

Speaking Through Omission: Game Maps as Spatial Rhetoric

Anders Sundnes Løvlie

IT University of Copenhagen

ABSTRACT

This paper uses the military propaganda game *America's Army* to understand how computer game maps can be used to serve a rhetorical purpose. I argue that the game maps speak primarily through omissions, simplifications and differentiating features that highlight the relationship between similar games, rather than the relation between game and reality. Through a study of user-generated maps, I conclude that the rhetoric of *America's Army* can be identified also in the players' own creations, indicating some degree of success for the propaganda purpose of the game.

KEYWORDS

Game Maps, Rhetoric, *America's Army*, User-Generated Content

1 INTRODUCTION

“The Most Authentic Army Game Ever!” This was the advertising slogan of *America's Army* (U.S.Army & MOVES Institute, 2002), a game which raised much attention in both game scholarship and mainstream media in the years following its launch on 4 July 2002. In recent years the game has received less attention, although the series has continued to be developed in a variety of versions, the most recent released in 2013 under the title *America's Army: Proving Grounds* (US Army, 2013). So why return to this game now, years after the hype died down? Because among the constant onslaught of military-themed games, *America's Army* has a unique claim to authenticity that, in its aspirations as well as its shortcomings, can be used to shed light on some interesting properties of games as fantasy, reality and rhetoric. *America's Army* is the official US Army game, commissioned by the Army to be used as a recruitment and propaganda tool – that is, to get young US citizens interested in pursuing an army career, as well as to show people in other parts of the world “how great the US Army is” (U.S.Army, n.d.-b). No matter what one's feelings might be towards this endeavor, *America's Army* is a fascinating game to study for anyone interested in the use of computer games for rhetorical purposes. And while both the media hype and scholarly attention towards the game has declined, the game is not gone: The PC version has been developed and updated through 4 main releases, as well as games for mobile phones, XBOX and an arcade game.

Existing literature on *America's Army* has often focused on the institutional context of the game, whether it is seen as propaganda (Nieborg, 2006), branding/ advertising (van der Graf & Nieborg, 2003), an educational or military testing tool (Nieborg, 2005), or even as “civilian-military public sphere” (Li, 2004). Alexander Galloway points to the lack of *social realism* in the game, as distinguished from the game's technical “realistic-ness” (Galloway, 2004). Ian Bogost makes similar observations, pointing out that the game “underscores the contemporary American assumption that matters of military conflict are commutative; that is to say, one global, even transcendental situation guides both sides of the conflict. [...] This line of thinking accurately represents contemporary U.S. attitudes about military conflict. Our perspective is not only right, but there is no explanation for the

opposition's behavior save wickedness" (Bogost, 2007, p. 78). In my own work, I have analyzed *America's Army* as a special case of computer game rhetoric, where the army's propaganda message is communicated not just through words and images, but also through the game design understood as a system of rules, game world and avatars (Løvlie, 2008, 2009) [reference removed]. In the following article, I wish to expand on the spatial dimension of this analysis, looking at the contribution of game maps to the rhetoric of *America's Army*. While this game is interesting as a unique historical case, I contend that it also can serve as a lens through which we can understand broader developments in representations of space in military-themed first person shooter games.

The word rhetoric is used here in a broad sense, referring to the use of language or other means of communication for the purpose of persuasion. To speak of the design of a computer game as a work of rhetoric is therefore to speak of game design as a kind of language, or at least a form of communication. This is not uncontroversial – one might contend that game design is primarily about constructing games that appeal to the players, and that "the value system of a game is strictly internal", as Espen Aarseth has claimed (Aarseth, 2004). On the other hand, scholars such as Henry Jenkins and Sybille Lammes have suggested computer game spaces can be viewed as a form of "narrative architecture" (Jenkins, 2004) or "spatial storytelling" (Lammes, 2009). In her analysis of cartographic practices in real-time strategy games, Lammes suggests viewing game spaces as "material semiotic practices that are intertwined with, and part of, more extended cultural networks" (Lammes, 2008, p. 270). Aarseth has suggested that game spaces should be seen as "allegories" (Aarseth, 2001), which at the very least implies that game spaces in some sense can communicate something.

Leaving aside the debates about games as stories, it does seem uncontroversial to view *America's Army* as a work of propaganda. As David Nieborg has pointed out, the game fits well in the U.S. Army's own definition of propaganda: "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 dictionary of military and associated terms*, quoted in (Nieborg, 2009)). There is no dispute that the game has been commissioned in order

to promote a particular message, as stated on the game's website: "*America's Army* is part of the Army's communications strategy designed to leverage the power of the Internet as a portal through which young adults can get a first hand look at what it is like to be a Soldier" (U.S.Army, n.d.-c).

The rhetorical purpose of *America's Army* is obvious. But the rhetorical work done by the game is not trivial, influencing the design of the game on many levels. The focus here is not on identifying rhetorical *figures* — such as metaphors — in the design, but rather to describe the rhetorical *strategies* employed in the design of gamespaces and maps. These elements of the game work together to support the game's central claim to authenticity. An appearance of authenticity is important for the game's message to be seen as believable, supporting the game's claim to being educational, serious and trustworthy; especially as the game's primary target group is fairly young, teenagers aged 13 and older, whose parents might need to be persuaded that this game is different from the gory and violent games that have so often been accused of damaging their children (Halter, 2006, pp. xix–xx). In the following I will discuss how this rhetorical strategy affects the spatial composition of *America's Army* - both in its three-dimensional gamespaces, as well as the two-dimensional map representations of these spaces. Finally, I will turn to the gamespaces created by players themselves, using the game's mission editor, in order to assess whether the spatial rhetoric of the game can be found also in the players' creations.

2 GAME MAPS

"Maps are [...] inherently rhetorical images," claims cartography historian J.B. Harley: "As images of the world, maps are never neutral or value-free or ever completely scientific" (Harley, 2001, p. 37). If this is true about maps of the real world, then it certainly must be true about the maps that can be found in *America's Army*, an artificial environment built with a clear rhetorical purpose. But there is an important difference in the way maps work in games vs the real world. In a multiplayer first person shooter game such as *America's Army*, the word 'map' has an odd double meaning: It can be used to refer both to the "map" – in the common sense of the word – and the "terrain." The multiplayer

versions of games like *America's Army*, the *Counter-Strike* series (Valve Corporation et al., 2000), the *Battlefield* series (EA DICE, 2002) do not take place in the large, semi-continuous spaces common to many of their singleplayer counterparts like *Half-Life* (Valve Software, 1998) or *Halo* (Bungie Studios, 2001). Rather, the gamespaces of these multiplayer games can be described as a string of isolated game arenas in which battles are fought. However, these arenas are usually designed to look more or less like realistic battlefields – in the case of *America's Army*, these range from real-life US Army training facilities to Taliban hideouts in Afghan mountain areas. Among players, these arenas are colloquially referred to as "maps."

This double meaning of the word "map" stretches far back in time – after all, many war games, such as the 19th-century *Kriegsspiel* (von Reisswitz, 1824) as well as its modern family entertainment counterpart *Risk* (Lamorisse, 1957) actually take place on maps. For these games, the map *is* the game arena. And when *Doom* (id Software, 1993) gave users the possibility to create their own game arenas, the tools used for creating these spaces referred to them both as "levels" and as "maps." One of the reasons why this mixing of concepts does not seem unnatural is probably that, like any map, the three-dimensional gamespaces of first-person shooters are themselves graphical – and simulated – representations of space. Arguably, a map over one of these artificial spaces – in the sense of a two-dimensional, schematic overview – is much more tightly connected with that space than a real-world map is with the space it depicts. After all, the computer game map does not need to be created by means of land measurements, aerial photography, Euclidean projections and all the other techniques necessary to create a real-world map; rather, it is just a simplified, two-dimensional rendering of the space itself, created with the same design tools that were used to create the three-dimensional space. And so it seems reasonable to treat the gamespace as it appears in the three-dimensional game interface, and the two-dimensional map of it, as two different views of the same artificial structure.

3 THE SPACE OF *AMERICA'S ARMY*

America's Army, on the other hand, has its own terminology. Here, every map or arena is known as a 'mission', of which there are two basic kinds: Training missions, which offer single-player game rounds played offline; and combat missions, which are played online together with other human players. The arenas for the training missions have been carefully modelled on real-life army training facilities, whereas the combat arenas mostly consist of “fabricated hamlets and landscapes” (Davis et al., 2003, p. 271). The designers' own account speaks not only of the great efforts but also the apparent enthusiasm going into the creation of an authentic gameworld:

Over the two years beginning in May 2000, the team visited nineteen Army posts, including Ft. Benning (for the rifle range), Ft. Lewis (weapons), and Ft. Polk (vehicles and house-clearing operations). Besides photographing modeling and texture referents, shooting motion-capture video for animations, and recording thousands of sound effects, the team jumped from towers, submitted to dog attacks, even rode a Blackhawk helicopter at 3 a.m., watching the fireworks as live shells barraged the terrain below. (Davis et al., 2003, p. 271)

Certainly, a number of characteristics make the gameworld of *America's Army* seem more realistic than similar commercial games. For instance, if one tries to shoot while running the chance of hitting what one aims for is quite small. In fact, running around in the open is very likely to get one shot very quickly, and compared to similar games, *America's Army* avatars die very quickly – often after just being hit by a single bullet – and no magic health packs or medics can bring them back to life (until the current round is over, that is). In order to play this game well, one must move around very carefully, try to stay behind cover and avoid shooting while running. And since the speed of the avatars is lower than in many similar games, movement in general is relatively slow and cumbersome. The size of the gamespaces in *America's Army* contribute to this effect, being significantly larger than the typically dense, close-quarter combat zones of *Counter-Strike* (and most other games of the genre). The relatively slow speed of movement in *America's Army* makes the spaces seem even larger than they are. Elsewhere, I have presented measurements and comparisons of the gamespaces in three

contemporary games: *America's Army 2*, *Counter-Strike: Source* and *Battlefield 2* [reference removed]. While *America's Army 2* features much smaller gamespaces than *Battlefield 2*, players still need the same amount of time to cross the space, because the speed of movement is so much slower in *America's Army 2*. Of course in *Battlefield 2*, players can use a variety of vehicles to move around the gamespace, whereas in *America's Army 2* there are no vehicles at all, with the exception of a few missions where some quite slow terrain vehicles are available. Movement and gameplay in *Battlefield 2* (as in the other installments of the series) is fast-paced, dynamic and by any estimation very unrealistic compared to real life. Comparing the two games in this way, there is little doubt that *America's Army 2* is more realistic.

But what does it mean to be realistic? Even the “Radio Tower Map” – one of the largest of the game arenas in *America's Army 2* that don't include vehicles – can be run across in just over two minutes. How many real-life army missions take place within an area of combat that is strictly limited to such a small diameter? And even though the avatars in *America's Army 2* are slower than in other games, they still move quite fast. They can sprint in full combat gear at 4 meters per second (9 mph) and hold this speed for as long as it takes without ever getting tired, regardless of terrain, even knee-deep in water or snow. Their slowest mode of walking, typically used for sneaking up on enemies without making noise, is 1.5 m/s (3.4 mph) – which corresponds roughly to the normal maneuver speed of real-world foot soldiers.¹ And as for the metrical size of the gamespaces, they are also surprisingly small, ranging from ca. 70-350 meters across. In other words, the smallest battlefield is the size of a football field! The reason for these lapses of realism seems clear: they prevent the game from becoming so slow and cumbersome that it ruins the players' enjoyment of it.

Figure 1 shows a comparison between the smallest maps in *Battlefield 2*, *America's Army* and *Counter-Strike: Source*. As the figure shows, the map from *America's Army* is tiny compared to the one from *Battlefield 2* - no doubt this is due to the fact that players in *Battlefield 2* can use vehicles to move around, whereas in the other two games the avatars can only move on foot. Figure 2 shows the same three maps, with an altered scale to take into account the speed of movement in the three

games. Here, the map from *America's Army* appears a little larger than the map from *Battlefield 2*. A similar comparison using the largest map from each game yields similar result.

The authenticity of *America's Army 2* should not be measured primarily in the game's relation to real life, but in its relation to other games. The gameworld of *America's Army* may be presented as realistic and authentic not primarily because it is like the real world in a fully convincing way, but because certain features of *America's Army* are more realistic than those found in similar games. One may describe these contrasting features as “reality effects” (Armstrong, 2005, p. 8), or just a posture of realism – either way, it seems clear that it should be viewed as part of a rhetorical strategy. To the extent that game design can be regarded as a language, the pretense to authenticity in *America's Army* could be considered as a kind of rhetorical figure, a trope.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Espen Aarseth has analyzed the relationship between what gamespaces *are* and what they *represent* in his critique of a very different kind of game, one with little or no claim to realism: *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). Here the gameworld is presented as consisting of several continents, the appearance of which is “a seemingly seamless whole, a continuous surface that, by being continuous and labyrinthine, gives the impression of being a lot bigger than it actually is” (Aarseth, 2008, p. 116). In fact, one of these “continents” is just eight miles long from north to south, roughly equivalent to the island of Manhattan – or perhaps more appropriately, the size of Disney World in Florida. Into this small space is cramped even smaller zones of vastly divergent climate, culture and politics in ways which appear quite improbable. The reason for this, according to Aarseth, “is rather obvious and not at all irrational: Azeroth is all about playability. [...] [T]he key design principle is enjoyment, not geopolitical or material realism” (Aarseth, 2008, pp. 118–119).

In spite of *America's Army's* claim to authenticity, the same principle appears to be at work in the design of this game as in the fantasy space of *World of Warcraft*. If we consider the gamespaces of mainstream military shooter games like *Battlefield* or *Counter-Strike* as a sort of virtual, military theme parks akin to paint ball or laser tag arenas, *America's Army* distinguishes itself not by being a real army training facility, but rather by being a military theme park housed on army property and made to look more like the real thing than the competitors.

4 MAPS IN *AMERICA'S ARMY*

So far, game spaces; now let's turn our attention to the representation of these spaces through maps. Figures 3-5 show three maps, all of which depict urban landscapes. Two of them are taken from computer games – *America's Army 2* and *Battlefield 2*, respectively – while the third is a map of the real world taken from the online mapping service Google Maps and depicts a city block in Berkeley, California. The scale of the Google Maps image has been set so that it covers an area of approximately the same size as that of the map from *America's Army 2*, while the map from *Battlefield 2* covers an area that is ca. six times larger. What is worth noticing about these three maps is, first of all, this: Although *Battlefield 2* and *America's Army* are two quite different games, the maps from the two games appear to have much more in common with each other, than with the map from the real world. This difference between the game maps and the one from the real world shows itself in several ways. First of all, the map from Google Maps is more abstract, and doesn't show outlines of buildings or the landscape. However, this doesn't mean it is less detailed: Unlike the two game maps, the excerpt from Google Maps shows street names as well as the names and locations of restaurants, hotels, bus stops and other important features for navigation, such as the direction of one-way streets. Looking closer, one may also notice another difference: The two game maps show enclosed spaces, boxed in by boundaries that appear only partly natural, whereas the real-world map appears to stretch beyond the edges of the image without any apparent limit (as is actually the case).

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Viewing these maps in their original context, that is inside the games and in the Google Maps website, brings out another difference: The real-world map has far more interactive features. It can be zoomed in and out, panned sideways, searched, the map tiles can be exchanged for aerial imagery, it can be overlaid with extra information such as traffic, geotagged Wikipedia articles and photos from Flickr, et cetera. The map in *Battlefield 2* can also be zoomed and panned, and furthermore has some features that Google Maps does not: It shows the movements of the player and her team, as well as enemies that are detected by radars, as well as the status of certain important game elements (e.g. which team holds the important control points). In other words, the *Battlefield 2* map is not just a static representation of space, it is a control screen that displays dynamically updated information about what is going on in the game. By contrast, the map from *America's Army* is non-interactive and non-dynamic. What you see printed in this paper is exactly what you get in the game: a flat image and nothing more. If we look away from the fact that this map is displayed inside a computer game, this map is no more technologically advanced than an analogue street map printed on paper; or more appropriately, as becomes clear when one studies it closely, an analogue aerial photo taken with a good zoom lens.

These observations show that the purpose of the game maps are fundamentally different from that of the real-world map. The latter is a general-purpose tool for navigation and orientation with many levels of accuracy in a large, almost unbounded space. These game maps, on the other hand, are not particularly good navigation tools (unlike a traditional paper map, they cannot even be oriented to match the player's direction), and they are certainly not general-purpose. Unlike most maps in normal use, these maps are created to show not only the lasting features of a given place, but the features of that place at a particular moment in time. That is, these maps show not only a location, but a *situation*.

The map from *America's Army*, for instance, shows parked army jeeps, car wrecks and rubbish in the streets. These are things one may also see in the aerial photos or the “Streetview” function available within Google Maps. However, while one doesn't expect the parked cars shown in the aerial imagery of Google Maps to actually be there when one looks out the window onto the real street, in the computer game spaces the car is right where the map shows it to be. The *America's Army* game map is an aerial photograph of a world that is frozen in time, so the photograph always matches the actual situation perfectly.

In part, the rationale for including information about the situation as well as the location may be explained by the fact that these are military maps, designed to give an overview of not just the physical terrain but also the tactical situation at the moment of the operation. However, the maps appear to give both more and less detail than one would imagine from a real military map. In the map from *America's Army*, one can see not only the parked jeeps, one can even see where there are clothes hung out to dry. However, the jeeps, the clothes and the streets themselves are entirely generic. These are not individual streets that have street names, the clothes on the line do not have an owner, not even the city they are in is given a name. As such, this is not so much a situation as it is a tableau: a generic, fictional set-up, such as those that can be found in a ride in an amusement park. Unlike the game's US training camps, which are carefully modelled and identified as real-world spaces, each with their specific features and roles to play in the education of a soldier, the foreign spaces in which combat missions take place are never identified with any real place names, street names or any other feature that would indicate a specific, local identity. (While the mission descriptions presented to players before starting a game round often include “grid references” which offer the pretense of extreme accuracy in pinpointing locations on the map, there are no grid numbers on the map and no apparent way to use these references to locate anything on the map.) The enemy is never any real-life terrorist group or army, with any specific characteristics or identity of its own – it is always just referred to by the generic, technical term OPFOR (“opposing force”), and even if one manages to sneak up on the enemy close enough to hear them shouting messages at each other, one only hears a generic

“gibberish” language referred to by gamers as OpForian. Even when the game in some missions incorporates the roles of local allied forces, these are only referred to by the generic term of “Indigenous Forces.” In *America's Army*, the only identity available is that of a US soldier, and the only identifiable spaces are those of the US army bases. The enemy is anonymous and their land is generic and exchangeable.ⁱⁱ In the words of J. B. Harley, the maps speak “through their omissions as much as by the features they depict and emphasize” (Harley, 2001, p. 67).

While the game maps as shown above are not particularly useful for practical navigation, spatial orientation is of course highly important in first-person shooters, and maps are certainly used for this purpose. As in most other games of the genre, the user interface of *America's Army* includes a “head-up display” (HUD) which displays important information about the avatar laid over the image of the game world. Along with information about health, ammunition and gear, this interface also includes a small window onto the map, which displays the player's location on the map and rotates to match the avatar's direction. This view of the map provides the player with a quick way of orienting her current position in the larger landscape without bringing up the main map and obscuring the main view, which would blind the player from seeing approaching enemies.

This “gadget” might be compared to a common GPS navigator, such as those that have recently become popular in high-end cell phones and which can be used for pedestrian navigation in a way vaguely similar to the HUD maps in *America's Army*. However, this also brings to light a couple of important differences. First of all, the HUD map has a few features that go far beyond what a real-life GPS device could deliver. Its accuracy is absolute, both horizontally and vertically, and it works outdoors, indoors and even in deep underground tunnels; whereas a real-life GPS usually has an inaccuracy of at least a few meters horizontally and much more vertically, and loses its signal indoors, next to high buildings, or sometimes just in cloudy weather. The HUD map also shows the location of teammates with the same accuracy (and no time delay), something which in a real-life mass market device would be subject to the delays and inaccuracy of data connectivity. The most unrealistic feature of these HUD maps, however, is probably the HUD itself. Real-life GPS devices are actual

gadgets, which are carried in pockets and must be taken out, held in the hand and inspected, and then put back in the pocket if one wants to use the hands for something else (such as handling an assault rifle). While reports of experimental HUDs for infantry soldiers can be found in public sources online, this author has not found any sources indicating that HUDs for infantry soldiers are in common use in combat, and even if they were, it seems fair to assume that they would not have anything close to the extensive capabilities of the in-game HUD.

The use of a HUD format rather than a gadget can not simply be dismissed as a consequence of game conventions, because there is actually a convention for gadgets in the game: If a player wants to use binoculars, for instance, she must press a button which initiates an animation in which the gun is put down and the binoculars are brought up from the inventory. If an enemy surprises the player while she is busy looking through the binoculars, the binoculars must be dropped and the gun brought back up before she can fire at the enemy. That is quite realistic of course, and following the same principles one could easily have implemented a navigation device that had to be operated in a similar way. However, such a solution would have made navigation in the gamespace significantly slower and more cumbersome – and riskier – with the danger of obstructing the flow of gameplay. Here we see, once again, the limit of authentic representation in *America's Army*: The ambition for authenticity is balanced against the need to keep the game user-friendly and reasonably simple to play.

This balancing act is fundamental to the design of the game missions, as acknowledged by the designers:

The activities agreed upon were at once authentic, technically feasible and fun – or made fun. Take the radio-tower mission: yes, rangers would disable the tower in real life, but they might do that by blowing it up – which would be over too quickly in a game. Instead AA requires the player to find friendlies, take down terrorists, and safeguard foreign-aid workers till the communications people can effect a takeover. (Davis et al., 2003, p. 270)

The simple fact is, of course, that games need to be fun – but real combat is not. According to the game designers, the Army required “that the game be played absolutely straight, as an honest representation of the service, [...] extending to accurate depiction of hierarchy, missions, weapons, uniforms, settings, discipline, tactics, procedure” (Davis et al., 2003, p. 269). However, judging from the game's final design, this requirement seems to have been interpreted as secondary, something which could be applied as a “theme” wherever it didn't impede the primary objective: good gameplay. This is the rhetorical strategy of authenticity at work – authenticity used as an ornament, for something which at its base level is fundamentally alien to being an authentic representation of war. That the game's designers have managed to do this without making the result seem jarring and odd is a great rhetorical accomplishment. Evidence of this can be seen in the way users respond when they are given the tools to make their own contributions to the game.

5 “AUTOMATIC REJECTIONS”: USER-GENERATED MAPS

With the release of version 2.8 of *America's Army*, the players were given access to a new feature: the Mission Editor, a program that allows players to create their own missions for the game. Players could upload these missions to a new section of the game's website, called the “Mission Depot,” where other players could download them and try them out. The submitted missions would also be reviewed by a panel of experts. Missions judged by the expert panel to be “Fully Mission Capable” could then be played on official servers, and might eventually be included in the official game package.

The response from the player community to this new feature was initially not overwhelming. From December 2006 to April 2009, when I gathered data on the use of the mission editor, 358 missions in total had been submitted, of which only two had been deemed “Fully Mission Capable” by the Army's panel. The most popular mission received votes from 2450 users. By comparison, the popular website cs-maps.org, one of many such sites devoted to *Counter-Strike* maps, held at the same time over 14000 user-submitted maps and over 27 million downloads; the most popular map had been

downloaded over 375,000 times. In other words, the community of players submitting missions to *America's Army's* “Mission Depot” was notable, but not very large.

Absence is also one of the most striking features when looking at the content of these maps. First of all, even though the two Army-approved maps take place as terrorist/counter-terrorist operations in busy work-places – an oil rig and a secret research facility – there are no civilians, no workers or hostages present. This is also the case in nearly all the official missions in the game, and is quite understandable: From the Army's point of view, the presence of civilians implies the possibility of violence against them, which it cannot be seen to encourage. From the player's point of view, the presence of civilians that one must avoid firing upon is an obstacle that carries no obvious benefit (barring gratuitous violence) – except for making the environment more authentic, that is. But most striking of all is the absence of vulgarities and excesses of any kind from these player contributions. According to Richard Bartle,ⁱⁱⁱ game developers who decide to allow users to create things in their game worlds measure the result by a factor known as “time-to-dick”: That is, the time it takes before some user has found a way to create the shape of a penis. Bartle estimates that this can usually be measured in seconds. Users tend to be creative in all sorts of ways that may be both unexpected and undesirable from the point of view of the game's publishers. This may include sexual vulgarities, but also excessive violence and sadism (such as *The Suicide Bomber Game* (fabulous999, 2002)), political taboos (such as swastikas and xenophobic statements), or just humorous surrealism (such as the “Kitchen Map” for *Unreal Tournament 2004*, in which players are reduced to the size of toy soldiers and fight to death among the dirty dishes on the kitchen counter (Fliegenklatsche, 2004)).

When looking at the most popular missions in *America's Army's* Mission Depot, there are no such excesses to be found – both the missions themselves and the presentations of them are typically held in the same technical, professional style as the official Army game. Looking further down the popularity list, though, some more divergent missions can be found – such as a number of missions called things like “Quickdraw”, “Snowglobe” and “Bloodbath,” all by the same user named 'l{rusty+l{lown_}{fx}'. Reading through the comments made by other users about these maps, one

quickly realizes that s/he is a controversial figure – many greet his or her submissions with scorn and derision, whereas one dryly comments: “Putting ‘bloodbath’ in the title of the map basicly [sic] makes it an automatic rejection.” Another user has copied and pasted the same comment into the comments section of all of these maps: “Stop wasting time with these non-dev quality maps. The purpose of this site is to look for new AA community made quality maps to maybe eventually include in the game. Stop wasting time with these submissions that have no chance” (U.S.Army, 2006). What is clear from these comments is that a part of the user community seems to have adopted a certain design ethic from the design of the official game, which entails avoiding the unrealistic, whimsical and fast-paced in favor of a certain flavor of professional “realism.” Strikingly, these users take a stronger position than the Army's panel reviewers, who have deemed all the three maps mentioned above “Mission Capable,” the basic level of approval below “Fully Mission Capable.”

If we look at the user-created missions as a form of response in a dialog with the game of *America's Army*, it would seem that a significant proportion of the users of the Mission Depot have incorporated the game rhetoric of authenticity into their own speech: Demanding realism of a certain kind, while willingly overlooking an obvious lack of realism in other aspects of the gamespace. As a matter of course, there are elements of unrealism in all computer games, given how hard it is to make a perfect simulation of the real world (and given the fact that a perfect simulation might not even be desirable – since, presumably, few would want to play a first-person shooter where one had to cope with all the tension, struggle, fear and trauma of real-life combat). But apparently, there is a perceived limit beyond which the lack of realism becomes inauthentic. As long as a game stays within this limit and avoids unrealistic excesses, concerns of playability and enjoyment trump rigorous realism.

Following Espen Aarseth's comparison of the spatial design of *World of Warcraft* to the design of a theme park, one might chose to call this a “theme park realism”: A design strategy in which a few significant features are altered in the direction of a more precise realism to create highly noticeable “reality effects”. These effects provide enough “reality stimulus” to allow the player to suspend the disbelief that might be triggered by the lack of realism in all the other aspects of the game, and instead,

enjoy the ride. Seeing *America's Army* as the theme-park version of the US Army may help to reveal its spatial rhetoric of authenticity as hollow, but this should not lead to any easy conclusions about its efficacy. As the user contributions to the game show, the game has succeeded in establishing a significant – if not large – community of users even more devoted to its game-rhetorical ideals than the Army's own experts. As a work of propaganda, this is a significant accomplishment, which makes *America's Army* an interesting object of study to understand the ways in which game spaces can be used for rhetorical purposes.

REFERENCES

- Aarseth, E. (2001). Allegories of Space: The Question of Spatiality in Computer games. In M. Eskelinen & R. Koskimaa (Eds.), *Cybertext yearbook 2000*. Retrieved from <http://www.hf.uib.no/hi/espen/papers/space/Default.html>
- Aarseth, E. (2004). Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation. In N. Wardrip-Fruin & P. Harrigan (Eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*. Retrieved from <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/vigilant>
- Aarseth, E. (2008). A Hollow World: World of Warcraft as Spatial Practice. In H. G. Corneliussen & J. W. Rettberg (Eds.), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. The MIT Press.
- Armstrong, R. (2005). *Understanding Realism*. London: British Film Institute.
- Blizzard Entertainment. (2004). *World of Warcraft*. Retrieved from <http://www.wow-europe.com>
- Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press.
- Bungie Studios. (2001). *Halo: Combat Evolved* [XBOX]. Microsoft Game Studios.
- Combat load report*. (2003, December 31). Retrieved from <http://hqinet001.hqmc.usmc.mil/pp&o/POE/POE-301/Documents/COMBAT%20LOAD%20REPORT%7BDraft%2031%20Dec%2003%7D.doc>
- Davis, M., Shilling, R., Mayberry, A., Bossant, P., McCree, J., Dossett, S., ... Zyda, M. (2003). Researching America's Army. In *Design Research: Methods and Perspectives* (pp. 268–275). Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The MIT Press.
- EA DICE. (2002). *Battlefield* [Windows, OS X, PlayStation, Xbox]. Electronic Arts.

- fabulous999. (2002). *The Suicide Bomber Game* [Flash]. Retrieved from <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view.php?id=50323>
- Fliegenklatsche. (2004). Unreal Tournament 2004 DM Kitchen map (Windows). Retrieved August 19, 2009, from ZDNET website: <http://downloads.zdnet.com/abstract.aspx?docid=702947>
- Galloway, A. R. (2004). Social realism in gaming. *Game Studies*, 4(1). Retrieved from <http://www.gamestudies.org/0401/galloway/>
- Halter, E. (2006). *From Sun Tzu to XBOX*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.
- Harley, J. B. (2001). *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- id Software. (1993). *Doom* [DOS]. id Software.
- Jenkins, H. (2004). Game design as narrative architecture. In N. Wardrip-Fruin & P. Harrigan (Eds.), *First person: New media as story, performance, and game*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Lammes, S. (2008). Spatial Regimes of the Digital Playground: Cultural Functions of Spatial Practices in Computer Games. *Space and Culture*, 11(3), 260–272. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331208319150>
- Lammes, S. (2009). Terra incognita: Computer games, cartography and spatial stories. In M. van den Boomen, S. Lammes, A.-S. Lehmann, J. Raessens, & M. T. Schäfer (Eds.), *Digital material: Tracing new media in everyday life and technology* (pp. 223–235). Retrieved from <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/distributed/D/bo8364650.html>
- Lamorisse, A. (1957). *Risk* [Board game]. Parker Brothers.
- Lewis, A. R. (2006). *The American Culture of War: The History of U.S. Military Force from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Li, Z. (2004). *The Potential of America's Army the Video Game as Civilian-Military Public Sphere* (Master thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology). Retrieved from <http://gamecareerguide.com/education/theses/20040725/ZLITHESES.doc>
- Løvlie, A. S. (2008). The Rhetoric of Persuasive Games: Freedom and Discipline in America's Army. *Conference Proceedings of The Philosophy of Computer Games 2008, 1*, 70–91. Retrieved from http://opus.kobv.de/ubp/volltexte/2008/2461/pdf/digarec01_04.pdf
- Løvlie, A. S. (2009). *The Rhetoric of Persuasive Games: Freedom and Discipline in America's Army*. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag.
- Nieborg, D. B. (2005). *Changing the Rules of Engagement: Tapping into the Popular Culture of America's Army, the Official U.S. Army Computer Game* (MA Thesis, Utrecht University). Retrieved from <http://www.gamespace.nl/thesis/>
- Nieborg, D. B. (2006). "We want the whole world to know how great the U.S. Army is!" – Computer Games and Propaganda. In M. Santorineos (Ed.), *Gaming Realities—A Challenge for Digital*

- Culture* (pp. 77–85). Retrieved from http://www.gamespace.nl/content/Nieborg_GamesAndPropaganda_2006.pdf
- Nieborg, D. B. (2009). Empower yourself, defend freedom! Playing games during times of war. In M. van den Boomen, S. Lammes, A.-S. Lehmann, J. Raessens, & M. T. Schäfer (Eds.), *Digital material: Tracing new media in everyday life and technology* (pp. 35–47). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- US Army. (2013). *America's Army: Proving Grounds* [Windows]. US Army.
- U.S.Army. (2006). FX CQB Bloodbath by 1{rusty+1{lown_{fx}}. Retrieved May 2, 2009, from AA Mission Depot website: http://www.aamissiondepot.com/missions/fx_cqb_bloodbath_krustyklown
- U.S.Army. (n.d.-a). Army Physical Fitness Testing. Retrieved August 14, 2009, from United States Army Recruiting Command website: <http://www.usarec.army.mil/hq/apa/rc/apft.htm>
- U.S.Army. (n.d.-b). SUPPORT - FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS - Miscellaneous [FAQ]. Retrieved May 1, 2009, from AMERICA'S ARMY: SPECIAL FORCES website: <http://www.americasarmy.com/aa/support/faqs.php?t=3&z=12#qa12>
- U.S.Army. (n.d.-c). SUPPORT - FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS - PARENTS INFO [FAQ]. Retrieved August 14, 2009, from AMERICA'S ARMY: SPECIAL FORCES website: <http://www.americasarmy.com/aa/support/faqs.php?t=9&z=60#qa60>
- U.S.Army, & MOVES Institute. (2002). *America's Army*. Retrieved from www.americasarmy.com
- Valve Corporation, Turtle Rock Studios, Hidden Path Entertainment, Gearbox Software, Ritual Entertainment, & Nexon. (2000). *Counter-Strike* [Windows, OS X, Linux, PlayStation, Xbox]. Valve Corporation.
- Valve Software. (1998). *Half-Life* [PC]. Sierra On-Line.
- van der Graf, S., & Nieborg, D. B. (2003). Together we Brand: America's Army. *Level Up Conference Proceedings*, 323–337. Retrieved from <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/05163.34543>
- von Reisswitz, B. (1824). *Kriegsspiel* [Board game]. The Prussian Army.

Figures



Figure 1: Comparison of map sizes in *Battlefield 2*, *America's Army* and *Counter-Strike: Source*. The figure shows the smallest map in each game: The 16-player version of "Strike at Karkand" from *Battlefield 2* (main – the shaded areas are outside the game arena), "Urban Assault" from *America's Army* (inset, lower right corner) and "de_dust" from *Counter-Strike: Source* (smallest, lower right corner).



Figure 2: The same maps as in Figure 1, with an altered scale representing the time it takes to cross the map in a straight line. For *Battlefield 2* a medium fast vehicle (an APC) was used, for the other two games the avatar's running speed was used.

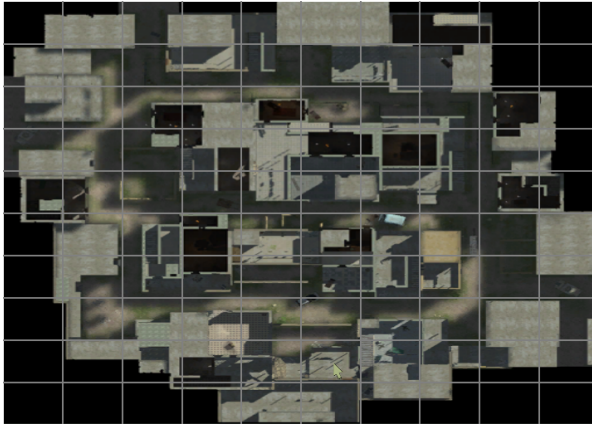


Figure 3: "Urban Assault" mission map, *America's Army*



Figure 4: "Strike at Karkand" mission map, *Battlefield 2*.

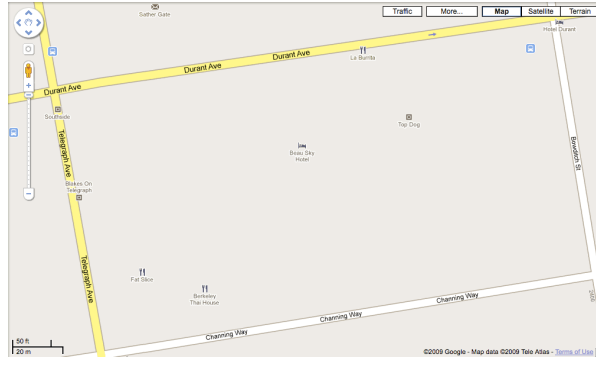


Figure 5: Map image from Google Maps, showing a city block in Berkeley, California.

-
- i According to military historian Adrian Lewis, the maneuver speed of infantry is 3 to 4 miles per hour (Lewis, 2006, p. 304). In order to get a top score in the “Army Physical Fitness Test,” a male soldier in the youngest age class must run 2 miles in 13 minutes or less, corresponding to a speed of 9.2 mph (U.S.Army, n.d.-a). These tests, however, are done with normal gym clothing and without a combat load, which for modern-day soldiers can be considerable – for US Marines, this load can range from 55 to 145 lbs (*Combat load report*, 2003).
 - ii There are a couple of exceptions to this: The “Insurgent Camp” mission is said to take place at some undisclosed location in Afghanistan, and the enemy is identified as “Taliban”; whereas the “Pipeline” mission takes place at a generic, desolate location in Alaska, against a generic terrorist group.
 - iii Bartle, Richard, “Open Worlds Panel” (keynote address at the Philosophy of Computer Games conference at Potsdam University, May 2008).