

Interview with Marco Brambilla
NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

The following is a transcript of a conversation that took place on October 3, 2003 between Curator Anne Ellegood and artist Marco Brambilla.

ANNE ELLEGOOD: I would start by asking Marco to give us a little bit of his background. In particular, we will discuss his move from being a commercial filmmaker to his practice as a visual artist in the medium of video.

MARCO BRAMBILLA: I started making films in my early twenties. I began making television commercials where I experimented with a lot of different visual techniques using compact storytelling and very short narratives.

At the time I was also doing a lot of experimental work, which was purely visual and concept-based, so it didn't really have to do with selling product or advertising. I moved to Los Angeles in 1985, where I started making films for Hollywood studios, and got very disenchanted with the system and the amount of compromise involved in working with huge budgets and that kind of exposure. About five or six years ago, I moved back to New York, where I focussed on doing work which was more personal and more concept-based. This is some of the work we'll be talking about today.

ANNE ELLEGOOD: I am going to pose the question as Marco walks us through some of these earlier pieces, the best way for him to address the question is to talk about it in terms of the work that he'll be showing you. Marco was not an artist who had worked with video games previously. There are many artists who do work with video games more consistently in comparison. I was very curious why Marco would take on this topic. In looking at the work, I was trying to think about its relationship to the previous projects, and wanted to know what interested him in the subject of video games, and in particular the game "Counterstrike". I also wanted to know how he links it to these earlier pieces. I was particularly interested in the way that "HalfLife" relates to the idea of spectacle, which you will find in these earlier pieces- the role of surveillance in our society. Marco seems to have an interest in public spaces, like airports, where people tend to feel alienation from those around them despite the fact that they may be immersed in a sea of people.

MARCO BRAMBILLA: With relations to video games, I really didn't know very much about video games until I started work on the project "HalfLife," which is based on a massive multi-player video game called "HalfLife," which has a modification called "Counterstrike" within it. "Counterstrike" is a terrorist/anti-terrorist squad-based massive multi-player online video game. I worked on a film adaptation of a Neil Stevenson book called *Snow Crash* in 1995. Neil Stevenson basically predicted the proliferation of the

Internet, and how this virtual environment would become as important to people's behavior and psychology as the real environment, which they would inhabit in real life. The premise to his book was that as people became more disenfranchised with their real life surroundings, they would transpose a lot of their ego into characters that they would manufacture for themselves, or alter egos or avatars in virtual space.

Since the book was published, this has become completely reality. There are video games now where you have up to six million registered users, for instance "Counterstrike" has six million people who are registered online to play the game at any time. At any given time, you'll have between 600,000 to 700,000 players spread all over the world, engaged in these squad-based combats. They're split among these different virtual maps, where you have up to 30 to 40 people who can play the game in each map. One day you'll be playing someone from Seoul, Korea, you can be playing someone in the same cyber cafe.

The popularity of Counterstrike is based on the fact that it's a very complex game to master. With more sophisticated video games you have a situation where empowerment becomes an important part. The manual for "Counterstrike" is about 30 pages long. It requires one to develop abilities and to buy weapons, basically everything is done in a realistic fashion. As you get better at the game, and it takes a long time to master, you start to develop a skill set that you feel is as realistic as any skill that you would have in real life. Players are so immersed in the game, and that's what keeps them coming back.

What attracted my attention to this game was an article in the *New York Times* last year. A journalist reported a killing outside of a cyber cafe establishment in Garden Grove, a city just outside of L.A., where there is the highest density of cyber cafes anywhere in the world except for Asia. This neighborhood is primarily made up of Vietnamese, and South Korean immigrants. It's a very poor neighborhood, comprised mostly of strip malls. There's very little culture, very little kind of spiritual center anywhere in the place. The cyber cafes have become the meeting places for these largely disenfranchised kids who play for up to twelve hours a day. Their identity has definitely been split between the real world and the virtual world within Counterstrike. It's given rise to combinations of gang violence, and certain violence that has stemmed directly from events that have happened in cyberspace. The incident I read about was a stabbing incident outside a cyber cafe, where one of the players had been accused of cheating. You can install cheats on your computer that allow you to unfairly live longer relative to other players. These two kids were waiting for him outside the cyber cafe entrance at night, and he was stabbed to death outside the cyber cafe.

The cyber cafe has since closed. I went to the location and shot the surveillance footage of the players in the same cyber cafe before it was shut down. We shot "HalfLife" in three different cyber cafes in that area. Since then, more cyber cafes have been closed because of their relationship to the kind of violence that's gone on after they played the game.

A lot of my work tends to be about behavior modification. My work regards the way technology has given us the ability to replace real experience with virtual experience, allowing us to be in as many places as we want to be at one time. The question posed there is how does it effect our sense of ethics, morality and behavior. When you are in this virtual world, you essentially have very little accountability for your actions. So your actions have very little consequence. That's perhaps given rise to this feeling of how people have become less inhibited in this virtual world, but also desensitized by certain elements of violence specifically in this game.

Here are some examples of my work. As it relates some of my earlier pieces, the piece you're looking at right now is called "Approach." I shot 900 people coming into JFK Airport from very long haul flights. I was looking for the moment between arrival and recognition. The footage was processed so that this moment of anticipation became very organic, and very specific to the character of the person who we were focussing on off the plane. It was to catch people in a moment of when they're not inhibited, where they are very exposed. It was interesting for me to see how different personalities react to that kind of exposure in public space. I mean, this takes place at airports. There's a book written about airports called *NonWorld* where these traditional generic environments become like an incubator for a certain type of behavior. This is very similar to the way some of these people have the same kind of desensitized looks on their faces. It's very powerful. This piece was actually shown on monitors, like the airplane arrival and departure monitors in the gallery as a four-channel piece. When you walked into the gallery, you were looking at a very bright room with really bad florescent lighting. It was meant to make you feel a little bit uncomfortable. I picked these old kind of florescent tubes that actually had flicker to them. We suspended the four monitors off the ceiling to give the impression of this kind of never-ending conveyer belt of people, that would be looking directly at the viewer.

ANNE ELLEGOOD: The first question most people might have is what exactly we are looking at. How are you able to obtain that footage? I am interested in Marco's practice, his use of time, not just his decision to work with a time-based medium, but how time might work as a conceptual idea within his works. I was hoping he could address that in regards to this piece as well as this idea of the spectacle.

MARCO BRAMBILLA: What you just saw was actually a motorcycle stunt that's done outside of London. There's only one person who still does it anymore. It's called "The Wall of Death," like the piece is entitled, and basically you ride up a wooden cylinder, and rely on the centrifugal force to keep you on the wooden cylinder, perpendicular to the ground as long as you maintain a certain speed. You have to be traveling above 26 miles an hour and below 52 miles an hour, otherwise you fly off the top or fall on the ground.

This activity seemed like a really interesting analogy for a lot of the themes I'm interested in, and it really has a lot to do with equilibrium and maintaining a certain

sense of equilibrium in life and perception. Obviously the idea that it's happening in such a contained environment where the subjective and the objective are so extremely different. I tried to show that in the piece with the views from the top, and then putting the viewer directly inside the cylinder.

The "Wall of Death" activity was created around 1932. The film treatment I chose for that was to use the early motion studies as a film technique itself. Everything that you see in that piece is actually a film loop that gets progressively collapsed into shorter and shorter sections as he raises his arms off the handlebars, and becomes more free in a way. It's basically collapsing a time line that starts at about 30 seconds at the very beginning. The first shot is just under 30 seconds. The very last shot is probably about a third of a second. We're talking the idea of a cyclical visual that is very similar to if you were just to shoot it and have him traveling around uninterrupted, it would appear essentially identical. Everything you see after the fifth shot in that piece is actually cut, every time he goes around one orbit. The orbits are also an illusion. His progress is an illusion, his getting to an end is an illusion. So it's transitional. Everything in his state of mind is transitional. There is no end result to the activity or to his frame of mind at the time.

I really like playing with pieces that have no beginning or end like that. This is another piece actually which is actually called "Equilibrium," and I shot a guy at very high speed, slow motion on a green screen, and then photographed the skyline from midtown, and processed it to look like a computer screen refreshed. We had the feeling of this very kind of poetic gentle motion in the foreground juxtaposed with this electric kind of background that was very overpowering.

ANNE ELLEGOOD: Why did you choose the jumping motion here ... as you felt that reflected equilibrium?

MARCO BRAMBILLA: It was because of the stock market I think at the time. This was one of the proposals for Times Square. It was when the stock market was coming up and down, and everybody was losing their fortunes. We had someone that looks like a businessman here, kind of struggling to maintain some kind of peace of mind.

For "Sequel" I took some films from "Demolition Man," the actual film print, and re-photographed it inside a projector gate at a very high camera speed. We were looking at the material of celluloid as much as the image itself. The soundtrack is actually the TA checks sound that you hear at the beginning of film. I chose to include the soundtrack here to present the whole idea of the way celluloid is so antique at this point, because in another five years, nobody is going to know what film is, as digital distribution takes over.

I thought there was something very beautiful about the fragility of celluloid, obviously in the projector gate you get these beautiful very abstract color patterns. I thought it would

be interesting to reconstitute the image, and put the image back together. Then play it back in reverse.

ANNE ELLEGOOD: Is there a comment about technology within that? Because in the regeneration process, you're almost making a call for celluloid to remain a medium, and I don't know if you were thinking about that, were you?

MARCO BRAMBILLA: Yes, I have trouble sometimes with people talk about video games and the Internet, everything tends to be very specific for a moment in time. As technology becomes more ubiquitous, we're obviously going to have a media that will not be as long lasting as a book or celluloid or a record. Everything is more geared towards convenience and accessibility than it is towards being archival now.

ANNE ELLEGOOD: In looking and talking about a few of these earlier pieces, it's fairly apparent that you have a pretty strong understanding of the history of film. I'm quite interested your manipulations of the medium of video in various ways. If you could discuss what kinds of inspirations you get from the history of film, and how important you feel that is in your work.

MARCO BRAMBILLA: When I was growing up, I was a very big fan of Fellini, Antonioni and Stanley Kubrick. The formality in the works, and in the very early film experiments, where you have colorization, sepia tone, all done by hand on celluloid was very interesting to me. The duplication of those effects digitally has come into my work. We did some of that actually with the Counterstrike piece with HalfLife. The video game footage was actually re-photographed off a monitor with a video camera, but then it was put into a very expensive and very sophisticated computer system to emphasize the color palette.

When you're looking at the video game, each map only has a very limited color palette, and each one is completely distinguishable from another one. One may be predominantly green or predominantly blue. The one element that they all have in common is the muzzle flash from the guns. They are all accentuated and the same color. The blood that you see on the screen is also accentuated and exactly the same color, regardless of which map you are looking at.

What I tried to do with that is to pull the look of each of the tableaux as far apart as you could possibly get but then reimpose some common element which would have to do with the color of the most aggressive elements within it. They were the gunshots and the blood. Right now, you can basically do anything and duplicate any kind of look or background or a combination of lighting in the computer. It's become much more democratic now. There are people now who are able to do work that you couldn't even attempt to do five years ago without a huge financial backing.

It's going to become more interesting for video artists to explore using special effects and editing techniques and music because the technology is really available for everyone

right now. The way I usually shoot a piece like "Wall of Death" is I'll go out and shoot it on digital video tape, and do a sketch as it were. Then I'll go back and edit that sketch. For this piece, we went back and shot it in 35 millimeter, which is much more involved and more expensive.

ANNE ELLEGOOD: In the first incarnation of Marco's "HalfLife" exhibition, which took place in Los Angeles, it was set up slightly differently. There was one large projection, and then two other projections. The piece that you're watching now was shown on a monitor in the back, almost in an ante-gallery. It became a kind of footnote to the exhibition rather than a primary piece. When Marco and I were talking about the installation here, we decided to edit this piece out. And there were some interesting things in that decision I felt.

Our primary reason for doing that was that we felt we would have to show it probably in the lounge area, and so it would become one of the first piece that you came across, and would set the tone of the exhibition. It would also set a particular kind of emotional tenor that we did not want. However, it was a difficult decision to cut it out, because I felt that it most succinctly addressed this question of the breakdown of reality and fantasy. In particular, Marco's exhibition felt so relevant to me and is an important work to do in this gallery, because of the glut of particularly reality TV that we're seeing out there. It felt very pertinent to those questions. So his choice was to make this as a reality TV style reenactment with the dramatization flashing across the screen. It's only sixty seconds, a very short piece. It just shows repeatedly. It gives you the quality that we all experience where visual images in the news and in television and advertising just get repeated to us over and over again. That came up a lot obviously with 9/11, and whether that kind of process has the result of numbing us in some way. Those are all elements of the exhibition that I think come out regardless of editing out that piece. I think it's important for people just to see it and to know that it existed, when Marco was originally conceiving of this exhibition.

Since some people perhaps haven't seen this show, I thought Marco could describe the three elements that we do have installed, and how they are installed, and what the imagery is, and in particular how the elements relate to each other. Perhaps in particular, this piece that you are now viewing here. There are very particular editing decisions that Marco made for this piece in relationship to the game engine imagery that's on these six screens. I wanted him to describe that editing for you.

MARCO BRAMBILLA: To film this portion of the piece called "Surveillance", we put pinhole cameras inside liquid crystal displays. This way, I would be able to photograph the players without them knowing they were being photographed, and also keep the orbit there focussed with their eye orbit around the camera, rather than looking below or above the camera. There's always crosshairs on the screen when you're playing "Counterstrike," so you can see that their attention is very much focussed either at or around the camera.

One of the most surprising things for me was to see how intense their expressions were even in moments of extreme violence. There are some reactions and every player has a specific way of reacting. The overall feeling to me is this kind of almost hypnotic kind of a focus that comes with being a part of this virtual world. They're pretty oblivious to what's going on in the real world around them.

Once I shot this, we were able to edit it in a way that would correlate to the virtual worlds that are presented as the other channels in the piece. The virtual worlds are cut into two-minute life spans as it were, because the average life span of a player in "Counterstrike" is about a minute and fifty seconds. The maps that I described earlier are actually cut into these minute and fifty-second modules, which represent an average life span for these players. When one of these players is playing inside the map, you're able to know this because of a screen name. The screen names appear on the map.

When they are killed or injured to the point that they can no longer play, the screen goes black. A different player, who logs on from the same team replaces them. All the players are playing simultaneously. Since I'm only showing four, as each player gets knocked out of the game, his image goes black and then he is replaced by one of the other players playing on one of the teams.

The footage of the video games was shot simultaneous to them being in this virtual reality. We had a few cameras set up to be able to grab images from the TV screens in real time, while they were playing the game in real time. They were each cut together to create these kind of virtual life spans of the same duration.

In the "Game Engine Channel", you can see that the "Terminator" is the kid on the upper left, actually, when you saw the players. Every time you introduce a player here, you get the screen name, which relates back to the surveillance image. In shooting the game off the video screens, I actually zoomed into the pixels, and used a lot of camera techniques to intensify the experience that tried to duplicate the type of immersion that these kids were feeling when they're playing the game.

Rather than just having a full screen image, this image goes very close up and very wide. It accentuates all the key moments within the game. At any one point in the game, you can look at six or seven different multiple points of view. We chose different points of view that would work for the piece, and then cut them together.

The third channel in the piece appears in the Media Lounge, is called "Garden Grove." It's real time footage, which was shot at the same cyber cafe of these players while they're playing "Counterstrike" at. Basically, they play very relaxing, soothing music over the ambient speakers. The players are all wearing headphones, and most of the sound from the headphones is gunshots, explosions and crashing. It's a very well organized cyber cafe. It's very compact and quite beautiful in a way.

ANNE ELLEGOOD: The other element people might have noticed is that we put the game "Counterstrike" the subject of Marco's exhibition on the computer pods when you're in the lounge area. There are a few reasons why we made the decisions we did: One, I felt that a lot of work related to video games would be fitting for the contemporary audience at the New Museum. I also think many of our audiences are aware of certain visuals, or aesthetics in video games that artists may be using, but may not be familiar with the games themselves, especially with violent ones like this one. It was important to have the game available. That way, if people wanted to see how it actually works, they could sit down and try their hand at it. I think most people would find that it's difficult.

MARCO BRAMBILLA: Your average life span is 15 seconds.

ANNE ELLEGOOD: I think my average life span is shorter than 15 seconds. It was an opportunity for us to have the game on view and, readily available for certain visitors who were unfamiliar with the game. On the flip side of that, I'm hoping that kids and people in the gaming community will discover that it's here and available, and they can come use the Media Lounge to hang out and play.

In fact, at the opening the other night, we were able to get some kids to hang out throughout the opening and play the game. This allowed other visitors who weren't familiar with it to see how it's really played by people who know what they're doing. It's a fairly intense experience to watch someone who's quite good at the game play it. That was the other added element of the exhibition here that was kind of nice.

MARCO BRAMBILLA: A student in California completed an interesting piece where he recreated a cyber cafe in the computer, and staged a game in the cyber cafe with people shooting each other in a virtual cyber cafe. In the media, experience replacement, as well as the idea of being able to sample, experience, and access information like never before has laid the foundation for this kind of ego displacement. These kids in Garden Grove have a very mundane, yet real lifestyle. They're perfect candidates to embrace this virtual environment as a place where they would prefer to live. They strongly associate their personality and their skills with what they're able to do while they're inside "Counterstrike." I drove a few of them home one night after the shoot, and all their conversations revolved around the game. Even after they had left the cyber cafe, they were still talking about the type of weapons they had used, strategies they could have employed to make them more effective, and basically all other topics related to the game.

When you offer someone who feels as if they are in an undesirable situation, the opportunity to be anyone, it raises an important question of is it making people less inhibited or is it delusional in a way? I think some of these very popular massive multi-player games like "EverQuest" online have developed entire economies within the game. The Pentagon is studying these games as a way of studying the way social trends develop in society. Social trends tend to develop in these virtual worlds 50 times faster than they would in the real world. It's definitely a tool that could be used to see what would

happen if people were less inhibited, and less constrained by accountability and self-consciousness.

In one sense, people that spend time in these environments are actually less self-conscious about their actions than they would be in the real world. Is that good or bad?

ANNE ELLEGOOD: It's also important to mention that I was drawn to Marco's project because there are a lot of messages you may take from it, and certainly the discussion today brings up a lot of questions. I didn't feel that his exploration into video games or into "Counterstrike" in particular was reactionary in any way. I didn't feel that the project was waving a finger and saying video games are bad.

Instead it was more about highlighting the particular elements of the subcultures that really do exist. It was posing more questions than any kind of answers. I feel that my main interest in it was again this kind of blurring between reality and fiction that is so prevalent, and what does this game in particular have to say about that?

When you look at video games like "Counterstrike," and if you go to the website for "HalfLife" for example, you would see how the games are marketed, there's a lot of discussion around how real the game is, how the weapons are "real," how the locations are "real." Everything is described as real. And I find that really fascinating because what do we really mean then? It is a game, after all.

Many people would argue that it's a harmless game that kids play, and has nothing to do with real life. Yet there seems to be this constant flux between this question of what's real and what's fantasy. The project proposed those questions in a really interesting way, and it comes up again and again around us in other mediums.

I also thought a lot about, once the project was underway. We went to war with Iraq, and in light of some of the recent news that a lot of the reasoning that our President gave us for going to war seems to be in fact a certain fiction in and of itself. Where do these definitions and these distinctions really come into play? Are we as a society starting to accept much more interplay between those two things?

Another example and this has been on my mind so much with Marco's installation, so I'm very aware of what I'm reading in the next new show on HBO called "K Street". The whole premise of K Street is looking at the politics of Washington, D.C., and in particular K Street in Washington where a lot of political play goes down. The show features lobbyists as the stars of the show. Then real footage of filming actual occurrences comes into play. For instance, "K Street" has used clips from the Democratic Presidential debates in the show. There is this way in which "real people" are actors, politicians' actions are being brought into the show as part of the fiction of the show, and there's really no distinction between the two. That's another example of something surrounding us that seems to be pertinent to Marco's project. Do people have questions in the audience about the project, earlier work, anything?

Woman in the audience: I'm curious about your relationship with the kids themselves, and where the owners of the venue go to play. You had said that you embedded a surveillance camera in this screen, which surveillance implies that someone is being photographed without his or her knowledge. I'm wondering, since you did have this relationship with the kids, did they know they were being photographed. Did you actually replace computers with ones you had generated?

MARCO BRAMBILLA: Yes, we did. We had to replace I think three or four screens with the ones we had created. We got permission to do that from the owners of the cyber cafes, in exchange for payment. And eventually we were there for three days, so obviously towards the end of that schedule, the players became more aware that something was going on. At least for the first day I'm quite certain that they weren't really aware of being photographed. Interestingly enough, once they did become suspicious of somebody photographing them, it basically did not change their performance on camera at all. They still remained just as focussed on the game and just as unaware of the camera as before they found out.

Woman in the audience: Were there any legal issues that the owner of the cafe was concerned with?

MARCO BRAMBILLA: No, we approached them and said we were doing a documentary-style footage on the game that's a phenomenon here. We were trying to be as respectful as possible. They were surprisingly cooperative, especially at the cyber cafe that got shut down due to the shooting that had occurred.

ANNE ELLEGOOD: I felt that Marco's piece that you see as you come in Garden Grove was also pertinent to the fact that once this violence occurred in Garden Grove, it became more of a requirement that the cyber cafes put in their own surveillance systems. The way he used surveillance to give you a sense of how the cyber cafes and the subcultures around them look, depicts how surveillance has become an integral part of those cafes.

Man in the audience: I noticed that the kids were very docile with any videotape of people, like when they got shot, did they curse or did they bang the table or were they all just docile?

MARCO BRAMBILLA: Surprisingly, they were all incredibly well-behaved, docile, and very focussed on mastering the game. What you have to understand is the big appeal of a game like "Counterstrike" is that you build up this skill set. You become empowered, because the game is difficult to master. From their point of view, they're doing something, which is actually elevating their knowledge of combat. They are studying it as much as playing it. In terms of people banging their hands on the table, I didn't see that. I think there was one kid we shot actually in Los Angeles at the cyber café, where it was a little bit crazier, because they were all playing within the same environment, and

there was more communication going on between the players. It was a little bit more rowdy that way.

In Garden Grove it was actually very focussed and intense. There was very little of that kind of expression. I also went to scout a couple of cyber cafes in New York. The interesting thing about New York versus California was that in New York most of the people in the cyber cafe are playing against each other, so they are also talking to each other over the consoles while they're playing. In L.A., most of the people are actually playing remotely with people in other locations. There is very little communication between the people.

ANNE ELLEGOOD: October 28th, we are doing a "Counterstrike" competition here in the gallery. We're inviting in particular people who are adept at the game to come and play each other. I suppose anybody is welcome to join in. If you want to see the kids in action, that would be the time to come and check that out. It's in the evening at six o'clock.

Woman in the audience: Concerning the "Wall of Death" piece, I'm interested in the sound, and where I can see that the sound is directly related to the edits that you do in the piece. Is the original sound filmed on site? Or do you work with a composer? If you could talk a little bit more in general about your process, and other people, you work with.

MARCO BRAMBILLA: Yes, I work with a sound designer who's actually done about three or four of these projects. We recorded field sound of the motorcycle; we actually put microphones on the wooden structure itself to record kind of low frequency sounds. We took this sample from the location, combined it with a more musical sample that was still a very simple kind of note that didn't have a melodic structure to it per se. We processed it with an equalizer that would create rhythms within the same note, but you were actually using exactly the same sample over and over again. At the same time, you were creating these weird different shapes of sound by changing the equalization.

Technically, I don't know exactly the tool that he used. Basically I wanted it to feel like one sample reconfigured in as many ways as possible to match each cut, and then looped in as many times as possible without it becoming too repetitive. It would have a breadth and have a rhythm without relying on a melodic structure of its own.

The process usually involves a sketch of the piece. I put my own sound track to it and then once I shot the final piece, I'll work with my sound designer on doing the final sound for it.

Woman in the audience: I thought the sound was inaudible.

MARCO BRAMBILLA: The sound here was a little challenging, because we had six video channels for the game engine itself, plus the main channels. The ambient for the main

channel is this drone that's actually traffic noise, but slowed down to 20 percent. It's a very low frequency at that point. That was the cue for the players. In each of the game environments, we recorded actual sounds from "Counterstrike," and then processed them to feel more psychological, more immediate. Every gunshot had an echo process to it and it felt a little bit more like you were inside the game as opposed to watching it on a screen. We worked hard to make the sound as unusual as possible.

Here it's quite challenging because we have to use six speakers, and hope that each channel didn't interfere with other channels, so the sound levels aren't quite as high as they would be if you had more space to show it.

Woman in the audience: I wondered if Marco's good at playing "Counterstrike," and also you had mentioned the 30-page manual that you have to read. I wonder if you think the kids actually read and refer to that. In the piece where it appears that the film burns, is that actually the film burning or did you create that effect digitally?

MARCO BRAMBILLA: For the second question, that was actually filmed burning. When you stop it in the shutter like that with an old projector, it actually does that, so we were able to get it to actually burn like that. As for the first question, I'm not very good at "Counterstrike." I played a couple of levels with the players, and I got fairly good at it but I'm not at the point where I could even spend a minute in the game without getting shot. As for the way the kids play, they do read the manual, and they do have really incredible interaction on the web and chat rooms. They give each other advice for tricks and shortcuts that they can use to complete missions in a more successful way.

There are people who are very accomplished at the game. One of the kids we shot was number seven in the world, and he was a celebrity in Garden Grove. He was known by his screen name on the street basically. There are 600,000 players online at any given time. Number seven was actually one of the players who we shot. When you're in the game, people will log on to his game, his map, just to watch him play. There is a tremendous difference between someone who's just starting who doesn't really know all the tricks and all the shortcuts, and someone like that who's been playing for years and has this incredible knowledge of the game inside out.

The 30-page manual is something that a lot of these players do read as training basically. It's almost like training for real combat.

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