

Training Recruits and Conditioning Youth

The Soft Power of Military Games

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The 26-year-old Dutch gamer Samir is still shocked by the reaction and outcry regarding his fan movie, “SonicJihad: A Day in the Life of a Resistance Fighter.”¹ After all, he created his video using only material and elements drawn from the first-person shooter (FPS) PC game *Battlefield 2* (2005) and its expansion pack *Battlefield 2: Special Forces* (2005). On December 26, 2005, Samir posted the movie on a much-frequented message board of one of the many online *Battlefield* communities, with the caveat: “Don’t see it as a jihadi movie, but as a comical look at the other side . . .” (SonicJihad, 2005).

Fast forward to May 4, 2006. The U.S. House of Representatives’ Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence holds an open hearing, an uncommon event as most of these hearings take place behind closed doors. The panel seeks to answer how global terrorist organizations use information and communication technologies to their advantage. Then, a government contractor from Science Applications International Corp. (SAIC) takes the floor and shows various examples of their research on “Al-Qaeda or radical Islamists on the Web.” The presentation ends with:

And then lastly, we want to show you *Battlefield 2*. This is made by an American company. But they [terrorists] have created a new trailer and a plug-in, which if you register and send them \$25, you can play it. And here is the advertisement.

(House Select Intelligence Committee, 2006)²

A clip is played. The clip, or “advertisement” and “trailer” in the contractor’s words, is Samir’s fan movie.

Soon after the hearing, the Reuters news agency issues a story titled “Islamists using U.S. video games in youth appeal” (Morgan, 2006). In minutes CNN, Fox News, and the *Washington Post* copy the Reuters report, and the story spreads swiftly. The original Reuters account contains several remarkable passages,

such as: “But in a modified video trailer posted on Islamic Web sites and shown to lawmakers, the game depicts a man in Arab headdress carrying an automatic weapon into combat with U.S. Invaders” (ibid.). Unfortunately, the Reuters reporter was not familiar with game culture in general, or the *Battlefield 2* expansion pack in particular. *Battlefield 2* allows gamers, without any modification whatsoever, to play as the “insurgents” or Opposing Forces. For a hearing that deals with misinformation, half-truths and propaganda, the meeting’s misunderstandings and distortions offer an ironic but a sobering portrait of the power of video games and new media to play into existing moral, political, and security panics.

Reuters’ initial erroneous press release concludes: “SAIC executive Eric Michael said researchers suspect Islamic militants are using video games to train recruits and condition youth to attack U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq” (Morgan, 2006). In a subsequent personal interview with a Dutch national newspaper, Samir indicated that he, before the incident, in fact, looked forward to visiting the U.S. but now he had become a bit anxious about doing so (Funnekotter and Nieborg, 2006). Like other gamers, he was stunned both by Reuters’ sloppy reporting and because of the double standard regarding video games’ representation of real-world combatants. After all, if there was such uproar about exploiting youth for Jihadi recruitment, Samir wondered, “What about *America’s Army*?” (ibid.).

The *America’s Army* Platform

This chapter examines *America’s Army*’s (2002) unique position within a global game culture in light of Samir’s remarks on the role of video games and—what can most easily be characterized as—propaganda. The military’s use of video games, and *America’s Army* in particular, signals the utility of game culture for the dissemination of State-produced propaganda as part of a wider U.S. strategic communication campaign (Nieborg, 2006). The freely downloadable *America’s Army* cleverly mixes educational, ludic, marketing, and propaganda elements that fits comfortably into the FPS genre, while also promoting a highly politicized recruiting and public relations agenda.

“The official U.S. Army game,” as the game is commonly referred to in its U.S. marketing materials, is best described as an online, multiplayer, squad-based tactical FPS game played on the PC. The game is distributed via peer-to-peer software and various game websites, and is developed and maintained under the direct supervision of the U.S. Army. The game’s expressed goal is to inform and interact with popular culture rather than to persuade or indoctrinate, and to raise awareness of the U.S. Army brand, rather than to recruit directly. A central theme of the game’s design is the varied opportunities awaiting gamers who pursue a career in the Army, and it is this opportunity for a direct recruitment solicitation

that was the primary catalyst for the game's initial development. Having commerce at the core of its brand identity, the PC game exemplifies the linkage of commercial goals with a cultural text through creating engaging experiences (Van der Graaf and Nieborg, 2003). In a fully branded virtual world as well as through its accompanying online community, both of which draw primarily on corporate aesthetics, gamers are positioned to get an overall favorable impression of the U.S. Army as an institution. As such, *America's Army* can be positioned within an emerging corporate tendency to create immersive advertisements in the form of entertainment, offering customers memorable sensory experiences that tie in with the positioning of a company, product, or service.

Since its introduction on July 4, 2002, the *America's Army* brand has expanded significantly with the Xbox game *America's Army: Rise of a Soldier* (2005), *America's Army: True Soldiers* (2007) for the Xbox 360, and the mobile phone game *America's Army: Special Operations* (2007). The most popular version of the game is *America's Army 3* (2009) for the PC. In addition, dedicated fans can buy *America's Army* action figures, apparel, and other paraphernalia on armygame gear.com, or seek out an *America's Army* cabinet in an arcade hall.

Rather than pursuing a series of updated games on various platforms, i.e. the standard non-governmental commercial game franchise, *America's Army* has become more of an expandable technology platform that allows for future gaming developments with relatively little costs to the military. According to its website: "The *America's Army* 'Platform' (AAP) is a government-owned core technology and content infrastructure designed to support existing warfighters, instructors & students through a new generation of low cost, PC-based, web-deployable, interactive training" (U.S. Army, 2005). This elaborate set of governmental applications uses advanced proprietary game technologies for various training tools (e.g., for land navigation), and modeling and simulation applications (e.g., weapon testing). The different non-public game technologies are used by various U.S. governmental organizations (e.g., the U.S. Secret Service), and are built by internal developers, commercial game studios, and U.S. Army researchers.

Given the dynamic pliability and multifarious still-emergent nature of the gaming technology, the AAP should be considered at least four things in one: an advergaming, an edugame, a testing tool, and a propaganda game. The edugame and testing (i.e., modeling and simulation) dimensions of the platform are most evident in the governmental applications, while the public version of the game features all four dimensions. Hereafter only the public version of the PC game will be analyzed since it offers us a salient inroad for analyzing the game's varied uses and ramifications.

Since the aim of this chapter is to deepen the understanding of the politics of play in modern wargames supported by the government, this chapter employs *America's Army* as a special case study because it is one of the few, State-produced,



Figure 3.1 *America's Army* arcade cabinet. Image used with permission from Global VR

highly visible and successful games to mobilize such an overt persuasive agenda (Løvlie, 2007). And, because *America's Army* has such a pronounced role as a strategic communications tool for the U.S. military, it raises the question: How do government messages become manifest in wargames that sell themselves as entertainment? To best address this question, I draw on the notion of “soft power” and provide a short discussion of the Global War on Terror as a war on/of ideas. It is my contention that modern warfare has already become a familiar and commoditized intertext—a set of, oftentimes transmedial, self-referential texts which have common narratives and/or themes (cf. Marshall, 2002)—which aid in the popular acquiescence to pro-military themes and agendas.

The militarization of popular culture is nothing new. Pro-military subject matter has long existed in television shows, movies, toys, and digital and non-digital games (Regan, 1994; Hall, 2003). Yet what makes *America's Army* such an interesting case study in this military-entertainment history is that its foundational technology possesses an adaptive and interactive character that allows its game developers and military personnel to design and produce cultural artifacts that function more dynamically than more passive and traditional forms of mediated entertainment.

Digital Games as Soft Power

Les Brownlee, the former Acting Secretary of the Army, and General Peter J. Schoomaker, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, emphasize the long-term character of the current Global War on Terror:

This is not simply a fight against terror—terror is a tactic. This is not simply a fight against al Qaeda, its affiliates, and adherents—they are foot soldiers. This is not simply a fight to bring democracy to the Middle East—that is a strategic objective. This is a fight for the very ideas at the foundation of our society, the ways of life those ideas enable, and the freedoms we enjoy.

(Brownlee and Schoomaker, 2004, p. 4)

The Global War on Terror is not only a war on stateless criminals but, according to U.S. government officials—like former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld—it is also “a war of ideas” (Rumsfeld, 2003). It is a war to spread freedom and liberty—i.e., values appropriated by and associated with the United States (Nye, 2004). The Bush administration’s mishandling of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has had devastating results on international opinion concerning the U.S.’s political leadership and its aggressive foreign policy. “The war has increased mistrust of America in Europe, weakened support for the War on Terrorism, and undermined U.S. credibility worldwide” (Defense Science Board, 2004, p. 15). The U.S.’s

suffering global image and the dwindling international support for the Global War on Terror is also supported by the polling data of the Pew Research Center (2006). And although freedom, democracy, and free market capitalism are values largely shared around the world, the Bush administration is seen as the main culprit for the waning support for the U.S.-led military interventions.

In his 2004 book *Power, terror, peace, and war—America's grand strategy in a world at risk* foreign relations expert Walter Russell Mead reflects on the U.S.'s changing superpower status. In his opening chapter he addresses the almost messianic role of American grand strategy, to spread peace, freedom, and liberty around the world using various forms of power. Mead builds on Joseph Nye's (2002) distinction between hard and soft power, offering two sub-categories for both. Hard power is divided into sharp (military) and sticky (economic) power, whereas soft power (cultural power) is split into hegemonic and sweet power. As comic books and Coca-Cola are part of the U.S.'s sweet power, so too are games, movies, and television series. According to Mead and Nye the Global War on Terror cannot be won by hard power alone, but requires soft power as well: "In any case, American sweet power, though limited and variable, clearly plays an important role in winning sympathy and support for American foreign policy around the world" (Mead, 2004, pp. 39–40). Unlike government propaganda, soft power is not under the State's strict control, and has—just as hard military power—its limits. *America's Army* is not only a public relations tool and a compelling cultural artifact, but it is a powerful example of the U.S.'s ability to successfully wield soft, and thus sweet power by tapping into and affecting popular culture by becoming culturally popular.

America's Army as Advergame

Anti-American attitudes are not only a direct threat to U.S. national security, but they also undermine the last remaining superpower's soft power. Since soft power is manufactured primarily by commercial enterprises, it is no surprise that the U.S. military is eager to appropriate such valuable practices. The Defense Science Board (2004) points directly to the private sector firms that excel at branding, marketing, and communicating messages with agendas. One way to do this is by using "interactive and mediated channels," because "pervasive telecommunications technology permits the cost effective engagement of target audiences in sustained two-way interactions using electronic mail, interactive dialogue, virtual communication, interactive video games, and interactive Internet games" (ibid., pp. 57–58). In other words, commercial games should be leveraged for the U.S. war effort. The commercial success of military-themed games like *Battlefield 2* (2006), *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), and *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* (2006) not only indicate the sweet power potential of military-themed

games generally, but they seemingly invite governmental appropriation given the ways in which they overlap ideologically with the Bush administration's varied clandestine (i.e., Black/Ghost Ops) and spectacular military interventions (i.e., Shock and Awe).

The U.S. military and a global game culture are profoundly interlinked on technical, cultural and economic levels, and the abundant, perennial presence of modern warfare in computer games is a consequence of this linkage and a catalyst for additional projects of this kind. The technological symbiosis between games for entertainment and military training enjoys a long history. With the end of the Cold War, the structure of the U.S. military, and the way U.S. forces would wage future wars, changed dramatically (Toffler and Toffler, 1995). Simultaneously, the research and development of modeling and simulation techniques flourished in the commercial entertainment industries (e.g., 3D graphics, higher speed connectivity, more advanced PCs). The booming innovation of commercial simulation technology did not go unnoticed by the U.S. military, as the vast and influential military-industrial complex transformed into the military-entertainment complex during the 1990s (see Der Derian, 2001; Lenoir and Lowood, 2005). The reach of the military-entertainment complex extends well beyond simulation technologies used for formal training purposes, however. Films, television series, toys, and other entertainment products are co-developed with the direct input of military interests (Hall, 2003; Robb, 2004).

The prevailing representation and simulation of modern warfare in games demonstrate that there is already a common understanding about the generic conventions of digital war. A global gaming culture, with its military origins of interactive play, is fueled largely by games centered on armed conflict, eagerly developed by young males for young males (Kline, Dyer-Witford, and de Peuter, 2003). Consider many of the gamic conventions in the FPS genre: the fetishization of weaponry, the focus on infantry and close-quarters combat, and the emphasis on rankings and multiplayer competitions. To effectively tap into popular culture the Army exploits existing technological, cultural, and economic frameworks of transmedia production networks, harnessing the collaborative nature of online game communities, and uses them to their advantage; thus, spreading the Army's symbolic capital in the process of free game distribution (Van der Graaf and Nieborg, 2003).

America's Army as Edugame

According to the *Official Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, propaganda is defined as: "Any form of communication in support of national objectives designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly" (Department

of Defense, 2004, p. 427). Propaganda is thus a message with a clear intention, known at forehand by its sender, meant to influence behavior; it is “a process of persuasion” teaching people to think of a given subject in a particular light (Taylor, 1998, p. 18). Three of *America’s Army’s* four dimensions overlap conceptually, as propaganda, advertisement and education share much in common. While *America’s Army* is first and foremost a sophisticated marketing tool, it also (literally) teaches gamers what it takes to be in the U.S. Army (e.g., the CPR skills for a medic).

The ongoing Global War on Terror calls for more soldiers and thus more recruits. The Iraq War in particular has put heavy strains on the Army’s human resources. However, while *America’s Army* is a branding tool and recruiting aid within the U.S., its worldwide availability potentially works against the platform’s recruitment goals. The FAQ section on the official website explains why someone outside the U.S. can play *America’s Army*: “We want the whole world to know how great the U.S. Army is” (U.S. Army, 2007).

America’s Army’s main design and gameplay principles are to create virtual replicas of key aspects of professional life in the U.S. Army (though the main focus is squarely on combat). As an important institution in American society, the U.S. Army directly and indirectly represents certain social and civic values. In fact, the game’s loading screen features the Soldier’s Creed:

I am a Warrior and a member of a team. I serve the people of the United States and live the Army Values . . . I stand ready to deploy, engage, and destroy the enemies of the United States of America in close combat. I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life. I am an American Soldier.

(*America’s Army*, 2003)

It is clearly a virtual moral contract or code of ethics. When the game has finished loading, the creed disappears and the player enlists in the digital U.S. Army.

***America’s Army* as Propaganda**

One of the ways *America’s Army* aims to positively influence its gamers’ attitudes is by showing that violence used by the U.S. Army is justified because freedom must be defended. Additionally, players are taught that the U.S. Army is a professional and ethical organization, based on the U.S. Army values: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage (or, LDRSHIP). To contextualize these values, *America’s Army* imbues common gameplay actions and FPS combat scenarios with political and ideological content whereby its institutional rhetoric and values are made explicit. A vivid example of this technique emerges during the first “medic training” lecture, which is one part of the single player campaign. A virtual drill sergeant booms:

In many cases, you will be risking your own life in a selfless way to provide first-aid. You are doing what's right, and showing personal courage, both physically and morally. By performing first-aid, we are living up to the Army value of honor, because saving a human life brings honor to yourselves and to the United States Army.

(America's Army)

In his critique of the many “myths of war” Chris Hedges argues: “The hijacking of language is fundamental to war” (2002, p. 34). Common in-game actions, such as nurturing, self-sacrifice, and acts of (virtual) heroism, are reframed in the game by adding Army values to them, such as “loyalty,” “selfless-service,” and “personal courage.” *America's Army* propagates the U.S. Army ethos and, by extension, the rationale and legitimation of the U.S.'s foreign policy.

In short, the game presents gamers with an institutionally sanctioned version of how the U.S. Army fights and why. The larger question—“Why?”—is made explicit in the official 224-page *America's Army* game manual. It states: “while tactical movement and communications are often essential to the success of a mission, the U.S. Army exists to defend freedom, and employing force in combat is an important element of their job” (Tran, 2003, p. 36). Lethal force is justified as a legitimate and necessary state action: “By mediating the definitions of violence, nation states have the ability to shield their own uses of force from censure and, furthermore, to manipulate representations of their uses of force to inspire citizens” (Hall, 2003, p 27). The game justifies and educates others on how to dispense proper lethal force so as to defend freedom.

America's Army understands its commitment to creating the player-as-U.S.-soldier identification by way of an ingenious but abrupt break with typical FPS design conventions. Even though *America's Army* is an online multiplayer game, any one gamer's point of view is, by design, restricted to that of an American soldier. In practice this means that both teams, those on offense and those on defense, see themselves and their team as U.S. Army soldiers and the enemy force as the Opposing Force (OpFor). It is not uncommon for there to be a modicum of character choice in commercial shooter games, where one can play as a German, British, American, or Russian soldier. In *America's Army* the gamer always plays as a member of the U.S. Army, though they appear to the opponent as the enemy. Mirroring the rhetorical ways in which news reporters wield “we” and “us” to conflate the complex logic of war into the more streamlined ideology of good versus evil and us versus them (Taylor, 1998), the “we” and “us” in *America's Army* is always-already the U.S. Army. Thus the terrorist or the OpFor team choice, which appear in such popular FPS games as *Counter-Strike* (1999) and *Call of Duty 4* (2007) respectively, is purposely elided to guarantee that gamers identify only with the right point of view: that of the American soldier.

America's Army as Strategic Communication

The developers of *America's Army* do not frame the game as a recruiting tool or an advergame, but as a "strategic communication tool" (Davis, 2004). Although the definition that follows does not explicitly mention *America's Army*, or any video game for that matter, it offers a valuable insight into the rationale of using strategic communication as a form of sweet power:

strategic communication describes a variety of instruments used by governments for generations to understand global attitudes and cultures, engage in a dialogue of ideas between people and institutions, advise policymakers, diplomats, and military leaders on the public opinion implications of policy choices, and influence attitudes and behavior through communications strategies.

(Defense Science Board, 2004, p. 11)

The line, then, between strategic communication and propaganda is a fine one, if it exists at all. The renewed attention to the role that strategic communication plays within the U.S. defense community is, in large part, a recent by-product of the Global War on Terror. Yet, Kenneth Osgood's analysis (2006) shows that the military strategic communication efforts enjoy a long institutional history. For example, at the beginning of the Cold War, the Eisenhower administration established various overt and clandestine government programs to win the "hearts and minds" of American citizens and individuals living abroad. The Defense Science Board, along with key players within the U.S. government, sees strategic communication as a vital component of America's national security and foreign policy efforts.

The U.S. government uses four instruments in deploying strategic communication: public diplomacy, public affairs, international broadcasting services, and information operations. Toffler and Toffler (1995) discuss the different levels of strategy "at which the military propaganda game," i.e., strategic communication, "is played" (p. 194). Information Operations, also known within the U.S. military as Psychological Operations (PSYOPS), are used at the tactical level of strategy through radio transmissions, leaflets, or television broadcasts aimed at foreigners in order to influence their attitude and behavior. Today various Psychological Operations are conducted in Iraq, but these operations are "failing miserably," just as they did during the Vietnam War (Kodosky, 2006, p. 3). Advising the U.S. Secretary of Defense regarding "the creation and dissemination of all forms of information in support of [PSYOPS] in time of military conflict," in 2000 the Defense Science Board recommended the use of "other media types" for PSYOPS. Interestingly, online games in particular are singled out for their popularity:

[Video games] can be disseminated by a number of techniques, ranging from diskettes to web downloads. Internet games allow a number of geographically dispersed players to participate in a large, shared virtual space. [. . .] All are suitable for PSYOP in some situations.

(Defense Science Board, 2000, p. 43)

Although *America's Army* is not currently used on the battlefield as a tactical PSYOPS tool, it may as yet become one because it is a complex, technological platform and not just a single, stand-alone game.

Public opinion has always been an important factor in warfare. Two other components of strategic communication, public diplomacy and public affairs, are aspects of strategic communication that are more directly related to the use of *America's Army*. Public diplomacy is an interactive way to inform foreigners about U.S. culture, values, and policy (e.g., by offering scholarships, official websites in non-English languages, and televised interviews with ambassadors and military commanders). As discussed previously, *America's Army* explicitly communicates various values, policies and views on U.S. culture. By doing so, *America's Army* is much more than a free game—it is part of the U.S. public diplomacy efforts. The success of *America's Army*, in terms of its registered and active players, explains the subsequent expansion of the *America's Army* brand. The game and its affiliated entertainment products may end up being some of the cheapest but most effective information weapons in the U.S. arsenal.

Conclusion

America's Army is, to fall back on a tired cliché, more than “just a game.” To answer Samir’s opening question, *America's Army* is highly successful at, quite literally, training U.S. Army recruits as well as conditioning a global youth culture through a single game. The game has become a powerful vessel for disseminating U.S. Army ideology and foreign policy to a global game culture. By showing a worldwide audience why and how the U.S. Army fights, the game positions itself as a key example of public diplomacy through the exchange of “ideas to build lasting relationships and receptivity to a nation’s culture, values, and policies” (Defense Science Board, 2004, p. 12). It even may qualify as a psychological tool that uses select information “to influence the attitudes and behavior” of “groups, and individuals in support of military and national security objectives” (p. 13).

Entertainment has long been an indispensable instrument in the propagandist’s toolbox. However, the highly sanitized view on modern warfare in *America's Army* is constructed by the U.S. Army itself, a more controlled endeavor than embedding journalists or influencing Hollywood scripts. The Defense Science Board (2004)

is clear about the role of video games in the wider military-entertainment complex: namely, that its contractors should develop even more games for popular dissemination. *America's Army*, then, as a free and technologically sophisticated game, is a preeminent application of soft power by the U.S. military. The game shows non-U.S. citizens that the U.S. Army is a highly trained, professional force, willing to fight against “those who oppose freedom” and it does so in a highly engaging interactive dialogue with gamers, through both the game and its vibrant fan community. By employing a discourse of authenticity the U.S. Army wields its institutional discursive power to market their game to a target group of gamers—i.e., teens and pre-teens—who are also, potentially, their future warfighters.

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Notes

1. According to Samir, his in-game name, SonicJihad, refers to an album of the American rapper Paris. You can see his videos on his YouTube channel: <http://www.youtube.com/SonicJihad>.
2. Actually, *Battlefield 2* is developed by Digital Illusions CE, a Swedish game development studio, and is published and globally distributed by the major U.S. game publisher Electronic Arts.

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