FCJ-051 Mods, Nay! Tournaments, Yay! – The Appropriation of Contemporary Game Culture by the U.S. Military

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2 United States (U.S.) Army recruiting did not seem to be a problem after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. However, the ongoing war on terror calls for more soldiers and thus more recruits. Operation Iraqi Freedom in particular has put heavy strains on the available manpower of the Army. A significant part of the U.S. war machine is tied down in the cities of Iraq, requiring a steady flow of fresh manpower and material. The Bush administration has made it clear that it expects the war on terror will be a decade-long battle against a shadowy enemy (Gordon and Trainor, 2006). At the same time, government officials such as U.S. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld pointed out that the war on terror is also a war on ideas'. According to him, it is a war to spread freedom and liberty, values appropriated by and associated with the United States.

3 Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become increasingly important elements in contemporary warfare (Toffler and Toffler, 1995). This trend labelled Infowar' is giving way to the convergence of the technological transformation of the U.S. military with networked, ICT-based warfare (Der Derian, 2003). In all its forms, information warfare can use simulations as weapon systems: in its hard form as a component of a weapon, or in its soft form as (public) dissimulations:

4 > More a weapon of mass persuasion and distraction than destruction, infowar nonetheless shares some common characteristics with nuclear war: it targets civilian as well as military populations and its exchange-value as a deterrent outweighs its use-value as an actual weapon. (Der Derian, 2003: 47)

5 Modern-day media have become powerful instruments of war, as many wars are won politically, not strategically (Payne, 2005). This political-ideological dimension of media was most visible during the first Gulf War. Before and during the war, television newscasts played a significant role in persuading U.S. citizens to support the war while distracting Iraqi officials with deceitful and distorted information about the war's strategic objectives (Taylor, 1998).

6 Today new media complement the use of older, 'mass; media forms. New media (technologies) have become vital tools to sustain the war on terror in two converging ways. First, games and webpages can act directly as recruiting tools or aids. For instance, the U.S. Army has various websites to assist parents with their children's decision to join. Second, entertainment media such as games directly and indirectly provide context and justifications through simulations and dissimulations as to why and how the war on terror is fought. As such, the concept of infowar directly relates to the use of game technology by the U.S. military. This paper will focus on this dual capacity of new media technology, specifically digital games.

7 Contemporary media seem to have incorporated militarised themes in every way possible. Television newscasts show embedded reports live from the battlefield while retired generals act as experts on 24-hour news channels. Hollywood movies use every special effect at their disposal to depict an even more spectacular image of war using leased military equipment. A great number of scholars have analysed this symbiotic relationship between military communities and the entertainment industries, generally known as the military-entertainment complex' (Der Derian, 2003; Lenoir and Lowood, 2003; Stockwell and Muir, 2003). Within this complex, countless television series, movies, and (comic) books are continuously being produced. And as the U.S. military uses the same simulation technologies as commercial game developers do, boundaries between commercial games and governmental military simulations are seemingly eroding. In addition, the historically strong ties between military and game technology are becoming more and more visible due to popular accounts of the military-entertainment complex (Chaplin and Ruby, 2005; Halter, 2006). More so than other media, digital games above all epitomise the military-entertainment complex.

Beyond the military-entertainment complex

8 To deepen the understanding of the expanding military-entertainment complex, the first state-produced recruiting game, *America's Army*, will be discussed. The complex, which seems at first sight to be no more than a technological bond between Hollywood/Silicon Valley and the

Pentagon, in fact has profound implications from a socio-economic and political-ideological point-of-view. Solely focusing on the mere fact that games are produced in cooperation with the military ignores the significance of the synergy between the military-entertainment complex and contemporary youth popular culture. The recent success of military-developed recruiting games impacts thinking about games and simulations and the use of these interactive texts for advertisement, education, and propaganda. Similarly, the appropriation of a global game culture seems to result in a reciprocal relationship between the hierarchical nature of the U.S. military and the participatory character of numerous game community clusters.

9 The U.S. military in particular benefits in various ways from a global game culture playing war-themed games. Military recruiters are able to use interactive entertainment as a valuable asset in their expansive toolbox. In what follows, the appeal of military games as objects for military recruiting will be discussed. Through the use of games the U.S. military deliberately chose to directly interact with the 'Internet generation.; With *America's Army* the U.S. Army tapped directly into game communities, and was able to harness the creative and symbolic capital produced by gamers. Whereas with commercially developed games, fans collaborate with the cultural industries, the players of state-produced games such as *America's Army* aid, however indirect and minimal, the U.S. war effort by spreading the U.S. Army's symbolic capital. The core of *America's Army*'s ideology is not primarily based upon the cultural industries' profit motive or on providing entertainment only. Where *America's Army* differs from a similar First Person Shooter (FPS) PC-game such as *Counter-Strike*, is that the former is a game with a clear agenda. Namely, the dissemination of the U.S. Army brand through popular culture.

10 In this paper I will argue that the commodification of play is now, by way of the military-entertainment complex, supplemented by the militarisation of play. Next, the two main reasons why games have been able to become viable recruiting tools will be discussed. First, there is the technological and economic dimension of contemporary game development and distribution. When comparing game technology to the development and distribution of Hollywood movies, it becomes clear that linking militarised interactive recruiting with digital play results in the alteration of the rules of engagement. Second, it will be argued that it is not a giant leap to build military-themed computer games for recruiting purposes, considering the rich shared history of military, academic and entertainment communities. The second part of this paper will consider the relationship between military communities and digital play using *America's Army* as a case study.

Branding the U.S. Army

11 Recruiting soldiers for the U.S. Army has never been an easy task. In the late nineties, partly due to the favourable economy, the U.S. military's annual recruiting goals were missed one after another. Then in 2000, the tides seemed to turn and for five consecutive years enough recruits were drafted to fill the ranks. In early 2005 however, the U.S. Army again failed to meet its annual recruiting target. Today the U.S. military has to rely on its recruiting efforts more than ever before. Because of full-scale troop deployments the U.S. military is stretched thin. Newspapers report of soldiers refusing to report for duty and U.S. politicians made clear that reinstating the draft is out of question.

12 One of the biggest problems faced by contemporary military recruiting efforts is its lack of effectiveness, and something had to be done to re-establish a long-term connection with the American youth. Mass media have been used for recruiting purposes since the 1970s, and today a quarter of today's 600 million dollars military advertising budget is spent on TV commercials (General Accounting Office, 2003). Advertising money used to maintain and expand the U.S. Army brand is also spent on sponsoring events and sports teams and on other promotional activities. In a report by the U.S. Army Research Institute, the media habits of America's youth were examined and two important media for individuals who might possibly join the Army were identified: television and the Internet (Morath et al., 2001). An icon of youth popular culture, the music channel MTV was identified as an outlet to reach the core recruitable audience of 18 to 24-year old males. To improve Army recruiting via the Internet, the functionality of the U.S. Army recruiting website GoArmy.com was enhanced. But besides hip TV commercials, recruiting offices, recruiters visiting high schools, and various other ways to attract new servicemen, the Army acknowledged the enormous potential of digital games to spread the message that: The U.S. Army is the most

powerful, most respected and most feared ground force in the world' (Army Game Project, 2003a: 3).

13 As mentioned earlier, military-developed or -sponsored games are as much weapons in the war on ideas as they are interactive recruiting tools. This dual role of advertisement (recruiting) and persuasion (spreading U.S. ideology) makes games capable candidates for the dissemination of propaganda. This holds especially true in regard to the U.S. military's own definition of propaganda:

14 > 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: 427)

15 While the focus in this paper is primarily on the role of simulation technologies and digital games, it is worthwhile to look at the place of Hollywood movies within the military-entertainment complex and Hollywood's linkage with the U.S. military establishment. Why is the military establishment so eager to use game technology for propaganda purposes in the first place, and why has there never been a state-produced movie with a similar (dual role) as *America's Army*?

Propaganda and popular culture

16 Communication scholars Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell argue that the Hollywood film industry never lent itself to overt propaganda' (1986: 72). Apart from the preparedness films' made in the 1930s, Hollywood never made a commissioned war movie to deliberately and systematically shape the perception of the U.S. military. While the U.S. military refrained from producing a blockbuster propaganda movie, it did have a significant influence in shaping many war-themed movies. David Robb's *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies* (2004) provides a detailed and well documented insider's look at the relationship between the movie industry and the U.S. military. Robb explains how Hollywood movie studios have only gained access to expensive military material and expert knowledge if they were willing to put up their scripts for editing. The U.S. military makes sure that a sponsored movie informs the public about the U.S. military and that the military is authentically' portrayed in order to help military recruiting and retention' (Robb, 2004: 44). The indirect dissemination of military propaganda may be a common practice and profoundly shape many box-office hits. Robb also demonstrates that military-entertainment collaborations are in many instances the result of tough negotiations.

17 Jowett and O'Donnell present three reasons why the military seems to be reluctant about the in-house development of a propaganda movie (1986: 81-2). First, a global audience is used to high standards and, thus, to fairly expensive movies. It seems highly unlikely that U.S. Congress would authorise the U.S. Army to spend a hundred million dollars on a recruiting movie, in the obvious absence of any guarantee of success. A second factor is the convention of a fictional narrative complete with (expensive) Hollywood stars. The medium of the motion picture is therefore totally limited to the values and ideologies that are an integral part of the plot structure' (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1986). These limiting values could seriously hamper the accurate portrayal of the complex and often tedious tasks of U.S. Army soldiers. Equally, a hero's singular point-of-view, think of Tom Hanks' Captain John H. Miller character in *Saving Private Ryan*, conflicts with the U.S. Army's Army of One recruiting message. Third, the distribution system for films is tightly organised and difficult to break into as an outsider. On the other hand, producing and distributing a Hollywood-like U.S. war movie is easier than in the 1980's. As we are entering the age of media convergence' the means of movie production have become cheaper and easier to use while the Internet can function as an inexpensive and open distribution channel (Jenkins, 2003). Nevertheless, making a successful Hollywood movie is even for the U.S. military a risky and expensive adventure.

18 Comparing these factors to the development and distribution of digital games, it makes all more sense why developing a full-blown propaganda game is far cheaper and easier than producing a high-profile movie. New game formats such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series and *The Sims* franchise, show that game design conventions are continually being altered. Even in the somewhat formulaic FPS genre and the sub-genre of tactical shooters, experimentation with certain design elements is commonly praised by gamers. Another obstacle, the factor of distribution, can be bypassed because of the near-ubiquitous Internet access in the United States. Gamers have proved to be

willing to download large files and to share content through digital and physical peer-to-peer networks.

19 In addition, in contrast to Robb's analysis, Hollywood military-themed movies are seen by *America's Army* project director Wardynski as stereotypical and sensationalist representations of the military' (Li, 2004: 40). Also, movies are an ineffective way to spread information because they are external, independent intermediaries beyond Army control' (ibid). Jowett and O'Donnell came to a similar conclusion two decades ago, claiming that: movies never became the powerful propaganda vehicle that its critics thought it would be', despite having the greatest potential for emotional appeal to its audience, offering a deeper level of identification with the characters and action on the screen than found elsewhere in popular culture' (1986: 72).

20 Conversely, contemporary game culture seems like a perfect place to exert full Army control. The U.S. Army already has a vast marketing apparatus to spread their U.S. Army: An Army of One' message, and games fit perfectly in the marketing mix of Army recruiters (van der Graaf and Nieborg, 2003). Digital games have been, and increasingly will be, used for various marketing purposes (Nieborg, 2006). While popular culture may be largely outside the direct control of the Pentagon, the dissemination of propaganda via military-controlled game communities has become a valid and attractive option. The U.S. Army does not have to make an expensive movie or produce their own television series; they are able to tap directly into existing technological and socio-economical frameworks of the military-entertainment complex.

Good morning soldier, welcome to the U.S. Army!

21 The representation and simulation of modern war in computer games shows that there is already a common understanding about (virtual) war (Nieborg, 2004). The war on terror is both explicitly and implicitly simulated in a wide range of FPS PC-games such as *Battlefield 2*, *Kuma War*, and *Counter-Strike*, and in budget action titles as *Desert Fury*, *Airstrike II: Gulf Thunder* and *Terrorist Takedown*. The ubiquitous availability of war-themed games is not solely industry-driven, nor can it be set aside as the result of a lack of imagination in game designers and publishers. Gamers themselves display an unequivocal need for the simulation of past, present and future military conflicts. Take the user-created total conversion modifications (mods) of the World War Two themed FPS PC-game *Battlefield 1942*. Every significant conflict involving a Western country has its own mod, from the Korean war to the Falklands war to the conflict in Somalia (Nieborg, 2005a). Similarly, only a month after the release of *Battlefield 2* there were already over fifty military themed mods in some state of development.[1] If gamers do not like the original game's conflict, they simply recruit people that have a shared interest and develop a mod of their own. Therefore, most gamers will not be the least bit surprised by a military-themed game, even if it is developed by the military.

22 The demographic composition of FPS game culture matches the main pool of potential Army recruits. The militarized masculinity' of FPS games exhibits a strong gender bias where violent themes are ubiquitous (Hall, 2003; Kline et al, 2003: 246-68). And, almost as a natural progression of the military-entertainment complex, the U.S. Army ordered the development of the first publicly available, state-produced military entertainment game in 2001. The army's move to venture into games proved to be worthwhile when the game was eventually released. On July 4, 2002, the first version of *America's Army* was made available on the official website.[2] Within days, servers were swamped and the game proved to be an instant success. For over four years the game has ranked high in the list of most played FPSs, attracting and retaining a considerable group of a couple of hundred thousand dedicated players. Every couple of months the game is significantly updated, with bug fixes and the addition of new maps, weapons and training elements. *America's Army* is part of the sub-genre of the tactical FPS, which means that gamers in online multiplayer sessions fight each other in a setting modelled after a place in the real world. The inner workings of *America's Army* have been explained in detail elsewhere (Li, 2004; Nieborg, 2005b).

Militarised play

23 It is important here to address the game's multi-modal character. What makes *America's Army* fairly unique and sets it apart from commercial games as well as military simulations, is that it is an advergame, edugame, test tool and propaganda game (Nieborg, 2005b). The game constantly balances between the expectations of gamers (shaped by FPS genre conventions) and the game's

design rationale (shaped by its four dimensions), not to mention, numerous technical design constraints such as hardware and software limitations. Although the game is part of the sub-genre of tactical FPS games, *America's Army* is more than 'just a game; or only a 'sophisticated advergame;. The official *America's Army*-brand definition is revealing in this respect:

24 > *America's Army* is the only official Army game designed, created and developed by the U.S. Army. As such, it is the most authentic Army game ever made, as it strives to provide an accurate, comprehensive and dynamic portrayal of the Army experience. Based on the seven fundamental values embodying the U.S. Army – Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity and Personal Courage – the game teaches players about personal growth and teamwork, while immersing them in real-life training and combat missions (Army Game Project, 2003a: 3).

25 *America's Army* has been carefully designed to propagate the U.S. Army ethos. This ethos simulates the rationale and legitimisation of U.S. foreign policy, giving the game its propaganda dimension. *America's Army* shows that the U.S. Army is a highly trained professional force, willing to fight against terrorists. This is achieved via its interactive dialogue with gamers worldwide through both the game and its community.

26 The Army harnesses the collaborative nature of online game communities and uses it to its advantage. On the one hand it spreads the Army's symbolic capital and ideology, and on the other hand it attempts to recruit possible military enlistees. With the introduction of various semi-commercial, military endorsed games (e.g., *Full Spectrum Warrior*, *Close Combat: First To Fight*) or even military produced games, the U.S. military directly taps into the very fabric of popular culture. This process of acquisition seems to be taking off right now and, as discussed earlier, this *modus operandi* entails much more than a technological collaboration. With continuing reports live from the battlefield, war has become an intertextual commodity', cross-promoted by the Pentagon and global media conglomerates on television, the Internet, in movies and in games (cf. Marshall, 2002). Therefore, military themed games have become part of the long history of the synergy between the political and domestic sphere (Hall, 2003). The efforts of the U.S. military to invest in the military-entertainment complex is a major leap forward in the merging of the military and the domestic spheres in the realm of audiovisual cultural forms' (Crogan, 2003: 279-80). By developing or ordering the development of military-themed games for educational, advertisement or even propagandistic purposes, the U.S. military can directly appropriate a global youth culture.

A militarised participatory media culture

27 To get hold of this process of militarisation and to critically approach the Army game as well as its relation with FPS game culture, Joost Raessens' (2005) notion of participatory media culture' will be used to reflect on the game's political-ideological implications. Participatory media culture, according to Raessens, encompasses three domains of participation: interpretation', 'reconfiguration' and construction'. The three domains have a political-ideological dimension which refers to: [...] the tension between the dominant and the critical, social and cultural practices in the realm of computer games' (Raessens, 2005: 373). These tensions are then defined by three elements. The first of these is top-down' versus bottom-up', referring here to the question concerning the results of the access to the practices of the media culture' (Raessens, 2005: 383). The second pair, homogenization versus heterogenization', discusses the question of the reproduction of ideologically charged values through games. And thirdly, there's a distinction between the real versus the possible'. Next, I will elaborate upon Raessens' three domains and subsequently analyse the political-ideological presuppositions of *America's Army* before I end this paper with a discussion of whether *America's Army* contributes to culture participation' or a more desirable participatory media culture'.

28 The first domain of participation deals with the interpretation of a game and is based on the notion of an active audience as conceptualised by cultural studies scholars such as Stuart Hall and John Fiske. Interpretation as a mode of participation can be heavily regulated, trying to facilitate what Stuart Hall would dub a dominant reading' or what Sherry Turkle calls simulation resignation' where gamers surrender to the seduction of the simulation' (Raessens, 2005: 377). *America's Army* ´s simulation model as well as its external discursive framework, are meant to let gamers internalise the rules of the game, to the extent that the Army-dictated rules of play are seen as natural. Through the process of what Ted Friedman (1995) calls demystification', *America's Army* is deconstructed in a way that is dictated by its regulatory and strict rule set, seeking full simulation

resignation. The notion of authenticity plays an important part in this process as many choices in the game's design are justified, by both designers and players, as being 'realistic;. For realism's sake, the gameplay is much more structured and bound by the rules of physics and warfare compared to similar games in the genre. Players become soldiers with a persistent record. Shooting team members is ruled out, and maps, weapons and player roles cannot be changed. Friendly fire always results in punishment.

29 Gamers seem to wilfully accept the many ideological preconceptions in *America's Army*'s simulation model. An important element in this respect is the fact that gamers seldom question the fact that they are not able to play as 'terrorists;. Via a software trick online, players see themselves always as a U.S. soldier and their opponents as 'terrorists;, a unique feature for online multiplayer FPSs. The simulation of the us-versus-them' dichotomy is present in almost every war game with a contemporary military theme. There is only a binary choice, coalition versus Iraqi Forces, U.S. Forces versus Arab/Muslim terrorists, good versus evil. The America´s Army player however is 'embedded; with the U.S. army and thereby deliberately loses the viewpoint of 'the other; (cf. Hiebert, 2003). The loss of context and the subsequent vilification of 'the other; is a well-known propaganda instrument (Taylor, 1998). Players may deconstruct the game's simulation model only to find a regulated and explicitly singular, or homogeneous, perspective: that of the U.S. Army.

30 The propagation of U.S. Army values is an important part of the ideological construct underlying the game's simulation model. The attention the values receive in both the game and the game's community may seem strange to outsiders, but reciting the seven values within the non-virtual U.S. Army is seen as just as vital as learning how to properly throw a grenade. Soldiers are expected to live up to the values around the clock, even when they are off duty. The developers explain how they tried to simulate the Army values in the game:

31 > [*America's Army*] rewards soldierly behaviour and penalizes rotten eggs. This works out in practical ways. In basic training, for example, you can opt to become a combat lifesaver. Doing so reflects duty and selfless service, so you get points and expanded opportunities for going through training. Out on mission, your buddy collapses in front of you. You can attend him, which earns points for loyalty and honor, or keep running, which scrubs points. If you do stop, you become a target yourself, which takes courage, and if you're hit, your health will suffer, so you need the integrity to inform your actions with sound judgement. Doing your duty and saving both your lives wins the most points. Just like in combat. (Davis, 2004: 11)

32 It seems that pointing out the seven values and giving them constant attention within as many elements in the game as possible is the only way to make the Army values an actual part of the game. From my own observations I would argue that the primary reason for the vast majority of gamers to become a combat lifesaver (which would reflect selfless service) or helping a wounded teammate in the heat of battle (which would reflect integrity) has more to do with peer-pressure and game conventions than Army values. The valued actions are to be seen in many other online games. Most notably Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) are rich social spaces where actions such as sacrificing', which a gamer would dub helping, nurturing or role-playing, provide meaningful play. Through the appropriation of common in-game player actions the Army emphasises its values. This rationale directly corresponds with the process of homogenisation.

33 The ideological struggle of the U.S. Army against FPS game culture and youth popular culture is an extremely uneven 'war;. Because of its high production values, familiar design, and by virtue of the game being 'official; and freely available, the U.S. Army rapidly created a large fan base of young men who wilfully subjected themselves to the U.S. Army's ideology. The game's vibrant and vocal community may discuss the lack of updates or the rampant cheating, but gamers who openly question Army values are yet to be seen.

34 Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony is useful to frame the notion of *America's Army* as a realistic game (cf. Raessens, 2005). On the one hand, the developers of *America's Army* use their intellectual and moral power as the exclusive authors of the text to enable a hegemonic status where the game could be seen as the most realistic shooter available – explicitly marketing the game as the Official U.S. Army Game'. On the other hand, by tapping into FPS design conventions the U.S. Army maintains a discursive consensus where *America's Army* is seen by many as 'just a game;.

35

When comparing *America's Army* to, for example, *Counter-Strike*, the former can be characterised as a FPS having a very strict simulation model with rigid in-game rules. The second mode of participation as discussed by Raessens is the process of reconfiguration', again in the case of *America's Army* a severely limited domain of participation. Players are not encouraged to freely interact with the gamespace. Instead, players seem to be controlled, not the world. As a game of emergence', the exploratory nature of many gamers leads to behaviour never intended by game developers (Juul, 2002). Exploiting bugs and learning tricks by creatively repurposing the rules of the game is a relatively innocent act and is intertwined with modern-day online gameplay. Gamers of the *Battlefield*-series, for instance, produce the wildest stunt movies with tanks and planes crashing through carefully placed explosive charges.

36 The developers of *America's Army*, on the other hand, try to rule out this kind of exploratory, or 'unrealistic;, behaviour. Every new patch shows constant tweaking of the placement of spawn points and the weapon layouts of various maps. Some maps became nearly unplayable after investigative players found ways to precisely throw grenades or shoot rockets in order to kill players who just began a new round – emergent behaviour called spawn killing'. In order to play the game, players have to adhere to the U.S. Army's Rules of Engagement (ROE) if they want to play the game with their peers.[3] Similar to the domain of interpretation, in the domain of reconfiguration the real' is clearly favoured over the possible'.

Construction: FPS Military Mod Culture

37 Recent research shows that U.S. teens with access to the internet generate original content on an unprecedented scale, creating blogs and webpages, as well as sharing and remixing all sorts of digital content (Lenhart and Madden, 2005). As content creators, gamers easily move in and out of participatory communities, which function inside commodity culture. The profit motive has never been absent during interactive play, as it always has been present in mass (media) culture: The fundamental imperative' of new media remains the same as that which shaped the 'old; media: profit' (Kline et al., 2003: 21). Many gamers, or fans, make wallpapers, distribute game files, host servers and develop game modifications, all adding value to the game. Even play itself, within the proprietary spaces of MMORPGs, adds value and becomes profitable to game developers and publishers (Humphreys, 2006).

38 Raessens' third domain deals with construction'. This mode of participation encompasses the addition of new game elements to existing proprietary commercial titles. The construction mode is integrated into many games such as *The Sims*, *Unreal Tournament 2003* and *Neverwinter Nights*, but is again severely limited in the case of *America's Army*. Commercial game developers actively encourage and take advantage of the modding ethos of sharing resources and knowledge. Such value-adding practices are beneficiary to the game industry and are an enrichment of game culture. Developing mods for FPSs has become a worthy, institutionalised practice (Kücklich, 2005, Nieborg, 2005a). Still, modding practices are seldom fully bottom-up and heterogeneous as they are delineated by various legal, economic and technological boundaries.

39 *America's Army*'s strict policy against modding is surprising when one takes a look at the way gaming is implemented in military training. Since a significant part of the game industry that develops FPS games is also part of the military-entertainment complex, the U.S. military is prone to take advantage of this collaborative game culture. Military contractors for their part are eager to take advantage of user-created content. Custom versions of *Microsoft Flight Simulator* are widely used for defence pilot training by the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Air Force at Naval Reserve Officer Training Courses (Macedonia and Rosenbloom 2001). Similarly, the research of two U.S. Navy lieutenants (Debrine and Morrow, 2000) shows the active involvement of the U.S. military in the implementation and appropriation of FPS game technology and mod culture.

40 Debrine and Morrow describe how the commercial online FPS *Quake III Arena* could be used within a military setting for the exploration of 3D architecture and for use as a primitive team trainer. Their analysis emphasises the low costs of modding a FPS. Those who are in some way affiliated with the various military communities all seem to agree: a player-driven culture of continuous, relentless, distributed innovation is the industry's greatest asset, far more valuable than the technology-driven popular games' (Herz and Macedonia, 2002). At first sight, mods and the military seem to form a perfect relationship.

Knives and pistols

41 The various socio-economic and technological advantages for the U.S. military of interacting with FPS mod culture may seem clear. However, as far as modding is concerned, *America's Army* could well be the exception to the rule. The first Official Army Game does not allow any changes to its software whatsoever. The Army is not secretive about its intentions. An online FAQ makes this clear: Will the editing tools be made available?'. The answer is: No. The Army is not planning on releasing any editing or modding tools for *America's Army*. However, the U.S. Army is planning on supporting *America's Army* over the next few years with additional content and features.'[4] Recently there has been talk about an official map editor, but when and in what way it will be implemented has yet to be seen. There are two reasons why full-scale modding is not allowed. First, and discussed hereafter, America´s Army is carefully constructed to portray the U.S. Army in a particular way, and the game's educational, marketing and propaganda dimensions will most certainly be lost on modders. Second, it would open up the game to cheaters, (culture) jammers, artists, academics and disgruntled gamers.

42 The ongoing discussion of adding knives and pistols to America´s Army is an example of the game ´s homogeneous emphasis on the real' versus the players´ bottom-up need for processes of heterogenisation by opening up a wider range of possibilities. The discussion started on the day the game hit the net and has never reached its conclusion. Knives as weapons are standard in many popular tactical FPS games and many gamers regard a knife-kill as a sign of so called l33t-skills' (elite skills) – because the ability to manoeuvre one's character behind another player character in order to stab him in the back is seen as the sign of superior playing skills. The Army's reluctance to include knives is based on the rationale that in the U.S. Army, knives are used as tools, not weapons'. The inclusion of pistols suffered a similar fate. In a forum, discussion developers expressed their fear of gamers duelling, which was seen as unrealistic soldiering, and their concerns about: Messaging issues (we don't want to simulate activity that can easily be duplicated on an American street)'.[5]

43 With the introduction in the game of *Special Forces* soldiers the Army suddenly-and much to the surprise of the community-added the M9 pistol to one of the maps. When, during the release of a follow-up patch, soldiers other than the sniper on the SF Hospital map unintentionally received pistols as well, the developers were troubled by gamers using pistols as their primary weapon. From a military standpoint, the need to express Army values and authentic Army missions and gameplay prohibits civilians from coming up with realistic scenarios or additional material. The addition of a simple female soldier skin would undermine one of the main pillars of the Army Game Project-educating male gamers about a possible career in the U.S. Army. The specific military occupational specialties' (MOS) currently playable in the game, such as U.S. Army Special Forces, are not open to women. The explicit educational goals, part of the recruiting role of the project thus severely limits involvement in the game's development.

No Velvet Army

44 Most mods are meant as pure entertainment and are made with no other goal in mind than to give gamers a fun experience: Fan culture is dialogic rather than disruptive, affective more than ideological, and collaborative rather than confrontational' (Jenkins, 2002: 167). Yet, the U.S. Army brand is, through *America's Army*, under constant attack because of the bottom-up practices of a mixed group of (culture) jammers. Besides concerns about sending the wrong message' and concern for the authentic portrayal of the Army, the game's propaganda dimension attracts continuous attention. The U.S. Army as a way of life and *America's Army* as a branded experience are high-profile targets for those who oppose the U.S. Army message or see in *America's Army* a reflection of U.S. foreign policy.

45 In an age where the decision to join the military is influenced by advertising in various media, the importance of *America's Army* as a marketing and recruiting tool is substantial. From this perspective, the collective power of a vocal group of disgruntled gamers may, considering the target demographic, be more damaging to Army recruiting efforts than a far more serious matter such as the Abu Ghraib scandal. Where a broadcast message, such as a television ad, may result in a reading of the commercial text opposite to its intended meaning, the interactive character of games and the fluid character of gaming communities open up a window of opportunity for culture jammers, anti-war/corporative activists, pacifists, artists, academics and bored teenagers.

46

Both commercial games and mods can be confrontational and disruptive in various ways. Intended as training modules, ideological messages or (offensive) entertainment, mods can serve as spoofs or satire (e.g., the *Castle Smurfenstein*-mod for *Castle Wolfenstein*), critique (e.g., *Escape from Woomera* for *Half-Life*) or art. An example of a controversial art game is the *Unreal Tournament 2003* mod *911Survivor*, which simulates the attack on the Twin Towers. The mod's only objective is to get the avatar out of the burning building and by doing so jumping to ones death.[6] Gamers on their part seem eager to use contemporary combat themes and conflicts. They do not hesitate to name their online characters Osama' or KillBushjr' and just as well create Islamic', Al-Qaeda' or Chechen' avatar skins. There are numerous *Half-Life* or *Counter-Strike* maps set in peculiar places such as a McDonalds or a Wal-Mart, scenarios the Army developers want to avoid at all costs.

47 The *Quake 3* modification *Political Arena* combines many of these aspects. The satirical mod features leading U.S. politicians such as George W. Bush with his main weapon being lethal injection. The game's objective is to steal the presidency with the help of the Supreme Court by picking up a U.S. Flag.[7] The Army Game Project's worst nightmare however may well be an *America's Army* equivalent of *Velvet Strike*. Artist Anne-Marie Schleiner (2005) developed this *Counter-Strike* mod, or to be more precise a set of in-game graffito's and intervention recipes', which in the end proved rather unsuccessfully. The recipes were meant to disrupt gameplay in order to point towards the masculine and militaristic character of the game. Even so, despite the ban on any *America's Army* game modification, the game's community resembles that of many other participatory game communities.

The Appropriation of Game Culture

48 Over the years, the Army Game Project managed to gather a large group of devoted fans around *America's Army*. The game provides access for anyone with an Internet connection and a decent PC to one of the most fetishised aspects of contemporary war-the adrenaline rush of man-to-man combat. The Army taps into existing social networks, building up trust and peer-to-peer communication. The U.S. Army is able to institutionalise a pool of semi-organised and enthusiastic gamers, using their collective intelligence' to produce all sorts of fruitful interactions (cf. Jenkins, 2002). The Army harnesses the collaborative nature of online game communities, and of course the *America's Army* game community above all, in order to facilitate the spreading of the Army's symbolic capital. This explains the contradiction of banning or frustrating user-created game mods while, on the other hand, institutionalising a militarised fan community. A closer look at the products and services that fans provide, such as videos, wallpapers and the organisation of LAN-parties, demonstrates how the Army facilitates, endorses, and appropriates an increasingly militarised game culture.

49 Many games have their respective fan communities creating short clips with in-game material. The MMORPGs *Star Wars Galaxies* and *World of Warcraft* have their dance videos, *Halo* inspired the humorous Red vs Blue and the *Battlefield* series has its wild stunt movies. The production of video clips is a common practice within the *America's Army* community. Clip developers seem to take a particular liking in showing their skills on the virtual battlefield and displaying their knowledge of the intricate game mechanics. In itself, this does not set *America's Army* fan videos apart from other FPS fan material. Yet, the great majority of clips additionally feature the U.S. Army slogan and logo, as well as the *America's Army*'s values and its patriotic theme. Interestingly enough, official *America's Army* promotional material includes two videoclips marketing *America's Army: Special Forces (2.0)* which bear an odd resemblance to user-created videoclips.[8] The promotional clips use in-game material, intersecting it with real world military footage. And, consistent with fan conventions, there is the unavoidable heavy metal soundtrack and the equally unavoidable use of U.S. Army slogans and *America's Army* brand material.

50 In addition to videoclips, gamers also produce more narrative-driven clips consisting of gameplay sequences. Further, *America's Army* movies draw heavily on the representation of war itself. These mini-productions are longer than the two minute videoclips and are dedicated to telling specific war stories, such as rescuing a hostage or eliminating a terrorist leader. Because of the lack of characters and intrigue in FPS games, gameplay movies tend to focus on spectacle, lavish cinematography and the integration of music and particular gameplay sequences. Plotlines are displayed by silent-movie conventions such as the inclusion of full screen intertitles and focus on protagonist´s hand gestures. Dominant modes of television show rewriting, such as character

dislocation, genre shifting and refocalisation are absent in gameplay videoclips (Jenkins, 1992: 162-77). Not so surprisingly, 'slash; videoclips are non-existent in the *America's Army* community. Subversive elements and critique towards the game are absent in many videoclips and gameplay movies. Gamers are very limited in their efforts to recontextualise material from the game since 'the set; only encompasses 30 plus maps and no civilian characters (except from some nurses), hindering non-military scenarios. As a result, user-created material appropriates and internalises an Army discourse, Army values and symbolism, further delimiting a heterogeneous participatory media culture.

Mock swear-ins

51 Besides user-created content, the actions of players themselves can be appropriated as well and put to use by the military apparatus. An element of contemporary game culture that is incorporated and explicitly stimulated by the Army is clan culture and tournament play. The (manufactured) need for team play and the militaristic structure of FPS games motivates aficionados to get organised to both survive and win. Many clans follow the same philosophy, structure and training principles as the U.S. Army (cf. Li, 2004). Clans, similar to sports teams, differ in size, nationality and involvement. On the popular community website AAOTracker more than 9000 *America's Army* clans are listed with over 80.000 members.[9] In a paper for the annual Interservice/Industry Training, Simulation and Education Conference (I/ITSEC), four members of different military communities explored the various methodologies to incorporate in what they call cyber gaming culture':

52 Just as the creation of Air Shows in the 20th century led to both successful civilian airport shows and military air base events, the future of large scale and small LAN party gaming competition can include both events with a civilian focus and those with a military orientation (Maguire et al., 2002).

53 The authors argue that there are many benefits to be reaped from military sponsored location based' game competitions as well as online gaming tournaments. It seems that the argument by the authors has been fully acknowledged by today's military. Clans are prominently featured on the official *America's Army* homepage, the place to be for dedicated players. The official forum counts over 200.000 members and an impressive 2.2 million posts. Two community driven tournament initiatives, TeamWarfare League (TWL) and the Cyberathlete Amateur League (CAL), are openly endorsed and their results are included on the homepage. Two years after its introduction the game itself has been geared towards tournament play by adding several admin functions and tools for clan play.

54 And in order to fully benefit from the recruiting potential of America´s Army, the U.S. Army urges Army recruiters to stage their own America´s Army-related recruiting events. To support this, there is a special website where recruiters can order their recruitment kit, which includes posters, free T-shirts, extensive set-up plans and a video explaining how to stage the event (tip: let gamers do a mock swear-in before starting the tournament!).[10] Non-U.S. players who cannot attend these events have their own mock swear-ins. The loading screen of the game shows the Soldier´s Creed, which opens with:

I am an American Soldier.

55 I am a Warrior and a member of a team. I serve the people of the United States and live the Army Values.

56 In the included *America's Army Game Instructions and Event Support* booklet, recruiters are given numerous suggestions about how to use the game for recruiting purposes: The game is a great icebreaker because young men and women love games and are always happy to talk to anyone about a 'cool; new game' (Army Game Project, 2003b: 17). LAN-parties in particular are explicitly designated as: [...] a prime arena for Recruiter activities' (Army Game Project, 2003b: 19). The booklet gives tips for additional activities at Army-sponsored LAN-parties. There, recruiters can provide haircuts by an Army barber' and camouflage face painting', or decorate the location with camouflage netting, standees and sandbags'. It becomes clear that the increasing militarisation of game culture, as an extension of the military-entertainment complex, has never been so 'cool;.

Conclusion

57 At the height of the Cold War, Terri Toles reflected on U.S. military recruiting efforts at the time: There is even talk of recruiting soldiers in arcades, the argument being that video game expertise may be transferable to the needs of the Army' (1985: 220).[11] In more recent times, with the ubiquitous access to PCs and consoles, military recruiting and propaganda entered the domestic sphere. Within a branded world where the Army is 'cool;, where games are developed by the military and used as training tools, gamers are eager to play with any military-themed game as long as it is fun. As a result, war has become increasingly delightful to those who have never experienced it. The military-industrial complex is more powerful than ever before. And as weapon systems and U.S. Army doctrines transform, so does the complex, only to become more pervasive. As the war on terror drags on and upcoming wars are presumably already being discussed, *America's Army* is not the only medium simulating and representing war. Television series, newscasts, movies and documentaries all contribute to an overall view of 'what war is like;, but what no other program, game or movie can claim is that they are officially developed by the U.S. Army. The expert knowledge of the Army about its own organisation gives *America's Army* an aura of objectivity needed to sell its product-the values of the U.S. Army.

58 Raessens reflects on the role of gamers within the cultural industries and distinguishes between culture participation and participatory media culture:

> 59 Culture participation is a broad concept that refers generally to the fact that we participate in the surrounding culture, be that in a passive and consumptive, or a more active and productive way. I consider participatory culture, the latter, more active attitude that, as we have seen, makes special demands concerning the interpretation, the reconfiguration, and the construction of computer games. (2005: 383)

60 From this perspective, the U.S. Army through *America's Army* clearly favours culture participation over a participatory media culture. The military is not unique in aiming for culture participation. Raessens discusses the cultural practices of gamers interacting with the cultural industries. The U.S. Army brought into existence a vibrant military-led game community serving a wide range of participatory actions by gamers. Yet, only those aspects of game culture are appropriated which adhere to a mode of participation which is top-down, homogeneous, and prefers the real over the possible. Despite the emergent character of online gameplay, the regulatory and top-down gameplay of *America's Army*, coupled with a specific marketing message, make *America's Army* a controlled environment with ample options for intervention. Developing mods as a common fan activity is replaced by the encouragement and appropriation of clan culture, LAN-parties and content production such as wallpapers and fan videos.

61 In the branded world of *America's Army* players may acquire various bits of trivial information about the U.S. Army. The knowledge and information which is picked up by gamers can be directly related to an external reality. Why do we fight in *America's Army*? To defend freedom! How? With my friends from all over the world, online. Within the one game of *America's Army* many, if not all, characteristics of the changing relationship between the U.S. military and popular culture seem to come together. The official Army game turned out to be not just some experimental Army project, but a game which young kids play for hours each day, sometimes over a period of a year or more.

62 The dedication and appreciation of gamers shown towards the game might seem strange for those critical towards the U.S. Army or violent shooter games. Yet, many gamers see *America's Army* as 'just a game;, and gamers may be unaware of any of the game's four dimensions or simply not care about them-in the end, it is a free (gratis) game. The Army brand is widely dispersed around the globe and the Army Game Project is expected to expand widely over years to come. New genres and forms of gaming, such as Massively Multiplayer Online FPS games, are also being explored by the military. All of this has been possible not despite, but because of, America´s Army players and fans. They directly contribute, little by little, to the expansion of the military-entertainment complex and the militarisation of popular culture.

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Notes

[1] List taken from Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battlefield_2.

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[2] See the official website https://americasarmy.com. February 2006 version 2.6, also known as *America's Army: Special Forces* (Link-Up), was released for Windows PCs.

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[3] See https://www.americasarmy.com/support/roe.php.

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[4] *America's Army* Frequently Asked Questions, https://www.americasarmy.com/support/faq_win.php?p=1&t=3.

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[5] An interview with one of the developers is located at the America´s Army fansite ArmyOps-Tracker: https://aaotracker.com/thread.php?threadid=73961.

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[6] One could question whether *911Survivor* with no apparent conflict, follows the definition of a game.

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[7] The mods homepage is located at https://welcome.to/politicalarena.

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[8] See https://www.americasarmy.com/intel/makingof_videos.php

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[9] For example, https://aaotracker.com/trackerstats.php.

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[10] See https://events.americasarmy.com/.

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[11] Toles refers to: Greene, B. Army sees a Use for Video Games'. San Francisco Chronicle (1981), 8-21.

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