'We want the whole world to know how great the U.S. Army is!' - Computer Games and Propaganda

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to deepen the understanding of the representation and simulation of modern war in commercial PC-games within the context of the military-entertainment complex. The game *America's Army*, developed by the U.S. Army, will be used as a case study to explore the use of ingame propaganda. *America's Army* is firmly grounded in the expanding military-entertainment complex and signals the successful linking of entertainment and defense. The main question will be then: Are games, and in particular *America's Army*, able to communicate a propagandistic message and in of so, in which way? In addition the U.S. military's usage of strategic communication will be discussed.

Keywords

Games, First Person Shooter, Americas Army, Propaganda, Public Diplomacy

Introduction

The 26-year old Dutch gamer Samir is still a bit surprised. He just made a fan movie, a fairly common practice in the *Battlefield* community. He used video material from the First Person Shooter PC-game *Battlefield 2* (Digital Illusions CE, 2005) and named his creation: "SonicJihad: A Day in the Life of a Resistance Fighter". His screen name SonicJihad refers to an album of the American rapper Paris. December 26, 2005 Samir posted the movie on a message board and replied to some questions from other players: "dont see it as a jihadi movie, but as a comical look at the other side..."[1]

Fast forward to May 4, 2006. The U.S. House of Representatives' permanent select intelligence committee holds an open hearing, an uncommon event as most hearings are behind closed doors. The panel seeks to answer how global terrorist organisations use information and communication technologies to their advantage. Peter Hoekstra, the committee's chairman, underlined the importance of the meeting: "As a nation, it is critical that we understand the specific and sophisticated nature of the threat we still face from Al-Qaeda and from radical Islamist terror. It is also critical we understand that the global war on terror is not just being fought on land, it is being fought in cyberspace as well" (2006). Then, a government contractor from Science Applications International Corp. (SAIC) takes the floor and shows various examples of their research on anti-American websites. The presentation ends with:

> And then lastly, we want to show you "Battlefield II" (sic). This is made by an American company. But they [the terrorists, DBN] 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.

A clip is played. The clip, or "advertisement" and "trailer" as the contractor refers to it, is Samir's movie. *Battlefield 2* is developed by a Swedish game studio, which also developed the official expansion pack *Battlefield 2: Special Forces*. The contractor rambles on and is complemented for his efforts.

Several hours after the hearing the press agency Reuters issues a press release titled "Islamists using US video games in youth appeal" (Morgan, 2006). In minutes CNN, Fox News, the Washington Post and others copy the Reuters report and the story spreads like wildfire. The Reuters press release contains several remarkable passages: "But in a modified video trailer posted on Islamic Web sites and shown to lawmakers,

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[1]   *Topic: Sonicjihad: A Day in the Life of a Resistance Fighter (Movie)*. 2005. Planet Battlefield Forums. Available: http://www.forumplanet.com/planetbattlefield/topic.asp?fid=13670&tid=1806909. May 5, 2006.

the game depicts a man in Arab headdress carrying an automatic weapon into combat with U.S. Invaders" (ibid). The Reuters reporter was apparently not familiar with the *Battlefield 2* expansion pack where one can play as an "insurgent". For a hearing that deals with misinformation, half-truths and propaganda, the mix-up must be a sobering experience.

Reuters' initial erroneous press release ended with: "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." In a subsequent interview for a Dutch national newspaper (Funnekotter & Nieborg, 2006), Samir indicated that he was stunned by the reporting of Reuters. Not only because of its inaccuracy, but what about *America's Army*?

The America's Army Platform

Over the years *America's Army* has become more of a platform than one single and stable game. Or as the official website explains: "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."[2] This elaborate set of governmental modifications uses proprietary game technology for various training tools (e.g. for land navigation), and modeling and simulation applications (e.g. weapon testing). The governmental versions are used by all kinds of governmental organizations, for instance the U.S. Secret Service. This group of governmental applications is not available for the public and is build by specialized sub-groups of developers and U.S. Army researchers.

The most well know version of *America's Army*, is its public version, or as version 2.7 is labeled *America's Army: Special Forces (Overmatch)* (U.S. Army, 2006). The official U.S. Army game is best described as an online multiplayer squad-based tactical First Person Shooter PC-game (Nieborg, 2005). The game is distributed for free and is also developed under the auspices of the U.S. Army. The goal of the game is to inform popular culture rather than to persuade, and to raise awareness of the U.S. Army brand, rather than to recruit directly, which is done by a large group of dedicated U.S. Army recruiters. Having commerce at the core of its brand identity, the game exemplifies the linkage of commercial goals with a cultural text through creating

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[2]   "America's Army Platform: Technology". 2005. U.S. Army. April 22, 2006.
     <http://info.americasarmy.com/technology.php>.

engaging experiences (Van der Graaf & Nieborg, 2003). The U.S. Army as a possible future career is a central them to game's design.

By analyzing the production, distribution, and use of both the governmental and public version of *America's Army*, four different dimensions can be set apart. The America's Army Platform can be seen as a recruiting tool (advergame), an edugame, a test bed and tool, and a propaganda game (Nieborg, 2004). The edugame and test tool dimension are most significant in the governmental applications, while the public version encompasses all four dimensions. Hereafter only the public use of *America's Army* will be discussed.

This paper will solely focus on *America's Army* as is it the first state-produced, highly visible and popular free game with an overt agenda. The aim of this paper is to deepen the understanding of the representation and simulation of modern war in commercial PC-games. Therefore a short discussion on the war on terror as a war on ideas follows first. Next, to contextualise the use of propaganda in games, the argument will be made that the theme of modern warfare is a familiar commoditised intertext. War is a familiar theme in television, movies, toys and games (Hall, 2003). The adaptive character of contemporary game technology enables game developers to design multi-dimensional PC-games, such as *America's Army*, moving beyond 'mere entertainment'. Another important question then is: Is *America's Army* a form of propaganda? And if so, how does it function as a propaganda tool? To avoid any hint of bias, the U.S. military's own definition of propaganda will be used. Further context is given by looking at the use of *America's Army* as a public diplomacy tool.

Digital games as sweet power

That infamous September-morning in New York, the world changed the moment the first airplane hit the Twin Towers, the United States was at war. Les Brownlee, 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 war:

> 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).

The war on terror is not only a war on stateless criminals, but, according to U.S. government officials, such as Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld; it is also a war on ideas. It is a war to spread freedom and liberty - i.e. values appropriated by and associated with the United States. The handling of the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq however, had devastating results for the image of U.S.'s 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: 15). This trend is backed by the polling of the Pew Research Center (2003) which surveyed 16.000 people in twenty countries. They as well conclude that although the values of democracy, free market capitalism and freedom are shared around the world, the Bush Whitehouse is seen the main reason of the decreasing support of the U.S.-led war on terror.

The question is then, how? How are anti-American attitudes to be altered? In his book *Power, Terror, Peace, and War – America's Grand Strategy in a World Risk* foreign relations expert Walter Russell Mead reflects on this question and discusses the changing role of the U.S. as a superpower. In his opening chapter he discusses 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 (military and economical) power is split up in sharp (military) and sticky (economical) power, and soft power (cultural power) is split up in hegemonic and sweet power.[3] As comic books and *Coca-Cola* are part of the U.S.'s sweet power, so are games, movies and television series. According to Mead and Nye, the war on terror should be won not by hard power, but by soft power: "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: 39-40). As I will argue hereafter, it is sweet power that directly relates to the usage of military themed games, and *America's Army*'s in particular.

The military entertainment arcade
Anti-American attitudes are not only a direct threat to U.S. national security, they also undermine the superpower's soft power. Since sweet power is mostly manufactured by commercial enterprises, it will be no surprise that the U.S. military is eager to

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[3]   Hegemonic power is the interplay of sharp, sticky, and sweet power making: "Something as artificial and arbitrary, historically speaking, as the American world system since World War II look natural, desirable, inevitable and permanent. So, at least, we hope" (Mead, 2004: 25).

appropriate such valuable practices. The Defense Science Board (2004) directly points to the "the private sector" who has expert knowledge when it comes to successfully getting across messages with an agenda. 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: 57-8). In sum, online games are to be used for the U.S. effort. And why not? The sweet power in many military games seems stronger than all. How has this come to be?

The U.S. military and a global game culture are profoundly interlinked on a technical, cultural and social-economic level and the representation and simulation of modern war in computer games is at the same time a result as well as a catalyst of this bond. The technological symbiosis between games for entertainment and military simulations has a long shared 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 into modeling and simulation techniques flourished in the commercial entertainment industries. The booming innovation of commercial simulation technology did not go unnoticed by the U.S. military and the vast and influential military-industrial complex transformed into the military-entertainment complex (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter, 2003). The reach of the military-entertainment complex is beyond the technical realm of simulation technology. Co-developed films, television series, toys, and various other entertainment products are direct outputs of the complex (cf. Hall, 2003).

The representation and simulation of modern war in computer games shows that there is already a common understanding about digital war (Nieborg, 2005). The U.S. Army does not have to make an expensive movie or produce their own television series; they are able to directly tap into existing technological and socio-economical frameworks of the military-entertainment complex. The Army can harness the collaborative nature of online game communities and use them to their advantage - spreading the Army's symbolic capital (cf. Van der Graaf & Nieborg, 2003). Gamers are familiar, or at least not surprised by another Army game, since military advisers decorated the box shots of commercial games for over a long time. War has become an intertextual experiential commodity and the (pressing) need for simulations of war

is omnipresent in today's youth popular culture. A global gaming culture, with its military origins of interactive play, is entertained by games primarily based on conflict, eagerly developed by young males for young males (Kline et al., 2003).

Empower Yourself! Defend Freedom

Short and simple, *America's Army* is a form of propaganda. 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" (2004: 427). Propaganda is thus a message with a clear intention, known at forehand by its sender, meant to influence behavior. Propaganda is simply "a process of persuasion" teaching people what to think (Taylor, 1998: 18). As said, *America's Army*'s four dimensions make it a fairly unique game. Three of its four dimensions show an interesting overlap, as propaganda, advertisement and education have 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, for instance, a Combat Life Saver in the U.S. Army.

The ongoing war on terror calls for more soldiers and thus more recruits. The second Gulf War in particular has put heavy strains on the available manpower of the Army. However, while *America's Army* may be a legitimate branding tool and recruiting aid within the U.S., being available worldwide conflicts with the games' 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."[4] By deliberately choosing to make the game accessible for gamers worldwide challenges the original goal of recruitment. The simulation of hard power, becomes part of the U.S.'s soft power.

America's Army's main design principle is to create a virtual replica of the U.S. Army. As an important institution in the American society, the U.S. Army directly and indirectly represents the values of this society and its government. As a copy of the U.S. Army, the game reflects U.S. foreign policy. Freedom has to be defended in *America's Army*, the freedom of all U.S. Citizens. The loading screen of the game features the Soldier's Creed and before joining any online round, players get to see the Creed telling them: "I am a Warrior and a member of a team. I serve the people

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[4]   Source: *America's Army - Support - Windows FAQ*. 2004. Americasarmy.com. Available: http://www.americasarmy.com/support/faq_win.php?p=1&t=3#faq3. March 29, 2005.

of the United States and live the Army Values", culminating in "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." It seems almost like a virtual contract. When the game is ready, the loading screen disappears and the player temporarily joins the digital U.S. Army.

Contextualized violence

Propaganda does not equal lying or deceiving. Far from it, the most effective forms of propaganda are for the greater part factually accurate. It is the context of a message which turns opinions and world views into information (Taylor, 1998). One of the ways *America's Army* aims to influence attitudes of gamers is by showing that the use of violence by the U.S. Army is justified because freedom has to be defended. In addition, players are taught that the U.S. Army is professional organization, based on the U.S. Army values - Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage. To put these values into context, *America's Army* appropriates the format of the First Person Shooter and recontextualizes common ingame player actions. For many gamers the sheer joy of playing tactical FPS games comes from playing as a team. The U.S. Army skilfully actions such as teamplay by labelling them as value-laden expressions. By offering a true-to-life combat simulation the Army provides a gamespace where Army values become more explicit. A vivid example of this mechanism comes from the first lecture during "medic training", part of the single player edugame dimension. A 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 (U.S. Army, 2006).

Ingame actions, such as nurturing, self-sacrifice and acts of (virtual) heroism, are repurposed by designating Army values to them, such as "loyalty", "selfless-service" and "personal courage". *America's Army* propagates the U.S. Army ethos and through this, the rationale and legitimation of U.S.'s foreign policy.

In short, the game shows how the Army fights and why. The "Why?" question is made explicit offline in the official 224-page *America's Army* game manual stating: "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: 36). In this case, lethal force is justified as a legitimate state action: "The rules and definitions of violent force are dangerously fluid and arbitrary. 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: 27). The sole justification to use lethal force is to defend freedom.

A major adjustment of FPS design conventions is the change in point-of-view. In *America's Army* you are always an American soldier, setting the game apart from all other FPS games on the market. Whereas you can choose to be a German, British, American or Russian soldier in almost every World War Two shooter, you can not play a terrorist in *America's Army*. The game's point of view is, by ways of a software trick, limited to that of an American soldier. Just as news reporters used "we" and "us" to bend the complex logic of war into the more streamlined ideology of 'good-versus-evil (Taylor, 1998), "we" and "us" in *America's Army* always stands for the U.S. Army. Make no mistake, in *America's Army* you are always 'with US'. It is one of the oldest and most common propaganda tricks in the book, limiting the point of view in order to vilify and obscure the enemy (Toffler and Toffler, 1995).

The acceptance of the role as an U.S. soldier is never really questioned on the official forum and debates asking for different roles - i.e. to play a terrorist - are nonexistent. Many gamers are aware of the fact that they perform two roles - functioning as 'double-bound warriors'. An American soldier towards oneself, and towards your team, you see your own hands holding an American weapon. At the same time you are, in the eyes of your opponent, one of the opposing forces. By playing the game you always are able to "Empower Yourself" in order to "Defend Freedom". The terrorist perspective from for instance *Counter-Strike* is lost to reinstate the 'right' point-of-view. After all, the opposing forces are 'enemies of freedom'. And you? According to the Soldier's Creed, you are "ready to deploy, engage, and destroy the enemies of the United States of America in close combat, a guardian of freedom and the American way of life, you are an American Soldier."

The Role of Strategic Communication

How then, as a form of sweet power, does *America's Army* fit in the overall strategic media use of the US government? The developers do not frame the game as a recruiting tool or an advergame, but as a 'strategic communication tool' (Davis,

2004). In this paragraph I will link the concept of strategic communication as it is used within the U.S. military - i.e. the U.S. Department of Defense - to *America's Army*. Although the next definition does not directly include *America's Army*, or any other video game, it gives a valuable insight into the rationale of using strategic communication:

> (...) 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: 11).

The emphasis on influencing attitudes and behavior aligns strategic communication with propaganda. The renewed attention to the role of strategic communication within the US defense community is a direct result of the war on terror. Yet, Osgood's analysis (2006) shows that its use has a long institutional history. At the beginning of the cold war the Eisenhower administration set up various overt and disclosed government programs to win over the hearts and minds of American citizens and individuals abroad. Therefore, strategic communication is seen by the Defense Science Board, and many key-players within the U.S. government, as vital to America's national security and foreign policy.

The U.S. Government uses four instruments to deploy strategic communication: public diplomacy, public affairs, international broadcasting services, and information operations. Toffler and Toffler discuss the different levels of strategy "at which the military propaganda game", i.e. strategic communication, "is played" (1995:194). 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 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: 3). In an advice to 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", the Defense Science Board discusses the use of "other media types" for PSYOPS:

> A number of other media types, and means of dissemination, are also widely popular. Video games are perhaps the most popular. They 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 (2000: 43).

While currently *America's Army* is not directly used on the battlefield as a PSYOP tool, it just may become one in the future. Public opinion always has been an important factor in warfare. Two other components, public diplomacy and public affairs, are two aspects of strategic communication which 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 language versions, and televised interviews with ambassadors and military commanders). As discussed before, *America's Army* explicitly communicates various values, policies and views on U.S. Culture. By doing so, *America's Army* is a part of the U.S.'s public diplomacy effort.

Conclusion

The game goes beyond branding and marketing when it disseminates U.S. Army ideology and thus indirectly U.S. foreign policy into a global popular culture. By showing a global audience why and how the U.S. Army fights, the game has become an 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: 12). It even may classify as a psychological operation, being a "military activity" using selected information and indicators "to influence the attitudes and behavior" of "groups, and individuals in support of military and national security objectives" (ibid: 13). Media have become instruments of war; an army may win a battle on the tactical level, but loose on the strategic level, and thus loose the entire war by a lack of public support. As Toffler and Toffler argue, future warfare: "Will take place on the media battlefield" (1995: 194). However, various news media still are wary of Pentagon intrusion (Taylor, 1998). In this light, virtual worlds, such as *America's Army*, seem like suitable propaganda tools. In the end, the highly sanitised view on war in *America's Army* is constructed by the U.S. Army. Through *America's Army* as a strategic communication tool, the U.S.'s soft power is globally dispersed. *America's Army* shows to non-U.S. citizens that the U.S. Army is a highly trained, professional force, willing to fight against 'those who oppose freedom' and does so in an interactive dialogue with gamers through both the game and its community.

By employing a discourse of authenticity the U.S. Army (mis)uses its institutional discursive power to market their game to a group of gamers who never experienced real combat - i.e. teens:

> "In much the same way that melodrama trains spectators how to feel about domestic relations, pornography trains spectators how to feel about sex and what to find titillating, and horror films train spectators what to fear, combat spectacle trains consumer citizens how the power of the nation should feel in their bodies" (Hall, 2003: 16).

From a skillfully designed first person view, a specific ideological perspective on the war on terror reaches the hearts and minds of a global youth culture. To many, *America's Army* is a legitimate model as to how to use sweet power to win a war on ideas. Entertainment has always been an indispensable element in the propagandist's toolbox. The Defense Science Board (2004) is clear about the role for the wider military-entertainment complex; its many military contractors should be ordered to develop even more vehicles, that is military games, for the dissemination of U.S.'s sweet power. As such, the success of *America's Army* has serious implications for thinking about the use of games for advertisement, education, and most of all, state-produced propaganda.

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