere and being able to "run around outside." Something else that several of my interviewees mentioned was how they were involved in what older students were doing. They, as freshmen, were allowed to participate with these much older Juniors and Seniors. Puff Snake mentioned how he went on offensive missions with some of the older players and it made him feel good, like he was an important.

Why People Play, Why They Come Back:

There are four aspects that make CtF attractive to players: the physical exercise, the mental exercise, personal recognition, and that it is a social reservoir.

Physical exercise does not mean that players are interested in becoming more fit or healthy, it merely refers to physically strenuous activity, usually in the form of running. Running gives people a chance to be able to unwind or just let loose. Chimera mentioned that running around at CtF was his only way of not going crazy sitting in the dorms all day. Anger Bloodthirst and the Scarlet Prince mentioned how it was fun to chase and be chased by people. All my interviewees talked about how it was simply fun to "run around" and in Anger Bloodthirst's case to "just act immature." The very act of running within the context of a game, running with a "fun" goal in mind, not just running for health, is considered fun for the people that remain at CtF.

Mental exercise refers to the strategizing that people partake in when playing. Players will organize defenses where they set up traps for the enemy offense by hiding in trees or behind hills. Offensive groups will organize maneuvers and tactics to get the flag or to make a jail break. Mental exercise doesn't just refer to the pre-thoughtout strategies but also refers to on the fly thinking that will occur during a chase or an attempt to stay hidden by an offender. It is a thrill to be able to match wits against someone you are chasing or someone who is chasing you, trying to outmaneuver them by jumping over walls or fences or bushes, or trying to cut them off before they can escape. It is the chase that epitomizes these two aspects of mental and physical exercise. Running fast and also thinking fast are important in being able to either win the game or merely stay out of jail.

If someone attends capture the flag long enough they become recognizable to the other players and CtF becomes a place where everybody knows your name. Players will greet each other amiably even if they have nothing to talk about simply because they recognize each other. Even players who have not played in a long time will be greeted with tremendous excitement if they return for a day or two. There is a feel of a welcoming community because of this which bleeds over into the fourth aspect of a social reservoir. But first I have to mention the higher levels of recognition such as fame and notoriety. Players who have exceptional skills develop clout in the community and "legends" are spread about them. Veterans can be heard telling newcomers, "That's Chimera, he's really, really good. He once defended the flag by himself against three offensive guys," or "The Scarlet Prince once had about five enemy defenders chasing him in deGarmo and he didn't get caught, and because he had these five guys distracted his team was able to win the game." Players with notoriety will also experience extreme reactions from other players, usually newcomers, such as a story the Scarlet Prince had told me before I began my ethnography. He was on the defense and he was going into the trench to prevent any sort of trenchrun that might occur.

He ran into a group of (he says) six or seven enemy attackers. Now because the Scarlet Prince could only capture one of them the rest could just run past him and onto the flag. However, what happened was that one of the attackers pointed and said, "Oh sh**, it's the Scarlet Prince," and all the attackers turned and fled. These kinds of esteem-rocketing experiences undoubtedly bring players back every week.

Social reservoir is somewhat of a difficult concept to describe in just one sentence. Players will use capture the flag to find out about classes or professors, which ones are good to take, which ones are bad. They will find out from each other what the newest video games are like and whether they're worth buying or which movies are worth seeing. Another example of how capture the flag is a social reservoir is the case of the Scarlet Prince and Anger Bloodthirst. They both wanted new roommates and since they knew each other through capture the flag and got along they agreed to room together. They told me that while they got along before sharing a room, it was when they roomed together for a while that they actually became good friends. The point is that they used capture the flag as a place to find roommates who they'd get along with. This apparently worked so well that they recently found someone at capture the flag to share an apartment with. Something that came up before I started doing my ethnography was how some romantic relationships had formed between a few members of capture the flag. While there are two examples that I and my interviewees knew of with people finding partners at capture the flag there were something else that came up. A by now gone player mentioned to me how he thought that a lot of the old players weren't showing up anymore because of all the "hooking up" that had gone on and that people were avoiding their ex's by not coming to capture the flag. I asked him why I never knew about this and the answer was that I was crawling through bushes actually playing the game instead of talking to people. I and my four interviewees don't know anything more than that as to what was happening, but apparently some of the players were using CtF to find sexual partners. What I am trying to demonstrate is how players will use CtF for social purposes in other parts of their life and as a tool in other aspects of their lives. But how far each player dips into the reservoir varies. The Scarlet Prince told me that the majority of his social life and social contacts comes from people he knows in capture the flag. In contrast, Chimera told me that capture the flag barely fits into his social life, that he rarely interacts with capture the flaggers outside of capture the flag itself. Before this ethnography I looked down upon the nerds whose social life was based in CtF, but, after some observations and interviews I began to investigate my own debt to capture the flag for the social life I had. Of the people I considered friends throughout my college career almost half of them were due to my participation in CtF, and almost the whole other half of my friends was due to my job as an RA. Before I became an RA the number of people that were my friends because of CtF directly or indirectly was well over 75%. Most of these friends I knew indirectly because of CtF, i.e. I know this friend because I went to a party at his house which I was invited to by someone I knew at CtF. The numbers vary slightly depending on how I define "friend," but the point is clear: CtF provides access to a social reservoir of other fellow students who can become movie critics, academic counselors, lovers, or friends.

Types of Social Interaction:

There were three types of social interactions I noticed: conversing, social strategizing, and goofing off.

When conversing, talking about capture the flag replaces small talk since it is an obviously common ground that players who don't know each other can discuss. Players will often make analogies between the game and some video game or some movie such as referring to an attack as

a "zergling rush" or advising someone when they're being chased to "press R twice to do a barrel roll." (Both are references to popular video games.) Conversations will range in topics from video games to finals to relationship problems to philosophical meditations to current affairs and national policy. Conversing takes place mainly in two places: the middle neutral ground and at each flag. At each flag defenders will converse to pass the time until the enemy attackers arrive. At neutral ground, conversing takes place either during the game between rival attackers waiting to make a move, or when games are not taking place. This includes before any game has started, after the last game of the night has ended, and in between games since both teams regroup in the center neutral ground after each victory/loss. Depending on the night conversations can be mostly about capture the flag, players regaling each other about their exploits or failures, or about other topics mentioned earlier. There is a third location that conversations sometimes occur and this is the jail. When there are many people in a jail they will sometimes converse to pass the time. The jail guards rarely talk because they are looking out for anyone trying to break their teammates out of jail. Sometimes jail guards will talk to the prisoners and attackers will use this distraction to get past the guards. This kind of conversing in jail occurred more often in preceding years than when I did my ethnography. Currently, those in jail, instead of conversing, simply yell at their free teammates to get them out of jail or to go capture the flag so the game will end and they can get out of jail that way. Sometimes players in jail will even yell to their enemies to go capture the flag, preferring to lose the game than to wait in jail any longer.

Social strategizing occurs mostly during offensive maneuvers. On the defense there is generally either chaos or one person ordering the others into formation. On the offense however there is much more socializing and consultation with teammates about how the attack should take place. Teammates will scout ahead and relay enemy positions to their offensive squad. This description is short but the actual activity is important. Asking someone to join you on an attack is a sign of respect and sometimes admiration for that person's skill and the attack itself is an event that all members can draw upon to converse and feel connected by. As one of my interviewees said, "It's cool to go with these guys because you're like, 'These guys are good.'"

Goofing off is generally anything that doesn't necessarily break the rules but isn't done with the intention of winning the game but rather the point is to have fun and/or break the monotony. This includes running across the quad while holding a large, fallen tree branch pretending to use it as camouflage, or building snowforts around the flag during the winter. It also includes organizing attacks with no serious intention of winning such as Phalanx, where the entire (defenders and attackers) all march in a Phalanx at the enemy. Another example of goofing off is when Anger Bloodthirst first started playing he would sometimes scream like a "school girl" when he was being chased and even after he was no longer being chased he would still run around in circles sometimes and scream. Anger Bloodthirst said it was fun to "just run around and be immature."

Some Problems That Arose:

As I had mentioned before I had stopped attending CtF regularly because I had found it to no longer be fun. Part of this was because people were not playing the game in a way conducive to what I found to be fun. I liked to go off the quad on stealth missions but the games were happening so quickly that they were over by the time I got back on the quad. Attackers would run en masse at the enemy flag in the hopes of outnumbering the defenders. I hated that. The other part of why I didn't enjoy capture the flag as much was because of all the complaining people were doing. People were complaining about the games being too short, about people not being successful at certain strategies, about other people complaining, about people not following the rules, and about

newcomers (not following the rules and not being successful at winning.) I had also noticed the way some people would deride and verbally abuse the newcomers by yelling at them for not following the rules or by doing something the particular veteran thought was stupid. I was sick of this environment and instead of trying to change it I simply started going less often.

Going into the ethnography I assumed that my interviewees would have seen the same things, especially after my interview with Chimera. He corroborated everything I had already thought. People were complaining too much, there was too much negative attitude, and too much bad treatment of the newcomers. He agreed with me that this was undoing CtF and might be its demise. Chimera blamed himself. He told me how he would organize defenses with the new people who didn't know what they were doing. He would order them to hold positions and fill in gaps when a defender left to escort someone to jail. Chimera believed that other veterans and newcomers who would become veterans saw him do this and began mimicking it themselves later on. This mimicking of Chimera's order-giving came off as aggressive and abusive especially when veterans would yell at newcomers for not following orders. Along with this Chimera believed that because he had created such good defenses it discouraged tactics other than simply overwhelming the defense with numbers. "I'm the downfall of capture the flag," lamented Chimera.

However, my other interviewees didn't seem to agree with Chimera and my own point of view. Both Anger Bloodthirst and the Scarlet Prince said that they were still having fun playing the game. The Scarlet Prince he didn't really notice the mistreatment of newcomers. Anger Bloodthirst said that he thought it was the veterans breaking the rules not the newcomers and that was what people were complaining about. Neither of them thought capture the flag was going to fall apart.

That's when I started looking back to when I was a Freshman playing capture the flag. I remembered that the veterans above me did complain a lot to the leader Longjohn just as now people complained to the leader Cyclopes. When I first told Puff Snake I wanted to interview him and why he didn't play anymore he said, "Because nothing's changed. Sometimes change is good." Perhaps very little changed but some things had.

Anger Bloodthirst mentioned that the mistreatment of players he saw was mainly at the beginning of the fall semester when huge influxes of students would come to play, at one game the total players numbered over a hundred. There had been some problems with sexual harassment going on and some general insults. With that number of people I couldn't imagine being able to find out who had done it, but Puff Snake said that there was some resentment of the brand new leader Cyclopes for not taking a harder approach. Puff Snake mentioned that Longjohn was an authoritative leader and would not have put up with that kind of behavior. Because Cyclopes did nothing it created a hostile and uncomfortable environment at CtF. The problem of sexual harassment left apparently when most of the newcomers left. Every semester less than ten newcomers, of the eighty or a hundred total, remain to play capture the flag.

There had been other problems with Cyclopes. Apparently at one point even before the incidents of sexual harassment there had been arguments and complaints about him. I was told by Chimera that there was some altercation between Cyclopes and a very well respected veteran which ended with Cyclopes screaming and storming off and the veteran leaving the game (not for good but for that night and several after.) Apparently some players met secretly had discussed overthrowing Cyclopes and replacing him with someone, or just starting a whole new club of capture the flag altogether. As Anger Bloodthirst said, Cyclopes was simply "not a strong leader." Here I felt guilty as Chimera had earlier. Both Chimera and I had been offered to take over the leadership roll after Longjohn was gone, but we both turned it down and it went to Cyclopes, the only person willing to do it. Would things have gone different if I had accepted the leader role?

Conclusion (of sorts):

Despite the friction that occurred and occurs, there is obviously enough value in CtF for people to return every week, and a few newcomers to remain to become veterans. The bonds of friendship people form there last a long time and are quite strong. The Scarlet Prince told me that he was still friends with people who used to play CtF but didn't anymore. Puff Snake, the interviewee who had left capture the flag to play dodgeball, said that he was now thinking of leaving dodgeball and that it would be a lot easier to leave dodgeball than it was to leave CtF because of the friendships he had formed there. Taking place in ISU's quad, an area belonging to all students, it is a place for students who would normally never meet because of where they live on campus to form a hub of social activity among similar minded people. It is also a place where incoming Freshmen, who are confused and alone in a new environment, can find some community to become a part of and form their initial social networking. It is a crucial part of the university for some of the students here.