

The Potential of America's Army the Video Game  
as Civilian-Military Public Sphere

by  
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## **The Potential of America's Army the Video Game as Civilian-Military Public Sphere**

"Citizens. Countries. Video Games. The US Army keeps them all free."

- America's Army video game advertising slogan, 2003

"Here, then, we have the first main characteristic of play:

that it is free, is in fact freedom.

A second characteristic is closely connected to this,

namely that play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life."

- Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 1950:8

"The severe discrepancy in the scale of consequence makes the comparison of war and gaming nearly obscene, the analogy either trivializing the one or, conversely, attributing to the other a weight of motive and consequence it cannot bear."

- Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 1985:83

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**[NOTE: Refer to accompanying CD-ROM for *America's Army* digital artifacts mentioned in the text. ]**

## **Introduction**

The basic aim of this thesis is to assess the US Army produced video game *America's Army*<sup>1</sup> (2002) and its online communities for its potential as a public sphere. My exploration of the game, and the communities which have grown around it, will be mainly based on observations of social formations and practices of the game, and interviews with players. Additional data was gathered from a visit to the US Military Academy at West Point where the US Army organization behind the game project, the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA) is based.

### *Gulf War 2, 2003*

Most of the data-gathering and research for this thesis was conducted in the months immediately prior, during, and after Gulf War 2 in the first half of 2003. On March 20, 2003 - the day the official US-led coalition campaign of Gulf War 2 began - I spent eight hours wandering in and out of *America's Army* missions (whilst I had the internet simultaneously broadcasting the live reportage of the BBC). I hoped to make observations about what the games players were saying about the outbreak of war as it happened, and what they felt about acting out virtual infantry combat at the time when real combat by US ground troops was beginning in Iraq. A new mission level, called "Radio Tower" – depicting a paradrop assault on an enemy radio station in a Middle Eastern desert, had been released by the development team only a few days before and the servers were busy with players playing the level for the first time.

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<sup>1</sup> see the website [www.americasarmy.com](http://www.americasarmy.com)

I was surprised to find, at least in my experience that night, that there was very little discussion of the outbreak of war. It was more common for the players to express a reluctance or even annoyance about the idea of discussing the unfolding events in the Gulf. The players who were active in the missions were there for escapism and for entertainment. For most, the idea of discussing real war seemed to threaten their sense of carefree pleasure and represented the encroachment of the serious into the liminal space of gameplay. Furthermore, it was noticeable that those with the most investment in the reality of war - the real military personnel players - were largely absent that night. It seemed that those who were most seriously concerned about the war were away from the computer and watching television news.

America's Army is unique as the first state-production of video game popular culture for the purposes of strategic communication with the public – in addition, it is unique as a space where the public can come into contact with the gamespace's core constituency of actual active duty and military personnel. The starting point of this thesis was my curiosity that night about why there was not more discourse about the political events of the real world which bore such direct resonance with virtual gamespace. Or to put in another way, could the America's Army gamespace hold latent potential as a civilian-military public sphere?

### *America's Army the Video Game*

For the main part, America's Army is a multiplayer networked game of the extremely popular tactical "first-person shooter" (FPS) genre<sup>2</sup>. It was given a "Teen Rating" for violent but goreless gameplay by the Entertainment Standards Ratings Board. Using the latest version of the Unreal advanced 3D game engine

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<sup>2</sup> For the uninitiated, a "first-person shooter" video game generally involves violent gameplay with guns etc. from the first-person perspective of a 3-D environment. A "tactical" FPS emphasizes more realistic weapons modeling, sophisticated tactics, and co-ordinated teamplay, and its game arenas and missions are constructed according to a realist aesthetic.

software, the game consists of a typical gameplay environment associated with the genre of tactical FPSs. This environment was structured in terms of 10 minute missions between two competing human teams who control avatars in a variety of landscapes. The players communicate via on-screen chat or (more effectively) through audio headsets ("voice comms"). The graphics, sound, and gameplay are designed to accurately model Army equipment, training locations, jargon, and so on. Mission scenarios are grouped in categories identified with real life Army divisions. The range of game missions already created or planned will encompass the full range of Army combat roles - including military police, medical "combat life-savers", armored infantry, and special forces, as well as regular infantry. Scenario design range from the realistic depiction of actual Army training locations (in which virtual laser training weaponry is used rather than virtual live weapons) to fictional geographical locations for active duty mission scenarios. There are hundreds of America's Army clans, many of them with their own website communities, active in competing in FPS game tournament spaces such as [www.teamwarfare.com](http://www.teamwarfare.com), and renting their own servers (a major cost saving for the Army).

Aware of the potential political sensitivity of such a project, the game structure was designed to reflect the values of the Army as an institution concerned with the ethical and legitimate conduct of war, as well as demonstrating a certain degree of political neutrality. For instance, a key directive for the game design was that players should not be able to play in such a way that they are rewarded for the killing of virtual American soldiers. Accordingly, each player sees members of his own team as American (with an ethnically mixed team of avatars), and the opposing human team members as enemies (the OPFOR or opposing force). OPFOR teams are portrayed as coming from one of a variety of broad ethnic backgrounds (Latin American, Arab, European) depending on the (anonymous) geography of the mission scenario. "Player-killing" - the targeting of your own team members - is punished by quick ejection from the mission-in-play into the representation of a military prison, and

the reduction of the player's rating. Team-playing and the securing of realistic Army mission objectives are set as official mission tasks rather than the general reward of killing seen in many other games of this genre. Typical missions include parachute training jumps, operations set in desert areas reminiscent of Central Asia or North Africa, and the "homeland security" defense of an Alaskan oil pipeline station from terrorist attack.

### *America's Army Project Rationale*

America's Army has been successful beyond expectations, winning a "Best of Show" award when it was launched at the 2002 E3 Expo (the major trade show for the electronic entertainment industry)<sup>3</sup>, has maintained a presence in the top 10 most played online games since its public release<sup>4</sup>, and by August 2003, there were almost 2 million registered players who had played over 185 million 10-minute missions<sup>5</sup> - this ranks high with the most popular of commercial video games. The America's Army project was conceived as a strategic communication tool (i.e. a branding and marketing initiative, particularly but not exclusively associated with the US Army's recruiting effort). It is notable not only as the first commercial game project entirely "created by the Army, designed by the Army, developed by the Army... because no one gets the Army like the Army!" (as one launch video trailer had it), but also the first product developed entirely by the US military designed for dissemination within the domain of commercial entertainment popular culture.

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<sup>3</sup> The 2002 and 2003 E3 trade shows were notable for the unprecedented introduction of a significant military presence, in order to advertise the America's Army game. This presence included armored fighting vehicles, real soldiers rappeling from a helicopter, bomb disposal robots, and the recreation of an Afghan village. Prior to this, E3 military presence had only consisted of actors playing soldiers for war game stalls.

<sup>4</sup> According to the leading online games portal, [www.gamespy.com](http://www.gamespy.com)

<sup>5</sup> On August 10th, 2003, with the release of version 1.9 of the game, America's Army recorded the highest daily player activity ever, with over 2.1 million missions played on that date - almost treble the usual average. Each mission involved up to 24 players. (statistics from [www.americasarmy.com](http://www.americasarmy.com))

First proposed in August 1999, the development process for the project was given funding approval in June 2000 at approximately \$7m (and \$2m a year cost for support and development until 2007) and involving the employment of veteran game developers from the commercial industry, based at the MOdeling, Virtual Environments and Simulations (MOVES) institute at the US Naval Postgraduate School at Monterey, California. The game is being distributed mainly as a free download or CD-ROM for PCs, with the July 2003 release of a Macintosh pay-version, and future plans for the licensing of console versions.

The primary official goals of the project are to support Army recruiting efforts, particularly of teenagers with high-tech aptitude and skills; raise the positive profile of the Army as an interesting, high-skilled organization; and to promote the revival of military-civilian grassroots contact. These goals are all urgent missions for the Army - it has the most manpower-intensive requirements of any branch of the military, and in the late 1990s, had problems meeting recruitment targets due partly to the inferior public image of the Army compared to other military branches<sup>6</sup>, and the decline of the gradual veteran presence in civilian communities<sup>7</sup>. The need for new recruitment is also greatly heightened at the moment as Army resources are being stretched to the limit with the new troop-intensive military doctrines in operation with the occupation of Iraq and the continuing "War on Terror"<sup>8</sup>. And furthermore, the current Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) policy perspective requires a higher level of technically

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<sup>6</sup> According to an Army-commissioned 1999 study by the advertising agency, Leo Burnett, the Army was regarded as the most ordinary, dangerous and "dirty", of the four main branches of the military, whilst also lagging badly behind in perceptions of elite status and being a high-tech organization.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed major study of the recent problems and challenges of "the civilian-military gap" for the US military, see *Soldiers and Civilians* (eds. Feaver & Kohn, 2001), published by the Triangle Institute for Security Studies. For comprehensive survey research on the changing attitudes of American youth towards military recruitment since 1975, refer to the RAND Corporation's ongoing Youth Attitudes Tracking Study (YATS).

<sup>8</sup> given the tendency seen after US troops have returned home after previous conflicts, there is likely to be sharp falls in the numbers of active duty and reserve personnel re-enlisting or extending their contracts after they return from duty in the Gulf or Afghanistan. This will make strategic communication efforts such as America's Army all the more urgent.



skilled and adept recruits to support the high-tech digitally-enhanced Army combat organization of the future<sup>9</sup>.

One of the strongest arguments made in support of the America's Army project is that the impact of the game is much more cost-effective than other forms of media marketing the US Army uses. For instance, free distribution of the game through online downloads and partnership video game magazine CD-ROMS make distribution costs to minimal levels. The development costs of the game - although moderately high compared to the average high-end commercial PC game - are marginal when considered in relation to the US Army's \$2.2 billion dollar annual recruiting budget. It is estimated that if the game motivates approximately an extra 400 recruits to join, then the project would have recouped its initial costs (OEMA, 2003).

I chose the America's Army game project and community as a site for demonstrating the political re-orientation of games theory for its unprecedented position at the juncture between military research and popular entertainment, and because the large scale of success it has achieved so far will likely encourage the development of similar projects aimed at video game popular culture by other state agencies. Although there has been a long history of exchange and collaboration between computer technology industries and government/military agencies – and notably the relationship between video game technologies and military simulations<sup>10</sup> – America's Army represents the first instance of the state production, appropriation, and management of video game popular culture in the public domain.

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<sup>9</sup> Another argument in support of the America's Army game project's targeting of teenage video game culture, is that especially PC gamers are likely to be from high-income homes, are already familiar with computer technologies, and have a higher than average expectation of university study. Also, initial thoughts about going into military professions are most often begun at age 13-14 years old (RAND/YATS).

<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive account of the history of this relationship – see Tim Lenoir and Henry Lowood's "Theaters of War: The Military-Entertainment Complex", 2003.

Video games culture has become a major global phenomenon since the 1990s (Herz 1997, Poole 2000) and an immediate critical concern of the involvement of state-military production in this field will be with the use of the new interactive medium for propaganda, and the societal consequences of the increasing partnership between the entertainment and defense industries<sup>11</sup>. Most of the concern has focused on the relationship between Hollywood film and television production with the military and the consumption of military themes through these popular culture media (Wetta & Curley, 1992; Turner, 2001; Suid, 2002). A particular anxiety is the retardation of public debate over issues of war, and public sensitivity about the difference between the reality of war and mass-mediated war imagery .

This anxiety has been heightened by the current military engagement of the United States, and by signs of deepening involvement between the defense and entertainment communities in recent years, mainly over simulation innovation efforts. The landmark 1997 National Research Council/Department of Defense paper "Modeling and Simulation: Linking Entertainment and Defense"<sup>12</sup> proposed a wide ranging initiative to guide the convergence and co-ordination of the cultures, human resources, business models, and technological agendas of the two communities. The primary motivation was the perception that the consumer electronic entertainment sector was greatly outpacing defense research in the innovation of simulation expertise. This innovation has not only been in terms of technology but also in the emergent cultural formations and social practices that have developed rapidly in games culture (Herz & Macedonia, 2002)

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, see critical responses to the America's Army project from the leading US liberal-left media in "'America's Army' Targets Youth" , August 23, 2002, The Nation; and "US Military Makes Game of Recruitment: Never has Propaganda Been as Fun as the New Army Video", June 27 2002, TomPaine.com.

<sup>12</sup> The NRC committee that produced this paper was chaired by current MOVES director Prof. Mike Zyda.

In 1999, one of the most high-profile new institutions associated with this initiative, the Institute of Creative Technologies (ICT) was founded at the University of Southern California. The ICT was specifically tasked by the US Army Simulation & Training Command (STRICOM) to intensify the exchange of both technical and cultural expertise between the military and the entertainment industry. Other US government agencies with active interests and initiatives in this convergence include the Defense Modeling and Simulation Office (DMSO), the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), and the intelligence agencies.

It is important to note here that the OEMA/MOVES production of America's Army has an institutional history and design rationale quite different from the several video game projects created out of arrangements between commercial game developers and STRICOM and/or the ICT<sup>13</sup>. The STRICOM/ICT game projects were created with the primary purpose of enhancing military training and simulation abilities. From the military perspective, the commercial game spin-offs are just an incentive to the corporate game developer partners (these are typically heavily modified in order to exclude classified data, to make the games more entertaining and less realistic, and even alter the thematic atmosphere for marketability).

The OEMA/MOVES America's Army project whilst employing veteran commercial game developers is entirely an Army-directed and funded project rather than a military-corporate partnership. And furthermore, particularly with the political sensitivity of the game violence debate, OEMA has placed great emphasis that the game is not for simulation or training purposes, and should be

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<sup>13</sup> Examples of these collaborations date back to at least the 1980 Atari arcade tank game Battlezone which was adapted as an Infantry Fighting Vehicle simulator. An important example of the adaptation of commercial FPS software was the 1990s US Marines directive which allowed the modification of the game Doom to produce more realistic level for training purposes. Current examples of STRICOM/ICT collaborations with commercial video game developers include the platoon leader tactical simulation Full Spectrum Warrior and the infantry company command game Full Spectrum Command (see <http://www.ict.usc.edu>). For a comprehensive overview of

regarded as a strategic communication initiative that embraces an increasingly important part of American youth popular culture. It is notable too that OEMA's<sup>14</sup> defining institutional mission was to provide independent economic statistical and analytical counsel to the broad range of Army initiatives. Past OEMA projects have been to give economic advisory on manpower management, the effectiveness of counter-drug operations, and the impact of base closures. The conception, design, and production of America's Army game, the brainchild of the current OEMA director, Col. Casey Wardynski, represents an unprecedentedly ambitious initiative for OEMA. The game project significantly raises OEMA's profile within the military community, having become one of the most important marketing and cost-effective marketing initiatives for US Army Recruiting Command (OEMA, 2003). OEMA's entrepreneurial success of leveraging video game popular culture, and enhancing its identity and prestige, has encouraged other military and intelligence agencies to take interest in video game projects.

### *Thesis Focus*

The focus of this thesis will be how we might assess the particular new military media technology in question, America's Army the video game, as a potential internet-based public sphere.

The guiding question will be what are limits and advantages of understanding the America's Army game community as a potential public sphere, one which is rooted in civilian-military relations. And furthermore, what modifications to the Habermasian normative public sphere model will this question suggest, when considering the future of state-produced video game culture?

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current US military collaborations with video game developers, see the website [www.dodgamecommunity.com](http://www.dodgamecommunity.com).

<sup>14</sup> OEMA was founded in 1983 within the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy.

The America's Army project is an especially rich site to consider the question of gamer culture as public sphere due to its unique situation within a matrix of state authority, military expertise, entertainment technology, and consumer marketing practices. The current exceptionalism of America's Army should be taken as a harbinger of future trends of state involvement in mass interactive entertainment culture, and as such, it is an important site for forward-looking political analyses that do not begin with the knee-jerk condemnation of military enterprises and/or of the entertainment industry in mind.

In this paper, I will critically examine the potential of the "gamespace" of the America's Army project to serve as a public sphere in general terms, and also specifically regarding the specialized question of US civilian-military relations and its part in contemporary democracy. This examination will first assess the official rationale underlying the project, the gameplay experience itself, and the official America's Army player community. I will then expand the assessment to a number of exceptional cases of America's Army player communities that reside in the unofficial gamespace. A general outline of these communities is detailed below in the methodological notes.

## **Methodological Notes**

### *America's Army Communities and Clans studied*

Note that the real life military *America's Army* gamer communities prefer to be referred to as "battalion", "unit", or other military terms so as to distinguish their identity from civilian gamer groups which are generally known as "clans".

#### Drunks with Guns

<http://www.madmodders.com/dwg/aao/index.html>

A typical casual gamer clan, fairly active in tournament competitive play.

Around 20 active members.

1<sup>st</sup> Veterans Battalion – “Serving Those Who Served”

<http://www.1st-vets.org>

largest real-life military *America's Army* community, comprising of over 700 members. 95+% military-civilian ratio. About 20% of the clan membership is non-US.

Joint Task Force - “An Online Military Gaming Community”

<http://www.jointtaskforce.net>

Around 30 core or senior members. Preserves 90/10% military-civilian ratio..

Men of God International

<http://www.menofgod.us>

A Evangelical Christian gamer community dedicated to missionary work on a number of online commercial gamespaces. Around 500 members.

evilhack

<http://evilhack.sourceforge.net>

A hacker community, dedicated to creating hacks of *America's Army* for general circulation. Hosted on the open-source programming community, sourceforge.net. 3 core members.

### *Interviewees*

Around 20 interviews were conducted with players of various *America's Army* clans. Each interview – sometimes done over several sessions - lasted between 2 and 6 hours, depending on the interviewee's willingness to commit time. In the following section, I will make reference to 10 of the interviewees, who provided the interview material most pertinent to the issues considered in this thesis. For the sake of confidentiality, I will be identifying these persons by

their clan identifier and the initial of their *America's Army* game identity. All these interviewees are avid *America's Army* gameplayers, having regularly spent between 20 and 40 (or more) hours a week playing the game or otherwise engaged in *America's Army* game community activity.

In addition, together with the military community ethnographer, Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi, I interviewed several Army officers in charge of the game project at the United States Military Academy at West Point. These sessions were face-to-face, lasted several hours each. Interview transcripts and other data obtained were subjected to Army review over the inclusion of extracted materials, but not their interpretation. No extracts proposed for inclusion in this paper were refused.

Note that many interviewees specifically requested that I correct misspellings, typographical errors, and profane language that occurred during the casual flow of online interview. For consistency, I have corrected spellings etc. for all interviewees.

Brief biographies for these player interviewees are listed below. I asked the interviewees to give as much biographical data about themselves as they were comfortable with – in the case of the evilhack hacker community, this was rather less than the others. All interviewees were male and aged between 20 and 40 years of age (the *America's Army* gamer community and FPS communities in general being overwhelmingly male).

#### *1<sup>st</sup> Veteran's Battalion*

(1VB) B. in his late 20s. Currently in Maine. Active duty Army Captain, Air Defense. Currently assigned as ROTC cadre and studying at Army college for Master's degree in Healthcare Administration.

(1VB) H. in his 20s. Active duty US Army (based in Germany). Infantry Company Master Gunner. Deployed in Gulf War 2.

(1VB) P. In his 30s. Lives in Chicago. Acting leader of 1VB while 1VB commander was deployed with 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division in Middle East. Signed up for military career route at 12 years old on high school program. Served in the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division. Invalided out due to paratroop accident during Airborne training.

(1VB) S. early 30s. Former USMC air defense. Served in the first Gulf War. Currently a civilian English teacher.

### *Joint Task Force*

(JTF) C. parent of 4, in his 30s. Self-described as “very Southern”, brought up in Tennessee. Grew up as an “airforce brat”. Served in the US Army military police in S. Korea. Married fellow MP. Now a civilian firefighter.

(JTF) W. late 20s. Founder and leader of JTF community. Active duty Joint Services satellite communications officer and force protection instructor. 9<sup>th</sup> year in the military. From a strong military family background (around 20 relatives in armed forces or DoD civilian bureaucracy).

### *Men of God International*<sup>15</sup>

(none)

### *Drunks With Guns*

(DWG) K. – 26 years old, home in Ohio. Left railroad engineer job to enlist in US Army in 2003.

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<sup>15</sup> Note that the pronounced wariness of the Men of God Christian Evangelist clan to outside scrutiny led to their refusal of my request for permission to seek interview candidates on their website forums.  
(This was the only game community to do so – Joint Task Force sought public affairs clearance first from the military, but were thereafter extremely open to inquiry).  
Men of God nominated a member of their clan – a professor of New Testament Studies – whom they thought would be most able with dealing with their political sensitivities in engaging with me as their official spokesman (and my only MoG interviewee). Unfortunately, unexpected (and still inexplicable) circumstances led to the withdrawal of the interviewee mid-session. Consequently, I deemed that interview data unusable for research.



(DWG) S. – 24 years old, based in Florida. Self-described “geek” programmer with “strong computer background”. Enthusiastic FPS player since high school.

*evilhack.sourceforge.net*

(eh) E. 23 year old founder of evilhack (unknown country – possibly European?)  
- began programming when 10 years old. Started own computer company after 11th grade.

(eh) H. – in his 20s. Core member of evilhack hacker group. Canadian coder – interested in programming and hacking since 13 years old. Describes himself now as “just a typical geek with a wife and a job”.

## **CHAPTER 1:       Theoretical Framework – The Public Sphere and US Civilian-Military Relations**

In this chapter, I first outline Habermas' theory of the public sphere, its role in contemporary democracy, and the potential of its revitalization through internet technologies. I then place US civilian-military relations in the context of this analytical framework of Habermasian theory, and explore the potential of online video game communities as a public sphere and the unique significance of the *America's Army* project as the first state-produced video game popular culture space.

### *Habermas' Conception of the Public Sphere*

Since the 1962 publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jurgen Habermas' conception of "the public sphere" - the independent space of reasoned debate and opinion in a liberal democracy - has had a very generative influence on political discourse and a broad range of intellectual disciplines internationally. In the years after the original publication of *The Structural Transformation*, Habermas has revised and improved his understanding of the public sphere numerous times in response to critiques.

Habermas' analysis situated the emergence of the public sphere historically as a new space in the 18th century Enlightenment context of the socio-economic rise of the bourgeois class. With their increasing leisure time and economic interests, the social importance of salons and coffeehouses grew as centers for deliberating and organizing public consensus in political affairs. This bourgeois public sphere achieved institutionalization through democratic constitutional reforms that guaranteed basic political rights such as freedom of speech, an independent judiciary, and equal civil rights. Within the public sphere,

opinion on matters of public interest and concern could be expressed and debated, on a face-to-face basis, independent of economic concerns and social pressures, and a democratically legitimate public consensus could be authorized through the four fundamental norms of the space. Firstly, there was assumed to be a basic parity amongst all the participants in the public space, so that the authority of social status was overruled by the better rational argument, and there was no coercion. Secondly, new topics of critical inquiry and debate were opened up as the space itself produced culture for consumption. Thirdly, the public sphere space was, at least in principle, open and inclusive for everyone. From these three underlying assumptions about the abstract structuring of the public sphere, Habermas argued that these enabled the fourth characteristic and main function - the public use of reason, mediating between the private spheres of everyday civil society (the workplace and the family), and the domain of the state.

Habermas' original conception was not a celebration of contemporary democracy, but rather intended as a warning about the long-term decline of the public sphere since the 19th century under the pressure of industrial capitalism, technological advancement and the expansion of technocratic bureaucracy. The warning was a call for public intellectuals to focus on its reconstruction. This decline marked a dangerous crisis of state legitimation, with citizens increasingly alienated from their democratic rights and institutions. In this view, the critical and deliberative reasoning based on communicative action (that is, the negotiation of mutual understanding, and the generation of constructive social relations between individuals) that underwrites the emancipatory political promise of Enlightenment progress is displaced by increasing elaboration of technical and instrumental reason as a means of enhancing power in a technologically and economically complex mass society. In Habermas' later writings, this consensual or "communicative" reasoning is understood as immanent in "the lifeworld" - that is, the world through which we share concrete

lived experience with others, which forms the basis for mutual understanding. This lifeworld community of shared understandings that are taken for granted is the essential normative structure of the public sphere – that is, the spatial-temporal arena where communicative reasoning takes place.

But as advanced technological capitalism developed, there was an increasing trend towards "the colonization of the lifeworld by systems". Systems are understood as social power structures which are dependent upon instrumental and functional quantitative rationality (with "steering imperatives" such as financial and electoral power). Thus, for instance, the policy satisfaction of corporate interests increasingly overrides civil rights concerns. Although the legitimation by instrumental rationalities may be immediately more powerful, they ultimately depend on the lifeworld-based authority of cultural values. In Habermas' analysis, a fundamental crisis of society arises, when the lifeworld and its capacity to support rational communication have been so weakened by systems that they can no longer generate sufficient democratic legitimation. This weakening leads to the growth of quantitative instrumental processes for claiming consensual legitimation in contemporary capitalist democracies. Habermas' term for these processes is "publicity" for corporate and governmental interests i.e. political consultancy, marketing and branding, electoral polling, and other techniques which give the appearance of a public without necessarily contributing to the actual communicative activity of democracy - what Habermas terms as "publicity", the product of large-scale corporate and governmental production of media.

In contrast to the mass-scale and technical character of "publicity", the notion of communicative action is based upon the critical rational potential inherent in everyday interactions between individuals. In a 1992 essay, "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere", Habermas contrasts "the communicative generation of legitimate power on the one hand" with "the manipulative deployment of media power to procure mass loyalty, consumer demand, and 'compliance' with systemic imperatives on the other" (1992: 452).

### *Criticisms of The Public Sphere concept*

Much of the criticism of the Habermas' theory of the public sphere has centered on what is variously regarded as the utopian or ideal-type character of his conception which obscures the exclusion and silencing of non-hegemonic voices. The model is historically inaccurate in its emphasis on the achievement of consensus – there is an insufficient appreciation of the role of the historical struggle of interests, world-views, and power in Habermas' model. Moreover, this public sphere ideal presents itself as tolerant, diverse, populist, and open, when historically it has been dominated by wealthy white males. Habermas has been criticized for his neglect of ethnicity, gender, and the working-class, and the history of their counter-public spheres which developed to express political communities outside of the bourgeois sphere (Negt & Kluge, 1972). It has also been argued that Habermas' emphasis on a public sphere which makes universal claims of representation, and takes the formation of public consensus as a goal has little relevance to the cultural reality of advanced complex societies where there not only an increasing plurality of interests, but increasing heterogeneity of cultural lifeworlds, particularly with what postmodernists such as Jean-François Lyotard understand as the breakdown of the traditional legitimation authority of metanarratives which claimed a fundamental, overarching cultural lifeworld for everyone (Lyotard, 1984). In this perspective, it has been suggested that it is more productive to think in terms of a multiplicity of lifeworlds, and consequently of public spheres. This is also to account for the context of advanced complex societies which are dependent on relations of dominance and subordination, where is neither possible to aspire to universal parity in a truly non-coercive, consensual situation (Fraser, 1989).

These specific political critiques of Habermas' Enlightenment political project have influenced his later development of his framework toward the less teleological and prescriptive, but also ahistorical and essentialist theory of

communicative action. This shift marks Habermas' repudiation of his economic analysis in favor of a cognitivist theory of rational communication. The basis for the public sphere is understood now to be rooted in the inherent qualities of language and cognition rather than a concern with the materiality of socio-economic life, such as labor. This "discourse-centered concept of democracy" understands the process of public deliberation as one which does not directly exercise power but only influences government.

From the post-structuralist and constructivist perspective (in which language is regarded as socio-historically constructed and the primary site in which power struggles take place), Habermas' cognitivist model is utopian, and ignores the manipulation of language in the interests of domination. This oversight makes the model particularly vulnerable in the contemporary age of information technologies and communication sciences, where information (the quantification and codification of communication) has also become a key constituent of technical-instrumental power. As N. Katherine Hayles has argued, "Given market forces already at work, it is virtually... certain that we will increasingly live, work, and play in environments that construct us as embodied virtualities". The consequence of this trend is that information is increasingly regarded as a master site and abstract constituent of power to such an extent that the cultural perception of the relationship between technology and ontology today is that "material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns" (1999:48-49, 69). However, at the same time, the notion of information and communication technology proliferation being a primary site of power also suggests that the discourse-centered notion of the public sphere bears more substantive potential today.

### *The Internet as a Public Sphere*

The information revolution at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the new socio-cultural formations that have emerged in its wake, has been widely hailed by technology enthusiasts as the opportunity for the resurgence of public sphere

activity in the technologically advanced countries. Leading information technology advocates in the United States, such as Howard Rheingold (1993) and Esther Dyson (1994) and politicians such as Al Gore and Newt Gingrich, made much of the promise of the new cultural activities of networked computer infrastructure during the 1990s - a notion which became widespread amongst expert and academic, as well as popular discourses (Fernback & Thompson, 1995). For instance, Douglas Kellner (1998) has argued that the Internet has "produced new public spheres and spaces for information, debate, and participation that contain the potential to invigorate democracy and to increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas."

Habermas himself has allowed for some of the modifications to his ideal-type model that was needed to endorse the idea of a virtual, networked public sphere as a democratic solution to mass society: "if there still is to be a realistic application of the idea of the sovereignty of the people to highly complex societies, it must be uncoupled from the concrete understanding of its embodiment in the physically present, participating, and jointly deciding members of a collectivity." (1992:451) He later argues: "the phenomenon of a world public sphere [is now] becoming politically reality for the first time in a cosmopolitan matrix of communication" (1996:514). For the enthusiasts, the new information technologies appeared to fit all the normative requirements for the ideal-type public sphere model. The proliferation of these technologies were regarded as potentially allowing universal access to a decentralized anti-hierarchical medium of uncoerced communication outside traditional political spaces. Participants in these discursive spaces interact informally, safely, and shorn of physical status markers when generating discussion and the exchange of opinions on myriad topics through such technologies as online chat, text-based multiple user dimensions (MUDs), and website bulletin boards. At the same time, this widespread championing of the internet as a public sphere was met with numerous criticisms of internet-based discourse that claimed that the

novel conditions of computer mediated communication (CMC) within cyberspace were too immaterial and constituted an impoverished, discordant form of public communication.

The ongoing evaluation of internet CMC as the basis for revitalizing the public sphere is based upon both the interrogation of the new forms and spaces of communication that upholds the prerequisites for democratic critical rationality according to the normative Habermasian framing, and the drive to further evolve this framing to the new social dimensions and complexities of CMC. Leaving aside the broader debate on what ought to constitute the deliberative democratic ideal of public reasoning (whilst acknowledging the evolved state of late Habermasian theory) the specific idealized normative conditions by which we can test the potential of any given case of CMC might be set out as so:

- i.           Autonomy from state and economic power.
- ii.          Exchange and critique of moral-practical validity claims i.e. is the content of the discourse non-trivial for the function of public reasoning?
- iii.       Reflexivity i.e. public discourse participants have critical awareness of their own values, assumptions, and interests, as cast against the broader social context; this awareness includes attempting to empathize with alternative viewpoints.
- iv.       Sincerity and honesty of the participants' communications and attempts at understanding one another.
- v.          Discursive inclusion and equality within a shared communicative framework (common system/lifeworld experiences)

(adapted from Dahlberg, 2001)

In the next chapter, I first argue for the significance of *America's Army* as a serious political project and then emphasize its relevance to the discussion of revitalizing the contemporary US public sphere and the specific issue of civilian-



military relations. I then examine the three most prominent manifestations of the *America's Army* video game within the framing of the evolved normative Habermasian theory of the public sphere and the criticisms of the notion of the Internet as a public sphere. These three manifestations are the video game itself, the official US Army rationale underlying the game, and the general character of the game player discourse on the heavily frequented public forums of the official *americasarmy.com* website. I will test the public sphere potential of these manifestations (which represent the formal and normative contexts of the *America's Army* project) against the five ideal-type conditions stated above. Through this exercise I will identify key questions corresponding to those specific critiques of internet age public sphere theory which seem most pressing when considering the particular potentials and limits of this video game space as a democratic medium.

## **Chapter 2:           The Limits and Potentials of *America's Army* as a Video Game Public Sphere**

### *America's Army as a Serious Political Video Game*

A key basis for our understanding of the potential of video game culture as a space for public sphere generation is the argument against the trivialization of video games which is a dominant tone in mainstream perceptions of the medium. I argue here that there is an important trend of “serious” political games emerging, of which *America's Army* is one of the most prominent.

Gonzalo Frasca<sup>16</sup>, one of the more prominent voices today in the nascent discourse of humanities video game theory, writes that: “So, where should we go if we are looking for ‘serious’ computer games? As far as we know, nowhere. The reason is simple: there is an absolute lack of ‘seriousness’ in the computer game industry.... The reasons are probably mainly economical” (2000). Frasca defines “serious” games in the strong sense as those which are designed to have a influence on the player regarding important issues of political public interest. He also contends that these are very unlikely to emerge in the current mainstream conditions of the games industry, which like many, he regards as purely preoccupied with a commodity logic of escapist entertainment. Furthermore, Frasca argues that besides the inappropriateness of gravely treated political issues as a theme for a commercial game, there are structural conventions of mainstream game design that undermine and trivialize any moral

significance. The reality of life and death is not only trivialized by the binary win-lose logic of video games, he argues, but also by the replayability inherent in the video game medium. Consequently, the ergodic representation of political ethics is easily perverted by how typical game conventions free the player from moral responsibilities as grounded in permanent, non-trivial consequences, and cause the life-and-death bases of political discourse to lose their reflective value.

I would argue that, on the contrary, there is an emerging and increasingly influential trend of “serious” games with a political agenda in the “strong” sense. That these “serious” games are being conceived and produced most significantly by the intersection between the state and the electronic entertainment industry in the United States, for the interests of simulation, training, and public communication. The more urgent question, in my view, is not whether video game designers can create successful “serious” games for the mass market, but rather, one that concerns the public intellectual agenda of games theory itself, especially as re-oriented towards engaging the unprecedented emergence of state-produced popular game culture<sup>17</sup> of which America’s Army the video game is the current leading example. And furthermore, I am arguing that games like America’s Army, regardless whether one regards the project as a vital strategic communication tool or objectionable propaganda (or somewhere in between) is in fact a “serious” game in the strong sense of the political – of actually having a substantive impact on real world political discourse over the gravest public issues.

It is inadequate to analyze video game culture and industry as detached from “real-world” issues; in part, this would be to collude with the fantasy of commodified escapist leisure itself, and also ignores the material reality and

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<sup>16</sup> Gonzalo Frasca runs the popular video game theory website, [www.ludology.org](http://www.ludology.org)

physical spatiality of video game production and consumption. But these still might be understood as largely parochial concerns. The stronger argument for the broader political relevance of video game discourse is its status as a leading domain in which the integration and convergence of virtual and non-virtual social phenomena is taking place. The trend is now distinguished enough for legal experts such as the authors of a recent article in the prominent US Legal Affairs magazine to argue that: "It is important to understand what role law is playing – and should play – in virtual worlds. Over the next few years, increasing numbers of communities will come to exist in virtual worlds and real-world economies will continue to bleed into their virtual counterparts." (Hunter & Lastowska 2003)<sup>18</sup>. Examples of this "bleeding" include the real-world sale of virtual objects and avatars created by players in game-worlds. A trend of leakage in the opposite direction – from game-world to real-world – is also evident, for instance, in the influence of MMORPG clan rivalries on real-world gang violence in South Korea<sup>19</sup>.

However, the social constructs and communications enacted within (and thereby constituting) virtual game-worlds still generally have a displaced relationship to the materiality real world society (and so the public sphere). The relationship is primarily one of representation, reenactment, and communication. The leakages between game-world and real-world are primarily one of symbolic rather than material worth. The uniqueness of the America's Army game and its community, and its significance as a harbinger of future state production of mass interactive entertainment, is that the direct linkage with real world materiality

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<sup>17</sup> The Serious Games Workshop funded by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation is one example of a civilian thinktank dedicated to enhancing governance and policy discussion through video games ([www.seriousgames.org](http://www.seriousgames.org)).

<sup>18</sup> see Edward Castronova's landmark paper, "Virtual Worlds: A First-hand Account of Market and Society on the Cyberian Frontier" (2001). This paper analyzes the economy of Everquest in real-world terms and is reportedly the most downloaded paper on the Social Sciences Research Network database. It has been cited by former US Undersecretary of State for Commerce, Robert Shapiro, as evidence of the potential usefulness of these game-worlds for producing insights into real-world economic policy and social philosophy (Shapiro 2003).

<sup>19</sup> "Where does the fantasy end?", *Time* magazine, June 4 2001

goes well beyond the internal game-world sociality or the consumption networks of technology and commerce. The America's Army game integrates video game culture with real world politics in the most fundamental and serious way possible – that is, the material and moral support of the legitimate use of violence, or what Max Weber famously defined as the most basic political exercise and special right of the state. This is not simply the use of political drama as a compelling game theme, or the simulation of real world problems as a site of training and experimentation, or the creation of games specifically for critical comment<sup>20</sup>.

It is in this way that America's Army can be understood as a "serious" game in the strongest political sense. The game project is not simply one of ideological communication – be it understood as marketing or propaganda - but one designed with specific real-world moral and political effects in direct support of legitimate violence in the name of national security and defending democratic rights. These strong political claims can be seen, for instance, in the slogans used in the America's Army marketing campaign<sup>21</sup>. The campaign's main tagline "The Official U.S. Army Game – Defend Freedom, Empower Yourself" speaks of both the military institution's ideological claims of not only being tasked with the protection of core humanist values (a society based on the freedoms of the individual), but that in the process of training recruits, the potential and abilities of that individual to affirm and develop himself is enhanced.

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<sup>20</sup> such as the spate of amateur-produced small online Shockwave and Flash games in the wake of 9/11 and the Afghanistan campaign which offered emotional release or raised questions about the conduct of military operations. For examples, see "Online games are the newest form of social commentary", August 29, 2002, Slate.com. <http://slate.msn.com/id/2070197/>

<sup>21</sup> notably, the America's Army brand was developed as a separate identity from the U.S. Army brand (which has its own established marketing group). This decision was made in part to create distance between the entertainment/pop culture brand and the real military organization.

A clearer, more specific message is found in the video trailers produced to advertise the Special Forces missions due for release in 2003. The imagery in the videos intercuts gameplay scenes from America's Army with real film footage of American soldiers in action (at least some of the scenes appear to be from Iraq and/or the 2002 Afghanistan campaign). And the in-trailer narratives emphasize the moral mission of the US Army, and the key role played by US Special Forces, in both the "War on Terror" and Operation Iraqi Freedom:

"the threats to freedom do not sleep... the threats to freedom know no boundaries... neither do the protectors of freedom... the Army's Special Forces who defend what is best... and confront those who seek to oppress"

and:

"As long as there are forces which threaten the promise of freedom.. America's Army stands ready... and in the vanguard you will find... Special Forces [...] help liberate the oppressed... become one of the Army's Green Berets... and subdue the enemies of freedom"

One widely-read and enthusiastic championing of the *America's Army* project in terms of muscular political humanism was written by the video games correspondent for the liberal-leaning US online journal *Salon.com*, Wagner James Au. He writes:

"Though not explicitly doctrinaire in an ideological sense, by showing the very young *how* we fight, applying the moral application of lethal force on behalf of liberal values, [*America's Army*] create[s] the wartime culture which is so desperately needed now. [...] You can see them in the field, in subsequent years, dedicated young men and women, their weapons merged into an information network that enables them to cut out with surgical precision the

cancer that threatens us all – heat-packing humanitarians who leave the innocent unscathed, and full of renewed hope.”<sup>22</sup>

Also worth quoting here is an extract from an earlier 2002 *Salon.com* article by Au, “Playing Games with Free Speech”, which criticizes that year’s St. Louis federal court ruling (overturned in 2003) that video games are too trivial in subject matter to be afforded First Amendment protection. Au opens his argument in favor of video games being treated as significant social expression by reflecting on his experience of the Omaha Beach level of the commercial Second World War FPS, *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (Electronic Arts, 2002). This level was designed to aspire to an ergodic cinematic realism modeled after the opening D-Day landing scene of the Steven Spielberg film, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998):

“Saving democracy means having to wade toward the shore, while fascists unload hell on you from the beachhead. Which means you usually get killed. But you make that run, again and again, because the goal is worth all those lives you lose in the churning sea. [...] It’s a common conceit in games: play, die, reload, and ride the karmic wheel of kick-ass, until you get it right. But what ‘Allied Assault’s’ developers have done is use this feature to express an explicit point about World War II, and what it took to win it.”

In this extract from the earlier article, Au turns Frasca’s primary objection to the potential of commercial video games to invoke contemplation of serious issues on its head – the ability to replay the level even after virtual death, becomes a moment of empathy for what it meant to actually storm Omaha Beach. For Au, the perspective shifts from the notion of the resurrectable individual (who is comically or trivially immune to permanent death) to that of

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<sup>22</sup> Au, “Weapons of Mass Distraction”, *Salon.com*, October 4 2002.

the mortality of a single soldier who is interchangeable with a mass others – a logic which is equivalent to that of real military organization and the moral legitimation of war<sup>23</sup>. The ergodic replayability of virtual death on the virtual beachhead here, rather than trivializing history, instead pays tribute to the memory of the real deaths of D-Day soldiers which are relatively trivial (and therefore a worthwhile sacrifice) compared to the greater cause at stake (“saving democracy”). Au’s enthusiastic account of the potential of *America’s Army* is marked by a shift in perspective that connects the game experience not with real history but the conflict reality of the present day and the future – that today’s players are of the generation who will apply their interactive virtuosity in the name of lethal liberalism and the “heat-packing humanitarianism” of tomorrow.

Both Au and the video games scholar, Nina Huntemann (2003), directly compare the *America’s Army* project with the *Why We Fight* war films made by Hollywood directors such as Frank Capra in the 1940s – and both comment that the interactive character of the video games medium makes the game’s message more like “How We Fight” . But Huntemann uses this comparison to make a point quite contrary to Au’s:

“[games like *America’s Army*] are sort of like the *Why We Fight* films, except they’ve morphed into ‘how we fight’ video games, which takes away from a lot of the other ‘why’ questions, and all the moral questions that are connected

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[www.salon.com/tech/feature/2002/10/04/why\\_we\\_fight](http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2002/10/04/why_we_fight)

<sup>23</sup> As the video games theorist Steven Poole writes: “We are used to thinking of ‘life’ as a single, sacred thing, the totality of our experiences. But videogames redefine a ‘life’ as a part of a larger campaign. In part this resembles the brutal calculus of war” (2000:68). A most enthusiastic proponent of the idea that video game playing must be understood as a positive and deep cultural practice, Poole admits that his one serious reservation about video games is that “if a modern pilot has been trained on supped-up videogame systems, we should not be surprised if.... [h]e fails utterly to realize that his actions [in real combat] now have a moral content” and that it will be “a lethal failure of the imagination” if video games culture does not develop a strong sense of moral responsibility over this concern. (238-9).



to that.... [These games are]... a kind of 'shock and awe'<sup>24</sup> display of what the American military is capable of, without the consequences of context. That is seductive."

Huntemann's critique of *America's Army* (and other realistic war-themed games) assumes that the pleasure and hence the influence of these games comes primarily from the feelings of glamour and power of enacting virtual technologically-augmented violence – and that this reduces the game experience of war to the dehumanizing seductiveness of technology. But Au's account – despite its uncritical grandstanding – has the clearer understanding of how, as an official marketing/strategic communication tool of the US Army, *America's Army* is precisely concerned with how the "how we fight" is bound intimately up with the "why". The moral emphasis is there regardless of whether one sees this more as the proper assertion of honorable army values in the cause of humanistic politics or more as the careful fashioning of on-message ideology and branding.

#### *America's Army in the context of Civilian-Military Relations*

If we take its political significance seriously, can the *America's Army* video game space be thought of as having potential to help "save democracy"? In terms of the civil society problems of the public sphere, the most direct and obvious relevance of the game and its communities would be to the discussion of war and the domestic American question of US civilian-military relations. How

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<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, an early controversy of Gulf War 2 was the revelation that Sony Computer Entertainment USA had applied for the entertainment media rights for the name "Shock and Awe", the day after the US military's actual officially named "Shock and Awe" air bombardment operation in Baghdad. Sony quickly retracted the application in the face of a general outcry, and made a public apology – which might be said, demonstrates both the immediate commercial seductiveness of war as a theme for games developers and also that there is still a palpable ethical difference between media spectacles of violence for political purposes and those for entertainment.

does of the *America's Army* project's influence on American civilian society look in the Habermasian framing?

As an Army center for economic analysis, OEMA – the institutional originators of the *America's Army* video game project – can immediately be thought of as very much an instrumental-technical function of US Army bureaucracy<sup>25</sup>. The orientation of the game project towards inserting a conduit for increased public awareness and appreciation of the Army into a major sector of popular culture, could be thought of in Habermasian terms as the encroachment of systems in a lifeworld already substantially colonized by the money-orientated systems of the commercial entertainment industry. However, in the specific historical context of military-civilian relations in the United States, it is misleading to think of the US Army primarily in terms of its instrumental rationality of power and self-interest, as we might a corporation. At least formally, the institutional authority of the US Army rests on its moral and cultural distinctiveness from the self-interested liberal-capitalist ideology of American civilian society. As such, in basic Habermasian terms, the encroachment of targeted marketing innovations into popular culture for the purposes of improving the brand image and labor market profile of the Army is not simply a calculated instrumental function of publicity, but also a window between two distinct lifeworlds – a channel for inter-community relations which addresses the long-standing problem of the post-Vietnam “civilian-military gap” in US society.

In a keynote speech given at Yale University in 1997, US Secretary of Defense William Cohen expressed concern over “a chasm... developing between the military and civilian worlds” that was creating a climate of mutual distrust and resentment. This idea of the “civilian-military culture gap” has been a perennial issue for debates over the relationship between American national security and civil society (Cohn, 1999). There is the fear that estrangement between the military and civilian spheres will mean that public culture will not

nurture or support an appropriate or adequate military, and that the military community may become alienated from their loyalties to civilian command. This issue dates back to the framing of the US Constitution which was designed to protect American democracy from takeover – the Framers divided control of the military between three branches of government, and emphasized the importance of a citizen-soldier militia rather than dependence on a professional military. Traditionally, American public attitudes to the military have been ambivalent, influenced by a mainstream culture that values individualism over group loyalties, and a distaste for military involvement in politics (Langston, 2000).

However, since the end of the draft in 1973, the military has become an all-volunteer professional force, with increasing focus on technical specialization and careerism, due to the demands of technological advances and a reduced demographic recruiting base. In the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, concerns over differences between the military community and the broader public peaked with the collapse of the major external threat to national security. The journalist, Thomas Ricks, famously wrote of the extent of the growing cultural gap as an extension of the broader American "culture wars" in a 1997 article for *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine (1997). Ricks noted the growing intensity of contempt amongst military personnel for civilian culture as amoral and hedonistic, at the same time as the stature of traditional martial values and visibility of the military declined in the mainstream public<sup>26</sup>.

These anxieties were evidence of a trend undermining what the historian Samuel P. Huntington in his landmark 1959 book *The Soldier and the State*

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<sup>25</sup> the major OEMA project before the launch of America's Army was economic analysis support for the recapitalization of the US Army tank fleet.

<sup>26</sup> A major comparative survey of military and civilian cultural values in 1999 by the Triangle Institute for Security Studies (Feaver & Kohn, 2001) confirmed that military personnel were becoming more politically assertive in their views, and that "Military officers express great pessimism about the moral health of civilian society and strongly believe that the military could help society become more moral, and that civilian society would be better off if it adopted more of the military's values and behaviors" whilst the civilian elite was resistant to the idea that the military should have greater influence on American society (460).

suggested was the normal doctrine of civilian-military relations in the United States. Huntington approvingly cites a Command and General Staff College text from 1936: "Politics and [military] strategy are radically and fundamentally things apart. Strategy begins where politics ends. All that soldiers ask is that once the policy is settled, strategy and command shall be regarded as being in a sphere apart from politics." (Huntington 1959:308). In Huntington's view - still understood as shaping the dominant understanding of the military's relationship to civil society in the US defense establishment - the modern military must be regarded as a specialized profession distinct and isolated from the mainstream, with an unique responsibility and expertise in the "management of violence", transcends monetary considerations, and encourages a strong group ethic. As Feaver & Kohn (2001:1) argue "Differences in civilian and military are, of course, necessary and desirable: even in a society based on civil liberty, personal autonomy, and democratic governance, military institutions must subordinate the individual to the group, and personal well-being to mission accomplishment." Other influential military scholars such as the sociologist Morris Janowitz (1960) have argued that with the advancing complexity of modern society and technology, it is crucial that the military maintain sufficient proximity to mainstream culture values. That is, the military should become increasingly more democratic in outlook if a relationship of trust is to be maintained – particularly if, as in recent years, the professionalization of the military actually has led to a less robust concern with political detachment from the public sphere.

But at the same time, there are those military experts who argue that the gap is overstated and that "the military... remains highly salient, as a central institution affecting our material well-being and active in contemporary projects to constitute what we think is a good and secure society". That is, the military - with its large slice of the national budget, and its one-and-a-half million personnel force - both acts as significant material actor in society, and a moral

actor in the establishment of the social norms (Burk, in Feaver & Kohn 2001:248).

In the analytical framework of Habermas' conceptions of public sphere and communicative action, I would suggest that the US military represents an important institution and sector of American democracy that should be thought of as a self-conflicted combination of system and lifeworld, rather than Habermas' oversimplistic dualism of lifeworld vs. system. At the same time as the formal operational logic of the contemporary US military requires that its personnel and structures follow a precise technical-instrumental rationality, the nature of the military profession and its ethics requires that a very distinct and separate lifeworld of values and ideals<sup>27</sup> be maintained for its personnel. In part this helps guarantee the Constitutional ideal that separate civilian command is meant to ensure the subservience of the military system to democratic lifeworld values. But this contemporary distinction – the “gap” – also runs against another founding principle of the US Constitution. As Elaine Scarry has noted, the Second Amendment calls for the general distribution of military power amongst the populace – both as a right and a responsibility – and political rights were historically seen intertwined with military rights. For instance, as Scarry points out, the expansion of political suffrage to minorities, women, and the young in the US has been principally justified in terms of the usefulness of these groups in wartime (2002). The Constitutional ideal here is that of the citizen-soldier, whose cultural experience and political awareness of the military system is fully integrated into the normal lifeworld of civilian experience.

From this Constitutional perspective, the anxieties about the civilian-military gap become focused on the problem that the lifeworld production of military culture has become so disconnected from the lifeworld of the

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<sup>27</sup> Habermas (1984) has specified that the lifeworld is “a cultural storehouse” from which lifeworld members draw shared expectations about the ordering of social relations, and is also the milieu out of which our individual competencies for speech and action (our personalities) are formed.

mainstream public that the overall democratic legitimacy and rationality of the military's system function is threatened. As Morgan (2001) notes, this disconnection is not simply due to indoctrination and training but is "the result also of physical separation, creating limited military social and community ties. Military bases, complete with their own schools, churches, stores, child care centers, and recreational areas, can be characterized as never-to-be-left islands of tranquility removed from the seemingly chaotic, crime-ridden civilian environment outside the gates."<sup>28</sup>

The civilian-military relationship based on the citizen-soldier envisioned in the Constitution can be thought of in Habermasian term, as the cross-fertilization or mutual embedding of military system and civilian lifeworld in such a way that the former is subservient to the latter. This isolation of military communities from civilian society, in combination with the increasing demands of professionalism and technical specialization (which have intensified the "system" qualities of the military) makes this relationship ideal seem like a beleaguered concept (Abrams & Bacevich, 2001; Cohen, 2001).

A major potential of the *America's Army* project then, is the reconstruction of the relationships between military and civilian communities in a new internet space. However, although developing this potential is raised as a key goal for the project (OEMA, 2003), this lifeworld integration is not the fundamental official rationale for the project, and any potential must be considered in combination with the more central economic and communication aims, as well as in the distinct context of the expressed moral-ideological identity of the U.S. Army as a defender of American freedoms.

### *The Official Rationale of America's Army and the Civilian-Military context*

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<sup>28</sup> In his reportage on the experiences of newly trained US Marines, Thomas Ricks noted how many of those he followed became alienated not just from civilian life in general, but also from close family members and school friends (Ricks, 1997).

To illustrate this combination I draw upon press releases and internal Army documents made available to me by OEMA, as well as an interview with OEMA head and *America's Army* project director, Colonel Casey Wardynski at West Point. The mixture of the instrumental and the moral, of system and lifeworld rationalities, can be seen in both the press FAQs prepared by OEMA to deal with possible public criticism<sup>29</sup> as well as the internal OEMA documents which relate the official rationale underlying the project.

For Col. Wardynski - the originator and main champion of the *America's Army* video game concept - the rationale guiding and justifying the US Army can be best understood as the dovetailing of the socio-economic changes driven by the information revolution with the manpower and skill requirements of the Army of the future (known as "the Objective Force" in Army jargon). In terms of OEMA's key mission of supporting the manpower needs analysis of the Army, competition for skilled recruits in the labor market is understood as requiring institutional adaptation to information age popular culture. As befits the research orientation of an economic analysis thinktank, Wardynski notes that the fundamental task of the project is in dealing with the basic problematic assumption underlying economic analysis of a market economy – that of perfect information:

"Development, marketing and distribution of the *America's Army* game lie at the intersection of technological progress, opportunity and innovation. The concept for the Game however found its roots in economic theory. [...] economists understand that information [which drives decision-making by economic actors] is not perfectly distributed and that indeed, there may be considerable search costs. In fact, Daniel Kahneman, the 2002 Nobel Prize

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<sup>29</sup> These FAQs, mainly concerned with the game violence debate and questions concerned with the ethical representation of war, were prepared by the Political and Social Science departments at USMA, West Point.

winner for economics, pointed out that people tend to make decisions based upon information in their immediate environment." (OEMA 2003:1)

Wardynski was concerned that, in an increasingly dense, diversified, and competitive popular culture media environment, the Army was insufficiently effective in communicating through its television and film advertising campaigns. The new "digital generation" of tech-savvy kids was demonstrating a marked trend away from traditional screens to computer-network interactivity, in addition to higher expectations for information access. Wardynski noted that: "'if kids have stilted information, or no information... the recruiting costs are going to go through the roof".

This shift represents an additional strategic communication problem to the Army, which had already struggled with the decline of local community and family contact between soldiers and civilians (which had been the main information source for recruits prior to the post-Vietnam all-volunteer force) and the stereotypical and sensationalist representations of the military by Hollywood through traditional screens. In terms of information economics, Wardynski regards the personnel-intensive structure of the existing Army recruiting offices as outdated and cost-ineffective information intermediaries between the Army and the public, while the Hollywood representations are external, independent intermediaries beyond Army control. Wardynski explained how he thought the video game represented a compelling way of harnessing the cultural status of computers to solve these information problems through structural disintermediation and disruption (two key concepts of information revolution management theory). This would dramatically lower the information search costs for recruits:

"The computer's a tool... I was looking for a medium which would be disruptive in nature, and would shift the way people think about communication [in Army recruiting]... dramatically shift the effectiveness, shift the costs, shift



the intermediation", "Computers tend to be persuasive by nature... seen as devices that are sort of unbiased... very analytic in nature. Computer's just sitting there... it processes data and dumps out a result. It's very different from a recruiter... that's the hard sell. The game is very much a different kind of sell." [It represents] "a virtual world where you can separate them from their [real world] structure, and take them elsewhere [i.e. the Army] and this gets rid of the intermediary problems."

This borrowing of information age business model terms fits well with the Department of Defense's directive since the end of the Cold War that the military reorganize itself according to sound business principles of fiscal efficiency, and seek out commercial best practices and management innovations (Lenoir, 2002:14). But the basic notion of adapting to the needs of a new information technology culture which supports the intensification and purification of free market mechanics is also rearticulated in terms of the Army's formal overarching ideology as a premier patriotic institution whose mission is to defend American culture. The system rationale of information economics is essentially linked with the lifeworld experience of the core American values of market and political freedoms. In interview, Wardynski remarked he believed that a free information culture "is what will keep [this country] free the longest" and that this represented a key strategic advantage over totalitarian organizations and cultures where information access and flow are tightly controlled. This free information culture is regarded here not simply in technocratic or rationalistic terms, but is regarded as a fundamental driver of the American lifeworld that is embodied in its individual citizens, who are increasingly empowered with the anti-hierarchical, pro-networking effects of information technology proliferation. Wardynski noted that "the new generation" of tech-savvy youth should be understood as more used to (and therefore demanding of) information access and meritocracy, more capable of turning data into information, and would be

instinctively disruptive of traditional organizational orders. Aptitudes related to information handling and information culture values are seen as vital to the effectiveness of the high-tech, network-centric Army of the future, and young American gamers seen as especially proficient in these capabilities<sup>30</sup>:

"Americans are avid gamers. More importantly, when young Americans enter the Army, they will increasingly find that key information will be conveyed via computer video displays akin to the graphical interfaces found in games. From their gaming experience, these young Americans will be demanding consumers of visual information in terms of its presentation and organization. They will, however, find the distribution of information via graphical displays normal and intuitive." (OEMA 2003:3)

There is here an ideological, rhetorical, and technical three-way translation between domains of information age notions of political freedom of speech, computer-enhanced free market economics, and network-centric warfare. This pivots upon the new information-adept citizen subject. In interview, Wardynski remarked on the congruity between civil society CMC discursive practices and the information skill requirements of contemporary military environments:

"Our military information tends to arrive in a flood... and it'll arrive in a flood under stressful conditions, and there'll be a hell of a lot of noise... most of it hasn't been turned into information and it's still data... and this is a lot like the internet... you['ve] got the Drudge [Report alternative news] page [and] chatrooms... a lot of it's noise, some of it's information.... How do you filter that? What are your tools? What is your facility in doing that? What is your level of

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<sup>30</sup> One OEMA study of the entering Class of 2006 at the United States Military Academy, West Point, indicated that 85% were regular gamers.

comfort? How much load can you bear? Kids who are comfortable with that are gonna be real comfortable... with the Army of the future."

This translation of information freedom consolidates the ideological and technical legitimacy of this Army project when subjected to military and civilian oversight. In Habermasian terms, the specific instrumental-technical rationale here is not simply a system colonization of the lifeworld politically legitimated through the operation of publicity. Rather, the institutional identity of the US Army is such that it is formally obliged to stand outside the political space (and steering media i.e. economic and political individualism and self-interest) of the civil society it is tasked to protect, whilst supporting a separate lifeworld that is premised upon instrumental rationality. At the same time, it is dedicated to a function which it is formally obliged to be highly moralistic - the large-scale management of lethal violence – which lies outside the scope of normative political practice. The stance of the Army now, rather than its original Constitutional identity, can be understood then as one that ideologically excuses itself from the normative civil political space in order to both protect that space and mark itself as subservient to (*and* consequently more morally ordered than) the domain of civilian political power struggles and deliberation. Through this stance, the Army legitimates itself, and its increasingly more system-based lifeworld. The emphasis on instrumental rationality supports its political neutrality (note how Wardynski emphasizes above the rhetorical utility of the cultural perception of the computer as a neutral "tool").

This legitimization positioning is not only for the benefit of oversight authorities or the domestic public, but as OEMA notes in one report, since 42% of visitors to the *America's Army* website are non-US, then the gamespace becomes representative of the basic values of the whole of American society - an opportunity for foreigners to "receive information about American ideals and values. Thus, the game embodies the capacity to communicate with rising

generations abroad about the values and ethos that enliven the Army and the society whence the Army is drawn." (2003:9)

The ideological positioning of the project is most fundamentally expressed in the three-way translation and reformulation of information freedoms. To compose its project rationale, politically, economically, and militarily, OEMA borrows concepts from the contemporary mainstream lifeworld of information age America: the language of internet business best practices; the idea of the digitally-empowered knowing and communicating citizen subject, adept with information flows and data multi-tasking; and the adaptation of new media popular culture for corporate marketing purposes<sup>31</sup>. The advertising slogan "Citizens. Countries. Video Games. The U.S. Army keeps them all free." succinctly extols the equivalence made between individual freedom, military guarantees of national and international freedoms, and economic freedoms (of the market, and of the free distribution of the game).

From a critical perspective, this borrowing and equivalence might be understood as co-option or appropriation by a hegemonic institution, but from the Army's perspective, this might be understood rather as respecting the dependence of a subservient military on the civilian lifeworld. The information-empowered free citizen at the center of the three-way translation is simultaneously considered as the naturalized, mythologized traditional subject (the idea that freedom is what America and Americans have always been all about), and as the irresistibly novel product of the disruptive information revolution (the idea of the new internet-empowered generation of youth who are *especially* free).

This ontological and ideological formulation is, of course, not simply one undertaken by OEMA, but is part of the dominant contemporary discourse that promotes information (and its less and more sentient siblings, data and

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See Chen, Ferazzi & Li (2003) on the subject of America's Army as an "advergame".

knowledge) as the fundamental analytical and practical element of all social and natural phenomena (Castells, 1996) If the present specific instance of the OEMA project is not best thought of in terms of the system colonization of the lifeworld, it should be noted though that the broader information technology ("information age", "information society" etc.) discourse is characterized by the increasing encroachment of corporate technocratic logics of information and communication management in almost all spheres of life (Chesher, 1994). And furthermore, computer and internet development beginning with the roots of the cybernetic notion of computerized information interfaces as a model for human experience originate in US defense research (Arquilla & Ronfeldt 1997, Gray 1997).

The democratic identity of the *America's Army* is insufficiently constructed and communicated purely on the basis of the rhetorical and technical borrowing of concepts from a hegemonic discourse which is already seen as a key system-colonizing and military-related force in contemporary culture. On the instrumental coded level of information and communication science, it makes sense to equate (as Wardynski does above) with a citizen's ability to seek and discuss news through internet technologies with their potential proficiency with information age military hardware. This association has special mainstream appeal during wartime – as seen in Wagner James Au's enthusiasm for a future generation of digital warriors fighting for liberalism. However, this instrumental dimension of the democratic cyberspace identity of the project is quite antithetical to normative ideas of how democratic discourse is practiced in cyberspace, which has its most vocal roots in techno-libertarian concerns of reclaiming internet technologies from their military and corporate framings (Barlow 1996). Information and market freedoms must also be shown to correspond with a respect for standard expectations of internet freedom of speech.

The coherency of the *America's Army* gamespace's democratic identity within the lifeworld space of internet popular culture consumption must

be legitimated then through the adoption of practical functions and safeguards associated with the techno-libertarian side of CMC discourse<sup>32</sup>. This adoption also corresponds to the effort to establish the gamespace as one congenial to mainstream gamer culture activities. The communication of the legitimated identity of the Army takes place, then, not only through the design of the mechanics and experience of the video gameplay itself, but also through the construction and support of community in the gamespace of internet-mediated social relations created around the gameplay.

### *Political Communication in the Official Gamespace*

The official gamespace can be defined as that which is directly under the control of the *America's Army* project. This comprises principally of the gameplay environment on Army-contracted public servers, and the community forums and chatrooms based on the official game website. The FPS gameplay environment itself, whilst it contains components for communication (the in-game chat-box, and the conversations between players through voice communication network devices which are typical for games of this genre) represents an arena for interaction that appears to be completely antithetical to basic norms for rational discussion in the public sphere sense.

Firstly, it is based upon violence - aimed at defeating the other team in terms of capturing or dominating space and eliminating the presence of enemy participants. Of course these acts of violence are virtual, but so are the avatar bodies, and the mimetic outcome of the virtual killing is that of sudden removal of participants from the active domain of interaction. "Dead" players can still observe the game action on-screen, and also communicate with other "dead" players, or new players who are waiting for their first chance to play on the server. However, the content and mode of conversation in this space is also

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<sup>32</sup> One key observance of standard expectations for internet freedom is the lack of any personal tracking or data capture capabilities in the game's technical structure. Government regulations

extremely limited. Players are generally preoccupied watching and commenting humorously on the continuing gameplay, and waiting for the start of the new game. The brief time limit of each game session (a maximum of 10 minutes, and it is common for missions to be won within half that time), combined with the ephemeral nature of the chat messages (there is only a capacity for a very brief history of the recent conversations) automatically truncates any attempt at lengthy discussion in the space.

And once actually playing a new game mission, players are overwhelmingly preoccupied with succeeding in the game itself, and most rationally orientated conversation is concerned with team tactics and advice to less experienced players. It is common for game clans to have a rule against discussion of non-game topics or distracting attempts at humor during gameplay, especially over voice communications. Those players who attempt to subvert this general rule or offend in other ways (cheating, being excessively abusive, disrupting team operations etc.) are liable to be virtually killed or worse, “votekicked” off the server. This is the principal “democratic” mechanism in the game, where troublesome players can be proposed for a summary vote by the other participants that determines whether they are allowed to stay on the game server.

Recent sociological studies of FPSs and other multiplayer online games have suggested that it is premature to dismiss the player interactions within the gamespace as trivial. For instance, ethnographers of the popular *Counterstrike* FPS (Wright & Briedenbach 2002; Wright, Boria & Briedenbach 2002) have argued that player actions within the active game are not simply orientated to achieving game goals, but are frequently creatively turned towards expressing humorous, ironic, and even political sentiments (such as the use of the graffiti option in *Counterstrike* to write political messages on the walls). Moreover, they argue that the casual conversations exchanged during game chat

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concerned with user privacy mean that only general statistical information about the community

in combination with the performances of participants during gameplay are key in symbolically expressing competition, collaboration, playfulness, gendering, and togetherness experienced by the players.

In emphasizing the significance of these forms of communication, it is argued that they are not only non-trivial but also relatively more complex than the limited range of in-game actions available to the player would suggest. This limitation is compounded by the absence of physical bodies and the range of non-verbal communication face and body cues. Wright & Briedenbach argue that this apparent limitation must be qualified with the understanding that it is quite common (but not typical) for gamers to gather in the same physical space. And even beyond physical space sharing, ethnographies of players of online persistent world roleplaying games have shown how many gamers form meaningful and long-lasting social relationships with others who they may only meet in the gameworld (Turtle, 1995). Tony Manninen (2003), in an attempt to lay out a Habermasian Communications Action Theory (CAT) framework for a sophisticated categorization of those in-game player actions perceivable on-screen in a range of multiplayer game genres, proposes that it is possible to assign every kind of action a non-trivial rationality related to formal and informal social goals (instrumental, strategic, cooperative etc.). The narrow range of technical possibilities for intersubjective communication is compensated, Manninen argues, by the players' suspension of disbelief, and the imaginative and artistic resources invested in the game that help make it a meaningful experience.

However, this perspective of these game actions as significant on the level of personal cultural experience does not convincingly overcome Frasca's protest that these game actions are trivial in the broader political context. Notably, Manninen makes no attempt to place his CAT analysis of game actions in the context of Habermas' general political project. The meaningful interactions



in Wright, Boria & Briedenbach's *CounterStrike* studies are limited to personal exchanges within a specific and roughly unchanging group of players. Even those who invest much emotion and effort in the politics of their virtual game community are not necessarily motivated to be politically or socially engaged in the offline world, and there is a common perception of a negative correlation in this respect (Turkle, 1995:242). In the interviews I conducted with *America's Army* players, there was actually little evidence that players particularly valued in-gameplay actions beyond the enjoyment and mastery of gameplay itself. No interviewee had any favorite anecdotes to recount about gameplay successes or dramas when I asked them specifically for these. Indeed, there was often a certain air of bemusement at the notion that anyone would regard the gameplay in itself to be so important.

However, the value-laden institutional military context of the *America's Army* game suggests that the range of player actions available within its game environment are an exception to the basic criticism of in-game actions being of marginal political significance. A primary aim of the game project is to communicate the image of the US Army has an organization tasked with the management of violence in the name of democracy, with explicitly defined moral values. These values are purportedly expressed in the design of gameplay:

"Player progress is linked to Army Values through game mechanisms such as the Honor Score. [The Army Values are] Teamwork & Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, Personal Courage (L.D.R.S.H.I.P.)" (OEMA, 2003a)

The Honor score system in the *America's Army* gameplay punishes player actions such as attacking teammates and cheating, whilst rewarding leadership, teamplay, and the achieving of mission objectives. Players whose Honor scores fall to zero have their accounts deleted. Those players with higher

Honor scores gain access to advanced missions, and are also given preference in team role selections. Moreover, the representation of violence is kept to a minimum (only a faint splatter of blood is seen upon killing an enemy, and the body remains intact), and a parental control interface is available which can be used to deactivate blood effects; limit player access only to the training exercise missions and not to the "real war" missions; prevent access to the sniper role (a particularly sensitive issue after the 2002 Washington Sniper murder spree); and to filter out foul language in the in-game chat.

These game design features promote a positive public image of the Army, but were also intended to counter criticisms of the game. The Press Kit FAQs (produced by the Social and Political Sciences academic staff at OEMA) deal extensively with answering a range of potential criticism that accuse the game of promoting wanton violence, of militarizing youth culture, of potentially damaging the image of US Army, and even of helping to train enemies of the United States:

"the Army Game encourages America's democratic ideals in the application of military force. The United States is highly regarded abroad for its respect for the rule of law. The Army's game embodies this respect for the rule of law by incorporating rules of engagement and the laws of war into game play. The Game penalizes players who fail to abide by these rules. Furthermore, the Game provides insights into the Army as an organization based upon a set of noble values.

[...]

We are not concerned that hostile entities might play the game. Indeed, if they did they would discover that American Soldiers operate within a value-laden organization. Perhaps they might even identify with these values and question their hostility to the United States. Moreover, none of the information presented in the game is classified. Also, there is nothing in the game that specifies how Army commanders and staffs plan and conduct specific types of operations."

But however effective these communications within the game may be for instilling a respect for Army values, they lie outside the rudimentary requirements for discursive communication. The limitations to in-game discursive communication suggested above are even more damaging to the notion of public sphere potential here than the drawbacks associated with internet-based discourse in general since the game environment is designed to aid gameplay, not communication itself. However, gameplay is still significant as the main provocation for the generation of communities around the game. There are hundreds of clans – groups of players which regularly play together and maintain a website with a community forum – that play *America's Army*.

The community forums on these sites represent a more normative, stable, and decorous space for discussion – however, the content these clan forums are still limited by their primary self-identification as a site for escapist leisure pursuits. In this context, discussion on these forums are typically overwhelmingly concerned with game issues. A typical *America's Army* clan will generally express an identity (through player names, clan names, website graphics etc.) which either conforms to the military theme of the game (numerous clans are named after real life military units usually without having any real life relation to them e.g. *2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Force Recon Company*, *79<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment*, *Portuguese Special Forces*, *Special Air Service*); aspires to the genre atmosphere of the macho fantasy violence of FPS gaming (e.g. *Natural Born Killers*, *ButcherSquad*, *Nothing Else Matters*, *secluded psychopaths achieving zen*); or to bizarre humor, irreverent irony, and off-beat whimsy (e.g. *Ministry of Silly Walks*, *Death by Friendly Fire*, *Royal Penguin Empire*, and *MarvelClan* – a superhero-themed group)<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> For a sample of the range of America's Army clans, see this list registered with the HomeLAN game server service: <http://www.homelanfed.com/federation/clans.php>

A prominent exception of an *America's Army* community forum that positions itself above this trivialized identity is the forum of the official [americasarmy.com](http://americasarmy.com) website itself. It is here that we might expect to find the kind of reasonable discourse closest to the public sphere norms.

### *The Official America's Army Community Forum*

The official *America's Army* player community is supported through the technical infrastructure embedded in the official website<sup>34</sup>, and comprises of a heavily used bulletin board (there are approx. 1 million posts to date) with multiple sections, and IRC (internet relay chat) servers for online real-time text-based discussion (with approx. 100,000 registered users). Online chat communication spaces are not only generally seen as an arena for irreverent and unrooted conversation, but are relatively more ephemeral and less amenable to policed standards of discussion than comparative popular CMC means (see Reid, 1991).

In contrast, whilst the forum bulletin boards also have their share of unruly and flippant conversation, there is an overt and commonly held awareness that the structure, layout, and permanency<sup>35</sup> of the discussion space here. This helps denote the space as an arena for more serious discussion topics and styles. This can be seen as partly due to the shared cultural expectations amongst the fan population of what the public space of an internet community newsgroup or bulletin board is for. These expectations are also inscribed into this space by the official technical infrastructure – sections for the discussion of game-only topics are divided from sections for conversations about off-game topics, and these in turn are distinguished between a section for trivial and

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.americasarmy.com/community.php>

humorous discussions and one for serious topics. In addition to the expectations about internet forum freedom of speech, OEMA has stated that it views these forums as a “Virtual Community of Interest in Soldiering” (2003:6). The potential of this community as a space for contact and dialogue between those who serving or have served in the military with civilians is recognized by the granting of special “Army Star” name icons to those players who can prove to the game authorities that they have a US military service record. Whilst those with Army Stars (holders may belong to any branch of the military) only comprise a tiny fraction of the overall *America’s Army* community – approx. 1,000 players out of a total population of approx. 2,000,000 (OEMA, 2003:2) – these players have the greatest prestige within the community, and if the vision of the project is fulfilled, their numbers will grow in the future.

Given the prominence of the serious purpose of the game project, OEMA has recognized that it was important to designate a space for discussion of the serious real-life significance of the game that was marked off from those discussions which are obsessed only with playing the game itself, and also the broad range of off-beat humor found in such internet forums.

The serious topic section, whilst only containing a small share of the total community posts (approx. 50,000 out of a million posts), is notable for the way the official moderators specifically encourage discussion of public interest issues and current affairs. In this section, a large post by the official moderators and fans is permanently fixed at the top of the discussion list – in this post, a large number of internet news sources of various perspectives and national origin are linked, and an open-ended invitation for fans to post their own news source links is made. These news sources are very diverse - they include not only mainstream news sites such as the *New York Times*, *Fox News*, the *BBC World News*, but also alternative sites such as the English language site of the

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<sup>35</sup> all posts on the official website are archived, unless specifically deleted – in contrast to unofficial clan forums where, while deletion of posts by forum administrators is rare, wholesale forum message deletion is commonly regularly carried out for reasons of server space shortages.

controversial Arabic news station, *Al-Jazeera*; other international sources such as *Le Monde* (France) and *Pravda* (Russia); left-wing and right-wing opinion journals (*The Nation*, *Newsmax*); political intelligence forecasting agencies (stratfor.com, and debka.com) and news rumor/gossip sites (*The Drudge Report*, and its liberal counterpart, *Buzzflash*). It is also notable that the regular posters to the forums in general, and the serious topic section especially, are of an older mean age – estimated at about 26 years old<sup>36</sup> – than the community as a whole. The discussion ranges across the political spectrum with the most common current affairs topics aired being concerned with the War on Terror and the military.

Also permanently posted to the top of this forum are both a warning to show due respect when talking with others and a reminder of the Forum/IRC code of conduct which community members must agree to (this code is referred to both in terms of military jargon – “the Rules of Engagement” (ROE) – and of internet commerce - “the Terms of Service” (TOS)<sup>37</sup> ). This code of conduct not only sets out minimum expectations for appropriate behavior on the forum, but also emphasizes the relative independence of the forum content from monitoring and moderation (partly due to real-time technical nature of the forum, but also the shared expectation of free speech), and prohibits the posting of any abusive sentiments, illegal or deliberately deceptive statements, or commercial advertising:

“Participation in our forums is a privilege. Before posting or responding on our forums please read the following rules and expectations...

Considering the “real-time” nature of our forum, it is impossible for us to immediately review messages or confirm the validity of information as it is posted. Please note that we do not constantly monitor the contents of each post and are not responsible for any messages posted. We do not vouch for or

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<sup>36</sup> Estimate made by project deputy director, Major Bret Wilson, in interview.

<sup>37</sup> See the “ROE” link at <http://www.americasarmy.com/community.php>

warrant the accuracy, completeness or usefulness of any message, and are therefore not responsible for the contents of any message...

As a reminder, you have agreed that you will not use our forum to post any material which is knowingly false and/or defamatory, abusive, vulgar, hateful, harassing, obscene, sexually oriented, threatening, invasive of a person's privacy, or otherwise violative of any law. Inappropriate use of our bulletin board includes (but is not limited to) the following: advertisements, chain letters, pyramid schemes, commercial solicitation, posting copyrighted material without permission, graphic vulgarity/nudity, etc. Put simply: when posting, combine a dose of common sense with the Golden Rule!"

The official moderator emphasizes that the all posters will be equally dealt with for inappropriate behavior, and in particular personal attacks against others: "I don't care if you're a veteran, a professor, or a thirteen year-old, make a personal attack against someone and you will either receive a warning, or just be banned, depending on how severe the attack is, and how many you make."<sup>38</sup>

These official moderators have the power to censure abusive posters and can delete messages (moderators always explain why they are deleting the message, and the message is temporarily displayed in a "locked" forum for public viewing before deletion).

In interview, Major Bret Wilson (the *America's Army* deputy director in charge of community management) noted that from his perspective, the most significant institutional "fight" in developing the game project was in defending the OEMA preference for a very open free speech standard for the forums – as this technically violates Army regulations on website design, content, and speech. Wilson argued that it was important to demonstrate that the Army was tolerant and democratic, rather than authoritarian. To have a heavily censored

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.americasarmy.com/forum/viewtopic.php?topic=59620&forum=29&6>

forum, or to discourage political conversation, would offend popular expectations of internet free speech, and so damage the image of the Army.

Furthermore, Wilson argued that strict discourse management would especially alienate young gamers, who would not be used to the hierarchical aspects of the Army lifeworld: "You're trying to get people fired up about being in the Army... What image are they going to have of the Army... is it going to be their disciplinarian father, who says 'don't say that!', or is it going to be your teacher, your mentor, your coach?" Moreover, it would miss an opportunity to consolidate the sense of "belonging" the game project could foster through the community. Wilson suggested that the wrong way of approaching the gamer community was to assume that it was characterized by teenagers who were "lazy slackers" with "no goals in life". He argued instead that "[t]he right way... is that there are a number of different ways that you can make them feel part of this game, it's that sense of ownership [we're trying to promote]". It was important for Wilson that the *America's Army* project management understood how video gaming culture was more than an escapist, hedonist activity; that it was a site of socialization (including face-to-face relations) with a strong information culture ethic which encouraged the exchange of technical knowledge and skills (including those useful outside the gamespace) within a broader context of offline and other online social relations. Wilson remarked that video gaming and the rest of life "are not separate and distinct from each other... [social] relationships are the same things as gaming... jobs are same things as gaming... it all fits [together]".

A key part of treating the gamer culture with appropriate sophistication was honoring expectations of free speech – even in the case of opinions about controversial topics aired in the community that opposed those of the Army's. As Major Wilson explained about the discussion of Gulf War 2 on the site:

"Some [views] are blatantly intended to incite a riot... like we shouldn't be over there [in Iraq]...[but] what's neat about it is that the community police



themselves. [And y]ou need to have [dissenting opinions]. You gotta let them, you gotta let 'em."

The forums, according to Wilson, actually reflected a mainstream cross-section of American society: "They vary... it's like the normal standard distribution... everyone's clustered around [the topic threads that are] most progenitive... in GW2, its mostly clustered around the red, white, and blue. You have some outliers, but the majority would be favorable [in expressing support for the war]." Wilson also noted that the diversity of opinion and perspective on the forums challenged the stereotype that those in the US military, or otherwise participating in military culture, are politically monocultural:

"[in the forums, we] have some veterans from the first Gulf War who are out of the Army... and are sharing their stories... and are actually on the left extreme [of the ideological scale] which is a shock to people... to some folks, [who think] that all folks in the military were card-carrying members of the Republican party. I think it's an interesting education for everyone involved."

To illustrate the maturity and reasonableness of discussions in the forums, Wilson pointed out one particular case of the debate on the forums between Jack Thompson - a lawyer who is well-known for his class-action suits against video game companies for allegedly promoting violence amongst American youth – and the America's Army game players. Thompson registered himself on the America's Army forums in order to personally dissuade gamers from playing the game, and to protest the hostile emails he received from fans after he denounced the video game on an ABC television news report. This incident also led to organized, widely circulated petitions against the report in the America's Army community, a wave of complaints from players in ABC's own website

forums, and a fan-led campaign to boycott ABC news<sup>39</sup>. In his post, Thompson wrote:

“What you do NOT have a right to do is send me emails and threaten to harm me and my family, as many of you have done. That is not a particularly American thing to do. It is something one would expect of al-Qaeda, and those of you who have done it are terrorists in every sense of the word. [...] The Army removed the clear threats against ABC's [news anchor] Peter Jennings from this site. The Army's failure to do the same regarding me assures 1) that this site is in more trouble than it would otherwise be, and 2) that Congress will be interested in seeing that the Army facilitates physical and other threats against its critics as a matter of course. [...] the Army and the Defense Department have a very long history of conducting unethical, illegal experiments upon soldiers and civilians. [...] This 'game' is yet another experiment upon the unsuspecting pawns who play it. You are the latest guinea pigs. The guinea pigs have been trained to threaten people like me. You have taken the bait.”

Whilst it the initial reaction from OEMA was to propose the immediate deletion of Jack Thompson's post, Wilson successfully argued that this would be counterproductive, as it would alienate the gamers from the free speech perspective, and that it would be best to trust players to be mature enough to debate with Thompson themselves. The majority of the responses to Jack Thompson's post from players (which included high school age participants) indeed exhibit a degree of reasonableness and are not simply irreverent or hostile. For instance, several replies take note of Thompson's basis of his higher moral ground on his Christianity and his quotation of Biblical scripture, and accordingly respond by quoting scripture in defense of the game. Other replies point Thompson toward academic studies that argue against the idea that violent

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<sup>39</sup> The discussion thread around Jack Thompson's post can be found at

video games incite real violent behavior. Others reproach Thompson for his own hostile approach to the discussion, and remind him of the standards of public forum discussion; the community's basic expectations of reaching an understanding, of reasonably agreeing to disagree - as in this post addressed to Thompson:

"...you come to post on a public forum. The moderators can only do so much to ensure the protection of EVERYONE'S rights. This ranges from allowing a person to express their feelings, and others to be protected from slander and threats. Where do we find a common balance? This applies beyond our forum. To find common ground here, everyone has to let some things slip by. We cannot have a world where: anything offensive said is punishable; but you can say anything you ever want... please do not use terrorism, al-Qaeda, or any other types of these references. They look like cheap shots in an argument..."

### *Critique of the Official Gamespace as a Public Sphere*

How well does the official gamespace explored above test against the basic normative conditions of the ideal type public sphere? The official public forums appear to contain the most public sphere potential, and I focus primarily on this domain in the analysis:

#### *i. Autonomy from state and economic power.*

The content of the official and non-official forums are protected by forum administrators from intrusion by external commercial interests. However, these forums are epiphenomena of a gamespace which is produced by a key state institution according to a logic of commercial enterprise. Consequently the game design, business model, and community development are dictated by state values and

economic interests. This is made clear, for instance, by the attempt to embed Army values within the gameplay, and the conflation of information freedoms in the OEMA economic rationale for the game.

ii. *Exchange and critique of moral-practical validity claims.*

The designated space for serious and free discussion of current affairs and public interest issues on the official community website maintains a good basic standard for reasonable expression and freedom of speech. However, these discussions are still open to the accusations of triviality associated with internet forums in general. Aside from the community organization spurred to protest the ABC news report (which directly affected the gamer community itself), there is little evidence of other community political activity beyond discussion. This may be, in part, attributed to the large size of the official community, and the sense of anonymity and rootlessness this creates, relative to the smaller fan and clan sites. Moreover, only a small percentage of posters appear to be interested in the serious issue discussions.

iii. *Reflexivity and critical awareness*

There is a diversity of opinion and perspective on the forums, but there is a general tendency towards the exchange of polarized and entrenched views, rather than reflexive discussion aimed at achieving reasoned consensus. This problem is typical of many internet debate spaces. The lack of emotional investment and physical engagement compared with the embodied face-to-face deliberation preferred by the Habermasian ideal type model, combined with the vagueness of the political purpose and efficacy of the community space, mean that forum participants have less motivation to change their minds, or evolve the discussion.

Whilst the example of the Jack Thompson message thread demonstrates the willingness of game players to engage in

reasonable discussion with an outsider on equal terms, there is little indication of much of a stance on the part of the fans beyond defensiveness, and the repudiation of Thompson's claims. The sides of the game violence debate introduced by Thompson are already polarized here – Thompson is adamantly opposed to the game project, and the players' defensive response is taken to the point of possible harassment (or so Thompson alleges). The broader public audience whose minds may be swayed by the arguments on either side are not present in the debate space here. The only external constituency which might be influenced by the *America's Army* community actions are the executives at the ABC television network, but again this engagement is one of antagonism (through the players' petitions and the boycott of ABC) rather than deliberation.

iv. *Sincerity and honesty*

While the moderators of the official forums have the power to censure deceptive, harassing, or otherwise unreasonable posts, the limited amount of resources committed to managing the community spaces means that there is considerable room for insincere or dishonest posts. While the institutional context of the gamespace supports a higher premium for ethical standards of discussion compared with other game communities, the lack of political purpose beyond free discussion means that this is not a fundamental priority for either the participants or the official authority.

v. *Discursive inclusion and equality within a shared communicative framework*

The members of the *America's Army* community share a lifeworld experience with a pronounced moral and symbolic communicative framework – the FPS gamer culture in the institutional context of the

US Army. Regarding the specific question of rebuilding civilian-military relations, there is clear potential here for the sharing of civilian and military lifeworlds. Also, the project administrators who deal with misconduct by players both on official game servers and within the forum and chat spaces, are formally committed to treating fans equally regardless of their real life identity. There is also a significantly broad cross-section of opinion and perspective expressed in the community spaces.

However, this community is one that is very much a marginal one compared with the broad public sphere community imagined in the ideal type public sphere model. Furthermore, there are inequalities of prestige and respect between those players with Army Stars and civilian players, and also between American players and overseas players. Moreover, the gender bias of the FPS gamer culture means that the community is overwhelmingly male<sup>40</sup>.

### *The Broader Gamespace: Three Exceptional Cases*

The public sphere assessment of the primary gamespaces explored above can be summarized as demonstrating fatal weaknesses in three main ways:

- i. The overarching purpose of the *America's Army* gamespace is one of ideological and instrumental communication by a hegemonic state institution. The question of whether there is public sphere potential here for the revitalization of democratic civilian-military relations must also address the degree to which the project threatens an undemocratic militarization of public space i.e. a colonization of the lifeworld by system rationality. An urgent potential consequence of this

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<sup>40</sup> in my investigations of the game, I only came across only three or four female players out of hundreds – unfortunately, none of them were available for interview.

is a reduction in the capacity of the public to rationally argue and deliberate over military affairs.

- ii. The gamespace is centered around non-discursive forms of player actions in gameplay which are antithetical to basic premises for meaningful discussion. And furthermore, even discursive communication within the forums of the gamespace is trivialized by the prevailing atmosphere of escapism and leisure. These characteristics make the cultural discourse within the gamespace especially vulnerable to the general criticisms of how CMC interactions fall short of norms of Habermasian communicative rationality.
- iii. The exercise of freedom of speech on the public forums can be regarded as a mask of publicity that asserts a techno-libertarian democratic ideal that obscures the far more crucial significance of the economic logic of the project. It is this economic logic, adapted from the business models of the information revolution and naturalized in the translation between market freedom with freedom of speech, which will produce substantive material effects. In comparison, the political discussion in the gamespace is fatuous.

Each of these three weaknesses in themselves undermine the legitimacy of the notion of the *America's Army* gamespace as a potential public sphere, if they are understood as characterizing the totality of significant political interactions possible in this community. However, it is insufficient to examine the *America's Army* gamespace in terms of only its primary and official manifestations. Whilst the gamespace is currently not functioning close to the Habermasian normative ideal of public sphere, I argue that in the next three chapters how one should look beyond the primary gamespace and the mainstream contexts of mainstream practices to certain exceptional communities, in which evidence of more robust public sphere potential is to be

found. I identify three game culture groups which are notably active in *America's Army* community which all have a strongly articulated, enacted, and *expansionary* political agenda and identity that reaches beyond the gamespace and is non-trivially engaged in off-line public interest issues: the real-life military and veteran gamers; Christian Evangelicals; and hackers. This exceptional orientation means that these groups have a special tendency for escaping, refusing, and even subverting both the dominant official logic of the gamespace and the limited public significance of gamer culture.

I do not claim that the political activities of any of these three exceptional communities constitute a space close to the normative ideal-type public sphere. However, I argue that each has a particular characteristic political activity and orientation which demonstrates how a corresponding fatal weakness can be transcended, and furthermore, indicates how the standard model and critique of internet public sphere potential may be insufficient for assessing gamer culture in this instance.

### **Chapter 3: *America's Army* at War:**



## The Military Gamers and the Militarization critique

### *The Militarization Critique*

Habermas' concerns about the perversion of public sphere communicative rationality in the service of technical-instrumental interests are built upon the Frankfurt School critics' model of the transformation of 19th century bourgeois liberal democratic capitalism into the militaristic/corporatist state and monopoly capitalism of the 1930s, in which the public space for deliberative reason mutated into the domain of managed mass cultural consumption produced by corporate interests<sup>41</sup>. The anxiety here is that not only does military development represent a powerful socio-cultural drive towards modeling civil society according to non-consensual technical-instrumental values, but rational public discussion of military affairs is also increasingly thwarted.

Contemporary critics of the relationship between state military interests and commercial media technology development argue that this relationship is driving a fusion of digital and physical reality is disrupting the public's capacity to rationally deliberate over the actuality of contemporary war. In spite of the conditions of US military's traditional or formal democratic legitimacy, commentators have suggested that the predominance of US military spending and technical research & development nationally and globally means that there is an inevitable tendency towards domination of civilian domains. For instance, Tim Lenoir, in his comprehensive historical accounts of the relationship between the electronic entertainment industry and the defense simulation community in the United States, has argued that this relationship (what he calls "the military-entertainment complex") is the leading indicator of how "[in]

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<sup>41</sup> For the Frankfurt School theorists, a key concern was that the sophisticated abuse of media technologies by European Fascism for social manipulation was finding its post-war parallel in the Hollywood capitalist model of consumer entertainment - "a culture industry" which contributed to the fusion and domination of political, economic, and private spheres by economic interests whilst society tended towards an increasingly technocratic, administered, and undemocratic form centered on functionalist instrumental reason.

numerous areas of our daily activities, we are witnessing a drive toward fusion of digital and physical reality... [toward] a new country of ubiquitous computing..." (2000:291).

Around Gulf War 1 in the early 1990s, a widely expressed moral anxiety concerning the fate of the public sphere today was the perception that the television coverage of the war (especially the public broadcast of military videos of missiles hitting targets taken from the US weapons cameras) had generated a public discourse of war transfixed and seduced by the equivalence of the imagery to that of the video game screen – a immediate yet mediated experience perversely disconnected from the reality of war<sup>42</sup>.

This popular anxiety encouraged one of the most well-known intellectual controversies associated with Gulf War 1 - the philosopher Jean Baudrillard's claim that "The Gulf War did not take place". In the context of his signature postmodernist thesis of "hyperreality" (in which he claims that ever more sophisticated media technologies within the context of consumer capitalism are weakening or even obliterating the boundaries between simulation and reality) Baudrillard argued that Gulf War 1 had been the first "virtual engagement" of military force: "the war itself exerts its ravages on another level, through faking, through hyperreality,... with the precession of the virtual over the real... and the inexorable confusion between the two."<sup>43</sup> Baudrillard's commentary was heavily criticized. Most notably, the philosopher Chris Norris complained that the fact that people were taking Baudrillard's postmodern analysis seriously was a sign of "a widespread cultural malaise" in a morally degraded public sphere discourse about war (Norris, 1992).

Another influential philosophical commentator on the blurring of virtuality and reality in the media representation of Gulf War 1 was the military-media theorist Paul Virilio (1991). Virilio argued that the confusion between the screen

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<sup>42</sup> General Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of the Coalition forces, was himself quoted as remarking that this conflict was "the first Nintendo war" (Sheff, 1993:285).

images of the television news and the missile camera encourages an illusion of public participation and complicity in the act of war shown, which makes the critical differentiation between the virtual and the real impossible – the result is a shrinking of the sense of independent public reason, imposed by the drive of military reason<sup>44</sup>.

The consequences of this tendency are intensified by the proliferation of networked interactivity and abstracted information, so that in Virilio's vision: "[t]he capacity of interactivity is going to reduce the world to nearly nothing. [...] In the near future, people will feel enclosed in a small environment... at the limit of tolerability, by virtue of the speed of information...."<sup>45</sup>. In other words, the development of interactive communication technologies is leading to the obliteration of the public, and the reduction of the citizen to the systemic instrumentality of the digital warrior: "[t]he disintegration of the warrior's personality is at a very advanced stage. Looking up, he sees the digital display... looking down, the radar screen, the onboard computer, the radio, and the video screen..." (1989:84).

James Der Derian, the primary proponent of Virilio's military-media theory in the United States, has identified the convergence of military and entertainment media interests with the foundation of such institutions as the ICT, as the clearest and most dangerous recent manifestation of the military rationality of media development (2001). Der Derian argues that the management of public media culture for military purposes has created a discursive construction of "virtuous war" where military action is legitimized in the name of democracy and human rights, and made to seem "clean" by the

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<sup>43</sup> in the March 29 1991 UK Guardian newspaper article, "The Gulf War Has Not Taken Place".

<sup>44</sup> For Virilio, military reason is a historical force underlying all technological development and is overwhelmingly concerned with increasing abilities of speed - what he terms a "dromological" rationality. The immediacy of action, and implosion of space-time distances enabled by interactive media technologies are especially important for the dromological drive's "logistics of perception" (1989).

<sup>45</sup> As remarked by Virilio as interview by James Der Derian, Wired magazine, May 1996.

hiding of the real violence of war from public view. He suggests that this strategic and geo-political phenomenon finds its domestic equivalent in the accusations that video game culture encourages the desensitization of youth towards images of violence through its ergodic sensationalization and trivialization of killing, potentially to psychopathic extremes<sup>46</sup>: "New technologies of imitation and simulation [are widening the gap] between the reality and virtuality of war. As the confusion of one for the other grows, we face the danger of a new kind of trauma without sight, drama without tragedy, where television wars and video war games blur together. We witness this not only at the international level, from the Gulf War to the Kosovo campaign, but also on the domestic front, where two teenagers [the perpetrators of the 1999 Columbine massacre] predisposed to violence confused the video game *Doom* for the high school classroom." (2001:11)

The *America's Army* gamespace here appears to be vulnerable to the critique of the blurring of real and virtual violence here both on the level of its formal rationale and legitimation, and on the level of the informal attitudes of the FPS gamer culture, in spite of the Army's elaborate efforts to establish the game experience as a one which is highly sensitive and moralistic about the representation of violence and war. These vulnerabilities were illustrated, for instance, in two interviews with two casual gamers who belong to the *America's Army* clan, *Drunks with Guns* - a typical mainstream gamer group.

Whilst the negative coverage of the game by ABC which linked it to the game violence debate sparked consternation and organized protest amongst the *America's Army* community in general, not all gamers object to the idea that violence and war may be glorified and sensationalized in video games. For (DWG) S. who had spent a great deal of time playing FPSs since high school, the experience of interactive virtual and graphic violence was the genre's special

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<sup>46</sup> A key anti-video game violence text is Grossman & Degaetao's *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action against TV, Movie & Video Game Violence* (1999).

appeal. He specifically cited the ABC news report was the key initial motivation for playing the game:

"I was at a bar and we saw a news story about America's Army on ABC... slamming it for the violence in today's youth. I went home and downloaded the game immediately... in all honesty, I wanted to get a feel of why ABC News was slamming it for violence in today's youth. I've always been in opposition of that idea. Another thing about it that I liked was how ABC said the weaponry was more realistic than any other game out there on the market."

Whilst (DWG) S. indicated that he had no interest in joining the military whatsoever (although he did enjoy paintball and range shooting), the outbreak of Gulf War 2 did make him feel "more addicted" to, and more gratified from, playing *America's Army* as the daily media coverage of the war excited him:

"[The war] has only affected me in the way that I want to play more. [I] guess it's an adrenaline thing... watching the war and then playing AA. Yeah. I feel better every time I kill the OPFOR in [the desert] Insurgent Camp [level] now... it also made me wish I was shooting at the French [since they had opposed the war].... [with the current war,] in a sadistic sort of way there is an irony about the desert scenarios. I'm sure that is unintentional with the current situation in Iraq."

This kind of gaming pleasure and celebration of the sense of moral ambiguity in the video gameplay space is quite contrary to the ideal of the morally superior FPS experience communicating noble Army values that the official project rationale envisions. From the public sphere perspective, this kind of flippant, sensationalistic attitude towards virtual violence (a core trait of much video game culture) which escapes the official moral position of the game

threatens to undermine the credibility of the broader gamespace as a rational civilian-military community for serious discussion. On the other hand, even close identification with the institutional values communicated by the game may be distorted through the lens of broader gamer culture. Take, for instance, the case of (DWG) K., a civilian player who enlisted in the US Army in 2003, and attributed "70%" of his motivations to his *America's Army* gameplaying experiences. He had this to say about his decision (I interviewed him only a few hours before he was leaving by bus to boot camp):

"I was playing about 8 hrs a day... I was psyched to play this one level [called] 'Weapons Cache' because we had practiced forever on it. Nobody showed but me. I was so f\*\*\*\*\* p\*\*\*\*\* to this day I can't believe how mad I was. The thought in my mind was 'there would be no way in hell would they do this in the army'...from that moment on I played less AA and started looking for more info on the [real] Army... after all the wins and victories I had I didn't feel as good when around [people] who where veterans and [when I said] 'ya. I'm so good at this army game' and they just look at you like 'mother\*\*\*\*\*', its just a game....' I actually sat back and said I know I can do this in real life."

(DWG) K. also suggested that "deep down" he felt that the game had taught him the Army L.D.R.S.H.I.P values through its emphasis on successful teamplay, and that this had better prepared him for boot camp.

And in relation to the outbreak of Gulf War 2, (DWG) K. told me that the news media's war coverage encouraged his immersion in *America's Army* gameplaying. He would regularly hurry home from work to play 8 hours a night with the TV news on, concentrating especially on the desert levels. And once the news story broke about the Iraqi capture of US POWs, on those missions involving prisoner rescue:

“Well, I stuck to the Hostage Rescue missions. The new map Radio Tower [which involves the rescue of hostages] was almost a real life scenario of what was going on over in Baghdad and if I told you how much I played that scenario over and over I think you would puke, or say: get a life... hahaha... on average I was playing 8 hrs a day after coming home from work... all the while CNN was on... I notched up playing time when knowing there were [US] POWs [in Iraq]... well, first thing in all honesty I prayed to God for the safe recovery of all POWs and to grant them peace [until] I finally get over there to do something... for some sick reason I wish I was over there trying to help or do something... people around me thought I was crazy... because their idea of a "good life" is just sitting at home getting old and everything seeming to be safe? [these people are] letting others fight their battles.”

It was common for both military and civilian players to note the uncanny feeling of playing *America's Army* whilst a real US-led ground war was underway in the Middle East. A common conversational topic noted in my gameplay sessions on public servers was whether or not the game experience encouraged players to think about joining the Army. Since a frequent experience, especially for the new player, is to die suddenly from a surprise shot from an unseen enemy soldier within the first few minutes of the game, players were often heard to speculate on the insane riskiness of real combat or to bemoan the lack of in-game representation of close air support, armor, and other supporting military forces one might expect in real life. Even advanced players can typically expect to see at least one side in a game mission suffer more than 50% fatalities<sup>47</sup>.

(DWG) K.'s account demonstrates a further awareness on his part of the moral and ontological confusion of real and virtual war that *America's Army* provokes. The same feelings he describes as being seen as “sick” and “crazy”,

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<sup>47</sup> This effect is common enough that the America's Army developers are planning the introduction of artificial intelligence controlled OPFOR soldiers in certain new levels in order to more accurately depict Army doctrines of overwhelming force, and minimal casualty rates.

seem also sincere and noble in his mind. These feelings of uncanny unease might be attributed to the disorientation of crossing the boundary from identifying oneself with the lifeworld of the hedonistic civilian gamer to that of the morally strong and socially certain lifeworld of the military mindset – as suggested by his impatience with his clan members for failing to demonstrate the same commitment and discipline which he enjoyed experiencing. (DWG) K. appears to be a model example of a civilian player who has fully imbibed the official ideological message communicated by the game. However, there is also a hint of over-identification with the drama of combat presented with the game, to the point where his crossing over from civilian to military lifeworld is facilitated by a blurring of the mediated representation of real war on the television screen with its ergodic virtual re-enactment within the game. The “blurring” experienced by (DWG) K. appears to be vulnerable to the military-media convergence critiques.

### *The Military Gamers*

To challenge the militarization critique here, I somewhat counter-intuitively point to the exceptional community of *America's Army* players who are also active duty or veteran military personnel. The two real life military AA groups, 1<sup>st</sup> Veterans' Battalion and Joint Task Force, are both notable for their strong identification with the US armed forces. Neither group has any official affiliation with the *America's Army* project or any other military organization. They are entirely fan created and operated. Both groups are characterized by members from all branches of the military, and the 1VB group, with several hundred members, contains the bulk of the total “Army Star” population in the *America's Army* community. Both memorialize real-life military dead, prisoners of war, and those missing in action with graphics that take up the entire front pages of their websites (1VB has a dedicated, animated Flame of the Unknown Soldier; JTF has a large graphics of the POW-MIA symbol of the campaign to



remember missing US soldiers). On the front page of the 1VB website, the values of the community are asserted as so:

"The 1st Veterans Battalion has adopted the same guiding principles as the U.S. Army. We have based much of our philosophy, structure and training on these core principles. [...] 'Values are at the core of everything our Army is and does. Your commitment to living and teaching the Army's core values is critical to our success today and tomorrow.' -GEN. Dennis J. Reimer"

And the JTF community lists as its first rule:

"1. Members will at all times be expected to conduct themselves in a manner that brings credit to the Department of Defense, their parent service and the JTF. [...] Three documented and verifiable complaints will result in expulsion [...] and an effort to get you out of AA altogether."

Both the 1VB and the JTF refuse to use the term "clan" to describe themselves, preferring military terms such as "battalion" and "unit" in order to emphasize their special values, structure, and constituency. (JTF) W. explains:

"We are not a clan. We are a unit. We use the U.S. military as the model for our organizational structure. Individuals have different ranks, with those ranks comes responsibility in assisting in running the team. A clan is a loose affiliation of similar individuals... a family. A unit [is where people from] all walks of life come together to accomplish something, through cooperation, communication and teamwork."

Both these military gamer communities distinguish themselves structurally from civilian clans through organizing and training players in military style squads with a chain of command where rank is based on commitment to the game group (1VB has numerous squads, including a "NATO" squad for non-US

military/veteran players; JTF models itself after the formal Army fashion of a “HQ unit”, a “rear detachment”, and several “rifle squads”). At the same time as providing a sense of ontological security and communal familiarity, pleasure is gained by the military players from applying not simply their military training in real-life battle tactics etc., but more importantly their group and command-orientated mindset, which gives them significant advantage when playing against civilian teams. All the military players interviewed cited this as the main satisfaction they obtained from the gameplay. As (JTF) W. put it:

“[the best thing] with my team we do... [is] trounce the little Counterstrickers<sup>48</sup> (derogatory term for non-teamwork using fools) into the ground... that was the emotional satisfaction, proving the whole real army [point of view]... TEAM TEAM TEAM...”

These military gamer groups appear to very closely conforming to, and reproducing, the institutional ideology and hierarchical social structure of the US military. This is inevitable given that the members of these communities generally inhabit and support the distinct lifeworld of the US military. But in terms of the militarization critique – particularly given their greater prestige - these groups may be seen as complicit in the anti-democratic and militaristic tendencies of the gamespace.

However, I would argue that it is more appropriate to see this community as politically exceptional rather than ultra-conformist. Whilst the “Army Star” players have a special prestige in the *America’s Army* gamespace, their cultural influence here is secondary relative to the dominant system logic of the official strategic communication rationale, and the wider lifeworld of the FPS gamer culture. The perspective and political agenda of the military gamers can be distinguished from these broader influences if it is understood that they are

promoting their personal military lifeworld identity through the gamespace, and not simply replicating official Army ideology. For instance, the reproduction of US military organizational structures in the military game groups does not mean that they actually socially operate as an enforced command hierarchy. Rank is based not on real life military seniority, but the degree of commitment and contribution to the game-playing group. Chains of command generally only operate during gameplay to ensure proper execution of team tactics, relations are otherwise informal and centered around relaxation and casual conversation.

One might say that the military gamers are soldiers who are acting at playing soldiers. But the exceptional political agenda for these groups stem from their need to assert their lifeworld experience as real military personnel in the broader gamespace, and to promote an agenda concerned with veterans' affairs. A fundamental motivation for a military gamer joining these communities, is to socialize within a familiar military lifeworld, and distinguish oneself from what is perceived as the more lax, irresponsible and juvenile world of civilian players. It is noticeable for instance, how there is a significantly greater frequency of discussion concerned with serious military affairs and political news on the community website forums of these military gamer groups than there typically is in the civilian clan forums I observed. Many posts are specifically related to military culture – such as advice for new recruits for surviving boot camp, and prose memorializing the combat dead. More generally, subjects for debate and discussion in the 1VB forum within a typical fortnight, for instance, ranged more broadly in content and orientation. Topics discussed included promotion of a Republican pro-US political rally; the future of the Euro currency; weight loss advice; Israeli discrimination against Palestinians; US university political correctness; national gun control policy. Some discussions even weighed heavily against the official views of the US military – in one 1VB forum poll and discussion, the large majority of participants agreed with the proposition that

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<sup>48</sup> A reference to the FPS game Counterstrike which sparked the online tactical FPS genre, but

PFC. Jessica Lynch's widely reported and celebrated experiences in Iraq were actually not deserving of the Bronze Star medal she was awarded, and that the whole affair was basically a US Army propaganda exercise. Furthermore, the groups' scope of membership (and so the scope of their sense of shared lifeworld) extends beyond the US armed forces – 1VB has a substantial contingent of non-US military veterans; JTF counts firefighters and policemen as fellow professionals committed to upholding national security.

The military gamer groups' role in supporting the military lifeworld experience of their members extends into the off-line world, and even to familial relations. (JTF) W noted that many members of his military gamer group know each other in real life, and socialize in non-virtual spaces. He also noted that most of the JTF community – even those he has never met face-to-face – would be traveling to his graduation ceremony at his service school. Military interviewees also notably reported that many of those community members who had families would play *America's Army* with their children and spouses on community servers – a habit which is almost unheard of in civilian clans. (1VB) S. explains:

“Well, I think it's a way to be involved in their lives and it's a way for the kids to learn to interact with adults... the kids are thrilled to be on with us and respect their unique position ...they think it's pretty cool [that] not only are they playing with Dad's friends but they're playing with real soldiers, airmen, marines, seamen etc... AND be on [voice] comms with them... no other kids get that.”

This family context represents an extension of the private into a specific community space, where orderly military lifeworld values and norms can be nurtured in the minds of the adult players' children. (JTF) C. remarked that a key mission for the JTF community was to offer “mentorship and guiding force to the younger generations... To give them a place they can ask questions and learn.

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is today widely seen as a game too frequently prone to the immature, cheaters and abusers.

JTF tries to be a big brother... to some to help them stay away from bad elements and groups."

There is a strong sense in the military gamer communities that they must distinguish themselves as above the general atmosphere of the irreverent, the carnivalesque, and the corrupt that characterizes the virtual gamespace as this is unsettling for the serious nature of their real-life military identity. A special source of upset are those civilian players who pose as real life military in the *America's Army* gamespace. As (1VB) B. explains:

"There are a number of people that play that claim to be in the military, they portray themselves as full of military knowledge and skills. They really do generally put the military in a bad light as they are generally jerks and cause problems. I take great pleasure in identifying then sending a cruise missile in their general direction... They are often pretty good, the internet provides lots of info to this guys, it generally is going to take someone who has been in the military to identify them."<sup>49</sup>

The special political identity and agenda of the military groups is especially strongly asserted during wartime – when the need to distinguish themselves from civilian gamers, and also to be involved in real world soldiers' affairs is particularly felt as urgent. For 1VB, during Gulf War 2, the group organized itself as a virtual Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) post<sup>50</sup> which lent moral and practical support to deployed troops overseas. (1VB) P. explained:

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<sup>49</sup> Both military gamer groups described here have procedures in place for checking the military record claimed by potential new members. As one 1VB member noted, this process is easy when you have group members who actually work in military intelligence.

<sup>50</sup> (1VB) S, a Gulf War veteran himself, suggested that many of the Gulf War and Vietnam veterans in 1VB felt much more comfortable using the gamer community as a source of support than visiting their actual local VFW post: "Well, there's a certain amount of Awe we have for those [World War 2] guys... and it's like we don't want to disturb that club... the old breed fought

"We have a community of Veterans/Active Duty who have a lot of Pride. Well, the game has brought us together, but we are also talking and doing some things regarding RL [real life] issues... like our care packages, we have quite a few guys deployed to Iraq.... We are donating and sending out care packages to them... that's a man's best friend in the field!"

Beyond its function as a virtual VFW post, the *America's Army* gamespace also offered an immersive experience of nostalgia through its 3D modeling of actual Army training locations. All the military players remarked on the fidelity of the representation of these locations and related the memories it brought back with some amusement. (1VB) P, who was invalided out of the Army after a paratroop training accident which damaged his knee, related to me how the Airborne training mission in the game, particularly brought vivid, embodied memories back:

"...going up the [paratroop training] tower [in the game] was a flashback so I placed myself back there (in '88)... nervous, yes... then waiting up there viewing the scenery, hehe, what a thrill... then the drop... wow...went just like the training [in real life.] It's different because I wasn't really there but I found myself moving my body... hehe... so again, nervous... sweaty hands... hehe... all the directions by the black hat [instructor] were correct as in real life [...] birds in my stomach when I left the plane [...] I could feel the Euphoria after straightening my 'chute and seemingly floating in the air [...] I did say 'oh sh\*\*' before I hit the ground... I remember saying that in [real life before hitting the ground.]"

In (1VB) P.'s account of his embodied recall of his paratroop accident within the immersive context of the game experience, we can see how the military

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wars without all the technical craziness that we do... there's also that sense you maybe don't want to hear how easy you had it compared to them even though its true."

players have a more rooted relationship between their physical body and the virtual body of their game avatar. The relationship and difference between the virtual representation of bodily injury and the actual possibility of injury in combat was a constant background tension for them in the game. A typical comment on this matter was made by (JTF) C.:

"I would have to say, no 'game' will ever really capture the true essence of life and death. Just because it is a game...when you die in game, you can always reboot. In life... no joy. To be honest, there are some things I would choose to forget [about my military experience], but cannot. If this or any other game was to remind me a lot of those incidents in my life, I would trash the game, I do not care if it is the best game of the decade and everyone in the free world is playing it... [*America's Army* is] a game. War is real. BIG difference."

These tensions were cast into the foreground of the minds of the 1VB and JTF players with the outbreak of Gulf War 2, where the anticipated US casualty level was predicted in the several thousands. It was related to me how the *America's Army* gamespace became a more sullen place for these groups, while also emerging a vital space for support. 1VB and JTF members who were deployed to the Gulf, attempted to keep in regular contact with their gamer groups, even posting stories and photographs from the front. Several of those deployed have been injured in operations (e.g. 1VB's commander – who has since returned from Iraq - was wounded in a RPG attack on his unit's tactical operations center). The second-in-command of JTF posted this forum message from the Gulf whilst major combat operations in Iraq were still underway:

" we was all at the Harbor getting our vehicles and we had already had 12 Scud alarms (which I will remember for the rest of my life) and all of a sudden we hear a Thoompp...Boooooom and a flash and the ground shook and sh\*\*, I

was like WTF. I ran around the humvee and saw a red hue about I would say 1/2 mile off. But then the Scud alarm went off and I was like Slam got my sh\*\* on in under 5 seconds threw my Jlist on (new MOPP gear) and went to the humvee and waited for the alarm to stop. It stops and they call a FORMATION at the front of the column of vehicles! I'm like ok whatever then LT [the lieutenant] was like 'A scud just hit 300m away this is no BS people we roll out at daybreak'. We was supposed to have left 2 hrs before. So I'm like 'Hey LT can we smoke?' The reply was no you cannot smoke and I'm like (along with 40plus other soldiers) was like f\*\*\* that s\*\*\* we all lit on up rite there she was like WTF and we all walked across the street and chilled a bit then another Scud alarm. It was a hell of a night.

To all the new faces and names, you soldiers are in the best America's Army Squad on the net. The JTF will take care of you both on and off the net."

(1VB) S. told me about "the tremendous amounts of guilt that a lot of veterans experienced after the GW II broke out... because that's what we trained for..." and explained how the desert levels of *America's Army* became sites, not for joyful play and leisure, but for veterans and military family members to relate and explore their solemn anxieties about what it would be like in the Gulf. In contrast to the civilian players, (DWG) S. and (DWG) K., (1VB) P. related to me how, whilst he still spent much time with the 1VB online community, it became impossible for him (like other military gamers he knew) to play the game during wartime:

"the war changed everything... the game has taken a back seat... I barely play any more... because the war envelops my time... it's hard to explain if you're not a Veteran... it's something we all share [...] we pray for the fallen and those still there... heck, we even pray for the enemy soldiers, that they may lay down their arms and not lose their life... it is the Sacrifice we all share."



### *Implications for the Militarization Critique*

One of the principal criticisms of cyberspace-based discussion is that the abstraction of the interaction both from physical locales and from a personal sense of embodiment meant that the space was essentially ungrounded. Consequently, this is said to encourage a fluidity and irreverence of identity which potentially undermines the gravity and trustworthiness of any discussion. From the perspective of the media militarization critiques, the advance of ever more sophisticated media technologies allow a displacement or obfuscation of the reality of suffering bodies from the public communication of war: "In postmodern war, the central role of human bodies in war is being eclipsed rhetorically by the growing importance of machines in general" (Gray, 1997:46). This then, is an extreme form of the dangerous groundlessness of information age debate and its potential undermining of core lifeworld values by instrumentality: "[during Gulf War 1, US General] Schwarzkopf was able to make the extraordinary and, on the face of it, absurd contention that he was fighting a war without being in the business of killing largely because of the power of a system of [media] representations which marginalizes the presence of the body in war, fetishizes machines, and personalizes international conflicts while depersonalizing the people who die in them" (Gusterton, 1991:51).

The political identity and agenda of the military gamer groups, however, challenges the notion that the ergodic nature of the video game medium is a particularly seductive, immersive form of the trivialization of real war through the distancing from real bodies. The political exceptionalism of this arises from the premium the military gamers place upon asserting and securing their lifeworld status as differentiated from the mainstream civilian population of the America's Army gamespace.

Not only do the military gamer groups take special precautions in ensuring the veracity of their members' claimed real world identities, but their shared experience of the US military lifeworld encourages them to develop off-line, face to face social relations in the context of the gamer group beyond the usual expectations of civilian gamer clans. Their discursive identity within the CMC context of the broader America's Army community is consequently significantly more stabilized and rooted in their physical real life than the anonymous, multiple identities that civilian players can maintain. Interestingly, a couple of military gamers suggested to me that there were many more military America's Army players than the small number represented with the Army Star designation – the explanation was that many military gamers preferred not to take on the official trappings so they could act more freely (swearing, horseplay etc.) within the gamespace without having to worry about protecting their professional image. This suggests those military players who choose to take on Army Stars and join the military gamer groups are committing themselves to the idea of using the America's Army gamespace for purposes beyond that as mere escapist leisure.

These purposes are heightened during wartime, when the military gamers demonstrate a far more elaborate, conflicted, and empathic (even for those who have never seen actual combat) understanding of the uncanniness of playing the game than the civilian players, to the point where the gamespace's basic function of providing gameplay becomes more than irrelevant, but taboo for the veterans. Instead, the seductive blurring of virtuality and reality, of entertainment and war suggested by the game provokes an anxiety that makes the gamespace as a site for asserting the embodied reality of war. These assertions are motivated by the fact that the majority of the members of these military groups have either been, or will be, deployed in combat themselves or personally know people who are actively deployed in the current war situation. These politically significant activities include the memorialization of dead soldiers,

the community meditation upon the emotional upheaval of the war and the online communication and support network for deployed soldiers. And there is especially the concerns presented within the groups, and in the military gamers' interactions with civilian players, that the game was nothing like the seriousness of real war<sup>51</sup> - an affirmation of military lifeworld values that goes beyond the official institutional rationale for legitimation.

As the gamer generation expands and grows older, the likely effect of such recruiting and strategic communication projects as America's Army is that the military gamer groups will rapidly grow in size, and their particular political positioning will be increasingly influential in shaping the civilian-military public interest discourse potential in the gamespace.

## **Chapter 4: Repurposing *America's Army*.**

### **The Christian Evangelists and the Discourse Critique**

#### *The Discourse Critique*

There have been numerous criticisms of what many see as the overly facile portrayal of internet discourse spaces as the new infrastructure for public spheres. These are relevant to the critique of the *America's Army* gamespace here along several key lines. Firstly, the underlying technology required to support the new flows of communication represent a further dimension for the

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<sup>51</sup> Several military gamer interviewees stressed, for instance, from their own experience or those of others, that those who encouraged their children or young relatives to play the game would make a point of establishing the difference between the game and the violence of real combat. (JTF) W. related to me, for instance, how he used the internet to show his America's

exercise of hegemonic power relations. There is the potential for not only the consolidation of the existing advantages of privileged classes (those who can afford the technology and education needed) but also new forms of control over the distribution of information, skills, and responsibility - and consequently new formations of institutional authority (Winner, 1980). In the case of the *America's Army* project, there is a clear institutional intent for the reproduction of what can be understood as the hegemonic idea of the US Army as a key morally legitimate authority within American democracy. The incursion of the Army into video game popular culture here can be regarded as the colonization of new technologies for the purposes of consolidating and expanding the institution's dimensions of power within society.

But the internet as a key contemporary site for the extension of dominant ideologies also has the quality of a space where, as Mark Poster (1995) has noted, the authority, rationality and stability of discourse and subject identity in cyberspace is constantly undermined by the fluidity, unaccountability and spatial-temporal distortions of its own digital forms. This fluidity is positively seen as a guarantee of the multiplicity, anonymity, alterity and freedom of self-expression in cyberspace. The playfulness of the video game culture represents an especially strong manifestation of these qualities, even in the official gamespace of *America's Army*. But as Poster has pointed out, these new postmodern conditions for identity and social engagement in the cyberspace are so different from those presumed by the Habermasian model that entirely new conceptions of technopolitical discourse need to be composed. The notion that the postmodern fluidity of subjectivity of cyberspace is constitutive of a utopian state of playful freedom leaves out the problems which arise from the dissolution of grounded subjectivity, and the promotion of an instantaneous and ephemeral character of communication. The trustworthiness of discourse becomes unrooted, and individuals are ontologically distanced from physical social reality

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Army-playing godson the Vietnam War Memorial website, as well as photos depicting real combat casualties.

and its material sense of responsibility. Whilst serious social relations and discourse ethics are possible in CMC spaces, this potential is seen as always under threat or in a state of flux in the public domains of cyberspace (Reid, 2001).

These internet public debate spaces such as newsgroups are typically seen as wholly skewed in the composition of their population; prone to attract extremist opinions and those who deliberately resist rational debate; supportive of a quality of debate which is overwhelmed by opinion and emotion rather than fact and reason; and finally that most internet debate has little or no influence on political reality, and is plagued by triviality (Elvin, 2002). The very freedom of identity and expression associated with cyberspace anonymity is also suggested to lead to "the loss of identity and weakening of social norms and constraints associated with submergence in a group or a crowd", and consequently the promotion of irrational communication (Spears & Lea, 1992:38). These criticisms are applicable to describing how much of the *America's Army* forum discourse falls short of significant public sphere potential.

The military gamer groups, with their emphasis on stabilizing and securing their identity, status, and world-view, and their pronounced unease with the potential rootlessness of virtual community, would appear to challenge these discourse criticisms. However, they are vulnerable to another set of criticisms related to the positioning and effectiveness of politically significant discourse on the Internet.

Cass Sunstein has argued that even if the basic standards for grounded, reasonable and non-trivial discussion between internet forum participants are satisfied, the technical rationality of the internet infrastructure nevertheless encourages the "natural human tendency to make choices, with respect to entertainment and news, that do not disturb our preexisting view of the world" (2001:57). The social consequences of this is that as the internet becomes increasingly an integral part of people's lives, the citizenry become engaged in

online communities which fragment the experience of the public into what are effectively “enclaves” of like-minded people with similar interests. A healthy democracy requires not only the support of public deliberation, but also the exposure of the public to a diverse and unpredictable range of perspectives and experiences. Sunstein (2001a) suggests that in contrast with personal experiences of community in traditional offline public spaces (such as the pavement, the park, and the town square) people who largely relate to others through online enclaves are far less likely to come across opposite opinions, unanticipated encounters, and issues outside their own sphere of interest. In Habermasian terms, there is a loss of a universally shared lifeworld of heterogeneous public experience as a frame of reference for discursive interaction. And whilst the enclaves act effectively in themselves as spaces for community deliberation, their seclusion from the broad diversity of the public makes them, Sunstein argues, particularly vulnerable to groupthink and a drift to extremist and entrenched positions.

Sunstein concedes that the majority of internet community users will be exposed, voluntarily and not, to both online and offline diversity and unexpected information. However, he argues that if only a small percentage of internet users isolate themselves in internet-based enclaves, then this may represent a significant extremist minority of several millions, and so a broader potential problem for democracy. In the case of the military groups, the importance of differentiating their community and lifeworld identity from the civilian mainstream suggests that the enclave critique may be applicable to them, particularly given their status as a significant minority. For instance, in a comment that recalls the disconnection between the orderly life inside a military compound to the more chaotic civilian world outside, (JTF) C. complains that he prefers to play on the JTF servers since:

“[out on the public servers, there are] groups of [people] of a lot of different ages that try to influence our youth to do things they shouldn’t do.

Hack, steal, lie, cheat, give out info they shouldn't or maybe meet [people] they shouldn't... Bunch of weirdos... That is one major problem with the gaming community, and the internet community at large...."

Whilst this kind of attitude, in various degrees, is common amongst the military gamers, this does not mean that they have only limited contact with the broader community of civilian America's Army. JTF, on the contrary, makes a policy of reaching out to civilians through acting in an unofficial ambassadorial role on behalf of the military and as a moral guardian and role model in the gamespace. The JTF group leader, (JTF) W., has a particularly strong view of the need for military gamers to reach out to the civilian gamer culture<sup>52</sup>. (JTF) W. explained how important to JTF's identity to act in an unofficial ambassadorial role to the civilian public:

"Yes, JTF does take a role in the community, most of us are military or related and also help in our communities and each other. We want to be role models to our youth...[and offer] a helpful ear and communication that is missing in a lot of these youths' present lives."

(JTF) W. also emphasized that JTF was taking a number of real-world community projects upon itself – charity fundraising, and an adopt-a-highway scheme, and a special outreach to Junior ROTC programs – and that this community spirit was a fundamental part of the "good old US of A".

However, this spirit of outreach and engagement (along with the diversity of political opinion seen, for instance, in the discussion of serious topics on the 1VB forum) suggests only that the enclave critique should be qualified in this

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<sup>52</sup> After our interview, (JTF) W. made a point of sending me an article he had written for a local newspaper which called for readers to help post-9/11 America by doing more voluntary work and taking more civic responsibility in their local community.

case. The outreach and diversity of opinion does not deal effectively with the criticism that majority of the discourse takes place between military gamers in private forums which are not accessible to the general public in the way a clan community forum usually is. And the presence and outreach of military gamers in the public areas of the broader *America's Army* gamespace, whilst their worldview and political position must be differentiated from that of the Army's, recalls Michel Foucault's image of soldiers marching in the town square, who remind the public of the proximity of disciplinary state power (1979). Even if their private opinions are diverse within the military group, the need to assert the exclusiveness and special identity of the military gamers encourages a tendency towards discursive enclaveness. This itself reinforces how their public but exclusionary presence can be seen as reproducing the hegemonic milieu of the gamespace.

#### *Alternative Fan Media and Christian Evangelists*

Sunstein's enclave argument has been criticized for its underestimation of the diversity of digital communication culture. As Henry Jenkins (2001) argues: "Sunstein assumes that we join virtual communities primarily on the basis of ideological identifications. Yet, many, if not most, Net discussion groups are not defined along party affiliations but rather around other kinds of shared interests... which frequently cut across political lines." Jenkins, a scholar of video games, and of popular media fan cultures in general, suggests that the building of communities around popular entertainment experiences not only helps bring people with diverse opinions together, but the entertainment experiences also provide a consensual shared analogical frame of reference for discussing serious topics. He argues that "We should not underestimate such exchanges [within fan cultures] by maintaining a crisp separation of political dialogue from other kinds of social interaction."

Whilst the military gaming groups represent a fan community which is composed to a significant degree along ideological lines (at least in the sense of



the formal indoctrination of the military), the *America's Army* fan community as a whole (and the broader gaming culture in general) functions less as an enclave and more like the kind of consensual frame of reference which Jenkins suggests.

One objection to this is that video games are still a marginalized media culture relative to established mainstream media, and so do not represent a sufficiently broad cross-section of the general public. However, as the OEMA rationale for the project recognizes, interactive entertainment media is steadily displacing traditional use and is likely to continue to do so into the future. And the reach of fan cultures, can extend well beyond the specialized local limits of fandom. As Jenkins notes, media-based fan cultures have always been active in appropriating, cross-fertilizing, and reassembling various elements of official and canonical popular culture works to create fan media artifacts (Jenkins 1992, 2000). This kind of fan activity has grown exponentially, becoming a mainstream practice with the popularization of the Internet and digital media manipulation technologies. Humorous, bizarre, scandalous or otherwise remarkable fan-made artifacts – pictures, movies, music etc. – are now much more easily and habitually distributed via the internet to people who would do not necessarily have a particular interest in the specific fan culture or even the specific media technology in question.

These fan media artifacts also represent the ease of which significant ideas, narratives, opinions, and identities can be communicated digitally across cultural lines in ways which are non-discursive and not necessarily according to a serious aesthetic. These kinds of public expression lie outside the traditional, rational, conversational norms of communication which Habermas confines his ideal type model to.

For instance, one visually powerful expression of the military gamers' desire for differentiation from the civilian gamer lifeworld in these forums are the graphics styles seen in player's "sigs" (large decorative graphic signature banners that mark a player's post to any forum). Sigs in the military communities almost

invariably follow military themes – photographs of soldiers, military heraldry, service insignia etc. In comparison, sigs in civilian clans can be typically characterized as bizarre, wacky, and irreverent, often drawing on the idiosyncracies of obscure internet humor. In public spaces, such as the official America's Army forums or other general access forums, military and civilian sigs are juxtaposed incongruously against each other. More ambitious and sophisticated uses of consumer media software and technology repurpose symbolic elements of the America's Army video game itself. One major instance of this is the appropriation and re-articulation of in-game graphics for fan-created movies and cartoon strips.

Given the multiplayer character of America's Army (and the impossibility to date of modifying the game engine substantially), the creation of a fan movie using more than a few avatars and filmed directly from the on-screen representation of live avatar action, requires the substantial co-ordination and even choreography of multiple players geographically dispersed in physical space whilst acting in carefully planned concert in the virtual space. For instance, these fan movies are most often done to re-enact clan victories and tactics, or to humorously use the avatars and environments of America's Army for other kinds of performance-based communicative actions. One of the most popular humorous fan-made videos is of players controlling game avatars in co-ordination to make up a kind of hip-hop chorus line. The bodies of the avatars are lined up in formation and moved carefully in pattern, executing such maneuvers as spinning around on one spot, with a repetitive arm movements – and all this done in time to the music and to the other players virtually present. Another popular example of fan movie humor include coordinated collective "suicides" of avatars in unlikely and unseemly ways – leaping off bridges etc. These examples of synchronous and skillful co-operation within cyberspace show how sophisticated, creative, and social the enactment of non-discursive communicative actions can be.

In a Gulf War 2 movie made through the cooperation of some twenty members of the 1VB “acting” in virtual gamespace as both virtual US soldiers and enemy “Iraqis”, a more serious real-life public interest issue is addressed. The movie is entitled “Hostage Rescue”<sup>53</sup>, staged on the Radio Tower desert level, and set to dramatic battle music from the Hollywood movie *Gladiator* (2000). The movie was directed and produced by a Gulf War 1 veteran who told me that he had the original idea for the project from reviewing camcorder tapes he had made of his real-life GW1 experiences for his family back home. The subject of “Hostage Rescue” was set in direct response to 1VB’s anxiety for US POWs during Gulf War 2. A key scene in the first part of the movie is an eerie re-staging (using game avatars and graphics and complete with authentic Al-Jazeera graphics appropriated from the internet) of the infamous footage of dead US soldiers captured by Iraqis as broadcast by the Arab news network Al-Jazeera during the conflict. The rest of the movie is a carefully choreographed and precise staging of the exact military squad formations and tactics that 1VB members believed would ideally be used in a hostage/POW rescue situation. The production and distribution of the movie is regarded, along with the aid package effort, within 1VB as the most significant collective creative effort to demonstrate community unity and pride in the face of wartime concerns.

Real-world concerns and issues of war leak into the composition of the fan-made *America’s Army* cartoon strips as well, even though this repurposed use of game graphics for fan narrative tends to be considerably more bizarre, irreverent, and carnivalesque than the uses seen in fan movies (which, after all, requires a significant degree of consensus between players to produce – a cartoon strip can simply be made by one player and a photo manipulation software package).

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<sup>53</sup> <http://www.devil-dogsdomain.com/batmovie.htm>

The most widely read examples of these fan cartoon *America's Army* narratives can be found on the popular *America's Army* dedicated website, [www.militarysim.com](http://www.militarysim.com)<sup>54</sup>. Authored by someone under the outlandish pseudonym of "VANSHNOOKENRAGGEN", these comics mix *America's Army* settings and characters with graphics from elsewhere to create surreal, jokey, and wacky stories about elements of *America's Army* player culture. Topics covered include the ridiculous attitude and behavior of cheaters, newbies (that is, novice players, or "n00bs"), slackers (or "stoners"/"hippies"), and developers; the questionable suitability of immature gamers for military recruitment, and the impatience of players for new level releases and bug corrections.

One of the most interesting [militarysim.com](http://www.militarysim.com) cartoon strips is one entitled "Patchtastic!"<sup>55</sup> which simultaneously records – in an ironic intertwining - a key event in the *America's Army* fan community history *and* the real-life historical event of the outbreak of Gulf War 2. The narrative begins with a depiction of a experienced *America's Army* player in avatar form recounting important stories from *America's Army* history to newbie avatars – and specifically, "the tale of the great patch disaster of 1.6". At around the time of the final stages of the US military buildup in the Gulf, an incomplete version of the 1.6 *America's Army* software update (containing some mission and code data that was not supposed to be part of the official release) was leaked to the player community, and widely distributed against the official wishes of the project. This version also caused technical problems on numerous player computers and servers, and there was general consternation about this in the player community. As the cartoon strip has it:

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<sup>54</sup> this website is run by a former member of the *America's Army* developer team - the only one who had significant experience both in games development and in the Army.

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.militarysim.com/modules.php?name=Content&pa-showpage&pid=253>

"The [developers] tried to catch the patch before it got out but it was too late. The flood gates had opened and thousands of people got the wrong patch... The patch was a corrupt file! It was a virus that overpowered the users computers! Something had to be done before this Virus of Mass Destruction could be spread world wide by cyber terrorists."

And then in a leap of twisted logic into the events unfolding at the same time in the real world, the narrative cuts to a picture of President George W. Bush giving a speech about the coming war with Iraq at the United Nations. The text reads: "That night the president went on national TV to speak to America about the new threat..." and Bush is depicted as saying that the patch virus must be stopped by "getting rid of Saddam Hussein". The narrative of the imaginary threat of the computer virus unleashed by the leaked 1.6 patch fiasco merges into Bush's narrative about the need for military action in Iraq.

By the end of the strip, the correct patch was released by the developers, and "all was well". The narrator finally tells the newbies:

"Let this be a lesson to you. This only happened because of some selfish nOObs who wanted everything. They put pressure on the situation and they only made things worse."

The newbies then ask "But why did they release the wrong patch??", and the final picture is a photograph of US tanks in the Gulf with a cartoon sign saying "100km to Baghdad" with the experienced player responding: "I suspect that the Army had other things on their minds when they sent out the wrong patch. Anyway it doesn't really matter, it is only a game."

This surreal combination of fan culture narrative and real history narrative exhibits a self-critical, self-aware irony about the triviality of video gaming, and

the complaints of players, in comparison to real world political events, whilst at the same time showing respect for the Army, and reminding readers what the military's real mission is. There is further, subtler suggestion of an ironic subversion of the Bush administration's rhetoric about Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction - the portrayal of Bush making war claims based on the ludicrous idea of a patch 1.6 virus being a threat to national security suggests that there is room for being wary of his claims whilst at the same time as preserving admiration for the US armed forces.

A serious social meaning and communication can underlie even the most bizarre and outlandish fan culture narratives. The comic strip "As the Bullets Fly"<sup>56</sup> is particularly carnivalesque and surreal. Its plot is a disconcerting rendition of campy daytime soap opera dialogue between five weird characters sitting in a recreation room that forms part of *America's Army's* Alaskan pipeline station mission. The main characters are represented by photo images of a purple flame, a nerdy comedy character from the TV show *Saturday Night Live*, a captured Al-Qaeda terrorist whose image was widely circulated in the news media, a grotesque-looking elderly Asian man, and Joe Madden, the American football commentator. The humor of the narrative is obscure, but the ultimate purpose of the strip is its tribute and show of support to a member of the *America's Army* development team who has been deployed to the Gulf.

These movie and cartoon examples demonstrate how non-discursive communications and alternative narratives can mix the symbolic elements of *America's Army* with others drawn from other domains of popular culture and general public consciousness. This facilitates the communication of serious topics to a broader audience who may not have an interest in the game culture, but may still be able to watch a movie, or to read a website comic.

However, the examples cited above are limited by their production primarily for the consumption within the local video game culture. Whilst these artifacts

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<sup>56</sup> [www.militarysim.com/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=259](http://www.militarysim.com/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=259)

could cross community and cultural lines and be re-read with various degrees of effectiveness outside the domain of the *America's Army* community, these artifacts are produced without any sense of a specific political agenda that seeks to disseminate ideas to a broader community. Whilst the military gamer groups are making efforts to reach out to the civilian players, this is done in the context of the gamespace, which is already dominated and shaped by the real-life military theme. One gamer community that does have a specific, proactive political and public interest agenda that seeks to circulate non-trivial ideologies through fan culture in ways which have a significance beyond the gamespace are the Christian Evangelicals who make up the clan "Men of God".

### *Christian Evangelicals*

One of the most interesting and successful repurposing of the AA gamespace for alternative socio-political uses by civil society is actually a recruiting effort of a nature quite different from the US Army's strategic communication rationale. The Men of God International clan (MoG), founded by the actual pastor of a US church community, is a Christian Evangelical gamer group that seeks to reach out to and convert online gameplayers. At the moment, their activities are concentrated on five of the most popular online FPSs, including *America's Army*. Members of MoG are easily recognizable (even if they were not to have their clan indicator in their name) from the religious character of their game names (e.g. "Proverbs226", "GraceofGod", "Saved One") and the pronounced meekness of their behavior in-game<sup>57</sup>. Their website (menofgod.us) is a unique blend of gamer clan, Christian web portal, and an organized media operation of the religious right. For instance, they have all the usual features of a gamer clan site, but with the addition of prayer sections in the fan forums with the discussion of proper Christian morality, Bible study sessions and sermons using FPS voice comms, a dedicated ministry team, and

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57 even in the face of sustained game chat abuse from other players.

links to Christian Evangelical news, music, television, and online film sites on the front page. There are even attempts at Christian music produced specifically for the MoG clan. The level of organization and practical commitment to the task of converting non-Christians has reached the point where MoG has a complex bureaucratic structure, with the creation of special “Youth Divisions” for each game, and the creation of an “Office of Central Communications” to ensure efficient centralization of information and facilitation of communication between the multiple levels of responsibility.

The appropriation and repurposing of the *America's Army* gamespace is taken to the point that the main image on the page of the MoG *America's Army* division<sup>58</sup> is one of Jesus Christ overlooking the famous “crucifix” of steel supports found standing in the 9/11 Twin Towers wrecking, upon which the *America's Army* logo has been emblazoned. Standing in front of the crucifix are three *America's Army* avatars – the middle one, a Kalashnikov-toting, bearded OPFOR figure with a resemblance to Jesus.

The member's pledge for MoG mixes military terminology with the Biblical:

#### “OFFICER'S PLEDGE

I hereby accept this commission as an officer in the Men of God Squad, on behalf of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I fully understand my duties and responsibilities and undertake to perform the same to the best of my abilities by the grace of Almighty God. (Col 3:23,24). I shall endeavor to consistently improve upon the existing structure while seeking and implementing new ideas for the good of the cause, which shall provide for a more efficient and seamless Squad pursuant to Kingdom authority found in Holy Scripture (Eph. 4:11-13). I shall not place the Men of God Squad ahead or before the divine order of God, Family and Career, albeit I recognize the importance of the Squad to bring

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<sup>58</sup> see <http://menofgod.us/aa/>



unsaved souls to eternal salvation by the saving blood of Jesus Christ, to which I am thus dedicated. (Mark 16:15)."

The MoG's FAQ further explains the purpose and rationale of the group:

"Men of God International is an online community of men, women and children with one purpose and that is to win souls for Jesus through a unique and growing population of online gaming. Online gaming is the largest and fastest growing community in the world today. [...] In one game alone there are over four hundred thousand players at any one given time, day or night. At present Men of God is occupying five such games and is finding great success in sharing the Love of Jesus Christ to people all over the world. Some of the games we play are typically something that you would not think of, yet the population in these games are staggering and the fields of lost souls are ready for harvest.

*You are Christians and you play War Games? Why?* To us it's just a pc game and nothing more than that. There are some that would like to make more of it but to us it's just a game. No more no less. We have fun playing but most of all we love the fellowship we have with each other and sharing our FAITH and LOVE of JESUS CHRIST... May God Bless you Richly, General LORD's Soldier."

MoG's repurposing of FPS gamespaces such as *America's Army* into religious communities of prayer fellowship demonstrate the growth of a combination of system rationality (bureaucratic organization and professional communications management) and lifeworld communication. The assertive moral agenda seen here aimed at personally convincing the unconverted through the virtual gamespace is potentially as powerful as the official US Army communications rationale for the game project.

The MoG clan, whilst appearing to be a disconcerting, incongruous or even scandalous mixture of Christianity and video war gameplaying, is actually

adapting a media strategy quite typical of American Evangelicism's efforts to expand its influence in popular culture. Like the Army, Evangelicals in America today are increasingly committed to the notion that cyberspace outreach is vital for appealing to the young. Research by Christian pollsters have indicated that the overwhelming majority of young American Christians expect a "cyberchurch" to replace the traditional physical church (Barnard, 1998). Others have argued that the potential loss of the benefits of face-to-face congregation must be balanced against the benefits of CMC for expanding the Evangelical public. It is suggested that CMC spaces have "the twinned effect of making religious expression easier but more individualistic" through "lower[ing] barriers to participation and expression and weak[ening] the traditional hold that centralized authorities [...] have over the production of social and intellectual capital" (Katz & Rice 2002: 296).

Andrew Careaga (1999, 2001), a leading proponent of online evangelism for the digital generation has characterized the history of the expansion of evangelism in the United States as being shaped by several communications revolutions, each requiring innovative Evangelical Christians to pioneer missionary efforts in new mass entertainment and information spaces. This expansion into new media social formations generated a pragmatic dialectic between secular popular entertainment culture and Evangelical Christianity. The typical result was a carefully managed "fusion of dissonant cultural practices" (Harding 2000:4).

Campbell (1998) notes that whilst conservative Evangelical Christianity is still a dominant lifeworld in many parts of the United States, its decline since the 1980s Moral Majority phenomenon has seen a shift in Evangelical identity to one which asserts its legitimacy and expansion through claims of marginalization. In the online world, and particularly the more controversial or supposedly trivial spheres such as gamer culture, this marginalization is genuine. Campbell argues that this marginal positioning "provides the impetus for evangelical revival, and a resurgent interest in innovative evangelical techniques such as adaptive

strategies." Moreover, these strategies for revival are articulated primary through a "spiritual networking narrative" that:

"is supported by two metaphors coming out of the community's dialogue. They can be referred to as the Pioneer/Manifest Destiny metaphor and the Warfare/Battle Plan metaphor. The Pioneer metaphor comes from [the] settlers who came to America to colonise the "new" land [which is seen] as a positive venture, involving a "manifest destiny" [...] The Warfare metaphor... establishes the fact the group is being faced with an enemy, seeking to prevent their exploration and expansion."

These metaphors can be seen to be articulated in the inspirational language of the MoG community – new ventures into the mainstream gaming culture are discussed as operations against "the enemy", and the task of "harvesting" souls suggests the colonization and seeding of new territories.

The key goals of the strategies of adaptation and fusion in the modern Evangelical tradition have been the development of spaces where not only could the unconverted willingly accept personal and intimate messages from the evangelical ministry, but through which the lifeworlds of popular culture and organized religion could be joined through the active integration and repurposing of popular culture symbols and practices. This can be seen in the adaptation of typical gamer community structures by the MoG clan; the manipulation of appropriated imagery such as the *America's Army* Jesus picture; their participation on the public game servers; and the technical networking with other Christian media outlets. The ultimate purpose of this fusion, however is not to be satisfied with potential converts inhabiting an overlapping hybrid space between the hegemonic secular lifeworld and the religious alternative. It is rather, to direct the potential converts to exposure to the crucial, central form of

communicative reason in the Evangelical lifeworld – that is, the linguistic power of Evangelicals.

McCarthy (2000) notes that “Language is the power base of evangelicals, their linguistic strategies are deeply held and often the subject of discussion.” These strategies include adaptation and hybridization but ultimately the goal is ease the potential convert into a religious lifeworld where communication primarily takes place in terms of the traditional linguistic and communal practices of the Church. So, for instance, the way in which voice communications technology is transformed from a site for discussing game tactics and expressing enjoyment of playing *America's Army* into a networked space for oral ministry and spiritual testimony. By establishing an online presence in a position of duality and transition between the escapist virtual game world and the grounded reality of religious ministry, a “transformational gateway” is established and legitimated for the purpose of attracting converts, and directing them into another discursive domain or specific public.

### *Implications for the Discourse Critique*

The two key parts of the discourse critique considered here as most relevant to the *America's Army* gamespace are firstly the notion that politically significant, reasonable interactions are impossible in the public sphere without discourse in the normative Habermasian sense (and that cyberspace is particularly impoverished in this regard); and secondly, the suggestion that even in the case of ideal rational discourse within a community, the technical structuring logic of the internet means that such communities have enclave tendencies, and any cyberspace public will be fraught with fragmentation.

The FPS gamer culture can be considered as both highly non-normative or non-discursive in communication content as well as being marginalized and isolated from the mainstream public. But the example of the Christian Evangelist activities in the *America's Army* gamespace demonstrates how non-normative, non-discursive activities not only can be put to significant and rational political

purposes, but also work to introduce and embed new public sphere domains and discursive forms in ways which actively undermine any enclave tendencies inherent in the gamespace.

The primacy placed on missionary outreach and conversion means that the discourse within the Evangelical sphere never becomes enclave-like. Unlike the military gamer groups who are invested in maintaining a fixed ideal public image however diverse their worldviews may be privately, the essential dynamic of Evangelical communities such as MoG is characterized by the constant re-adaptation and re-framing of their public styles of communicative action, symbolic rhetoric, and cultural practice in accordance with the flux of mainstream popular culture. This dynamic is driven by the desire to nurture familiarity and intimacy with the private conscience of individuals.

The MoG clan represents a continuation of the Evangelical tradition of public discursive engagement with new media forms into the gamer culture. Their activities demonstrate the extent to the technical and symbolic repurposing of the *America's Army* gamespace can generate an alternative public space with a strong sense of political mission outside the official rationale, and distinct from its cultural logic. Moreover, the creation of an integrative, transformational, or dualistic space through the MoG community as a means of recontextualizing the symbolic experience of FPS gamers also indicates the limitations of the normative Habermasian framework in understanding how different forms of publics can be appropriated, re-interpreted, and linked or even fused with one another, particularly through the translation, reconfiguration and repurposing of artifacts and significations across cultural lines. In preparing them for the linguistic strategies of the Evangelicals, this also demonstrates how the non-discursive communicative actions (gameplaying, fan artifact creation) can be deployed to draw individuals into new forms of non-trivial, rational discursive communication in a new public (in this case, in the form of Evangelical ministry). This potential of reconfiguring the experience of publics also encompasses the

possibilities of new orderings, uses, and combinations of lifeworlds and systems within the structuring of the public – for instance, the bureaucratization of the MoG communications management.

Finally, the case of the Christian Evangelist FPS clan here shows how these non-official politically significant activities can take place with an expansive logic and to a widespread degree without necessarily being seen as disruptive or contrary to the overarching official and hegemonic logics of the gamespace. Consequently, the public sphere potential of such activities can be understood as evidence of the capacity of the *America's Army* gamespace for supporting non-official, non-trivial political activities and agendas which enrich the range of social practice and significance in the community without undermining the gamespace itself.

## **Chapter 5:           Hacking *America's Army*:                           Cheats, Hackers, and the Commodification                           Critique**

### *The Commodification Critique*

The exceptional community of the MoG comprehensively repurposes the *America's Army* gamespace for an expansionary political agenda quite alien to the official rationale and its normative expectations of the gamespace.

The MoG Evangelical agenda goes far beyond the limits of simple freedom of expression since it is actively aimed at reconfiguring the lifeworld context of the gamespace. Moreover, it does so through exploiting the very Army-owned infrastructure and symbolic capital that underlies the game. What might be said to be furthermore remarkable about this co-option of the state-managed gamespace by a civil society group is that it is tolerated by the *America's Army* authorities. But significantly, the missionary activities of MoG on other commercial multiplayer online gamespaces are also well-known and tolerated – for instance, in several gamespaces owned by the major video games corporation, Electronic Arts<sup>59</sup>. The implication here is that activist groups with alternative logics such as MoG are allowed to thrive so long as they do not disrupt or repurpose the public space in ways which undermine the overarching commercial logic of the gamespace (the monopolization of the gamespace's substantive economic impact by the controlling authority) or the basic normative community expectations of gamer culture (privacy, freedom from harassment, freedom of reasonable speech, and fun).

Jodi Dean (2001, 2002) has argued that the anxieties over the public sphere potential of the internet can be generally characterized by two contradictory perspectives - either that there is a lack of valid discourse capacity on the Internet, or that there is an excess of norms. She argues that these anxieties, which assume that the public sphere is still an ideal to aspire to, masks how the internet debate works as "an ideology of publicity in the service of communicative capitalism" (2001:4). That is, both the anxieties over the lack of key components required for the public sphere, and over the excess of irrational, untrustworthy communication are used as arguments for new regulatory policies and technologies of security, control, censorship, identification etc. The regulation of the internet infrastructure in these ways is

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<sup>59</sup> Related to me in personal conversation with an Electronic Arts game community manager.

generally aimed at ensuring and legitimizing the institutionalization of internet public space primarily as a site for commercial rationale.

In the case of America's Army, whilst the institutionalization of the gamespace is not directly commercial in the sense of a for-profit, transaction-orientated enterprise, it nevertheless depends upon a technical rationale of commercial publicity. The gamespace is ultimately generated and maintained so long as its economic instrumentality is able to excel in terms of quantitative measures such as cost-effectiveness and return on investment.

Dean suggests that the promise of the romantic techno-libertarian ideal of a cyberspace-based public sphere works to obscure the fundamental commercial logic that controls the material existence of the internet infrastructure. For Dean, the fulfillment of public expectations for internet free speech (such on the official America's Army forums) represents an ideology of publicity (pace Habermas) which facilitates "the commodification of communication [through which] more and more domains of life seem to have been reformatted in terms of market and spectacle as if the valuation itself had been rewritten in binary code" (4).

Such a facilitation can operate, as might be seen in the official OEMA economic rationale for America's Army, in terms of the translation or conflation of economic information freedoms with freedom of expression. So long as this translation successfully operates and is not challenged by exceptionally politicized groups within the game community, the lifeworld of the gamespace can continue to legitimate the operation of economic instrumentality in this public space. This legitimation on the ideological level communicates that the game is free and so has the appearance of a non-commodity; the gameplay represents the defense of American cultural freedoms which the national lifeworld is based upon; the players have freedom of expression on the forums and so democracy is seen to be exercised. But this legitimation, by establishing the gamespace as an acceptable public space for the creation of community by the citizenry, also adds two further, and crucial, dimensions to the economic logic of the enterprise.



Firstly, the development of fan community creates a pool of potential grassroots activists with their own dynamic for promoting and defending both the game itself and perhaps also the institutional ideology the game is supposed to communicate. The spontaneous mobilization of America's Army fans against ABC and Jack Thompson for condemning the game is an example of this. The creation of apparently grassroots activist groups in public spaces is a widespread corporate strategy within democratic capitalism, and an important element of current notions of "viral" or consumer-led marketing (Grefe & Linsky 1995).

Secondly, in the digital age, the distribution of technological capacities amongst the public empowers consumers to be prolific producers of consumer culture themselves. This means that fan communities can be encouraged to freely contribute very significant quantities of both their own technological capital and their human capital in the form of leisure time as free labor, in support of the maintenance and expansion of a commercial enterprise (Terranova 2000). For instance, a prominent economic measure of the game project's success as used in the OEMA internal documents, are the cost-savings from fans hiring or even buying their own servers for general public use – these fan servers actually account for the majority of the America's Army public servers. Other instances include the fan production of websites with guides to the game, of artifacts such as the movies and cartoons which enrich and extend the experience and diversity of the gamespace, and of software utility programs which add technical functions to the game program that were previously unsupported by the official development team (there are several entirely fan-produced software programs which facilitate a player's search for team-members and opponents of an appropriate skill level, or for previously encountered players).

From Dean's critical perspective, these economic benefits of successful publicity would signal the positioning of the internet public space as a "zero

institution"<sup>60</sup>. That is, an institution with no positive function or determinate meaning in itself at all other than to signify the presence of a social institution – a presence which masks the material economic exploitation of free labour and civil community. Dean argues that this masking brackets conflict through expressing antagonisms and differences at the same time as obliterating them by negating their material political dynamic, in the similar way that Habermas' fantasy of consensus and norms obscured struggle. In an echo of Habermas' original anxiety about the fate of the bourgeois public sphere, Dean writes "communicative capitalism has turned the utopian ideal of the public sphere into its opposite"(12).

So, given the case of the Evangelical Christians, not only is their political agenda is dependent upon the dominant ideology of publicity and the commercial logic which sustains the gamespace (there would be no gamer community to minister to without freedom of expression and the commercial infrastructure), but their community's expansionary tendencies actually increase the experiential and physical capital of the gamespace (in terms of time and technological infrastructure contributed). From the perspective of public sphere theory, the problem with this is that the democratic exercise of communicative action is put into the service of instrumental and commercial logics. Regardless of the content of the communications or the form of the repurposing, it is the economic contribution which substantively counts, so long as it does not challenge the fundamental premise and legitimacy of the enterprise. And these conditions do not obviously appear as exploitative, given the legitimated translation of economic and political freedoms under the rubric of the information age.

This raises the question of what range of politically significant expressions and activities *would* fundamentally challenge the underlying economic logic of the gamespace and so would be considered unacceptable repurposing of the

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<sup>60</sup> a term she borrows from Slavoj Žižek's reading of Levi-Strauss.

public sphere in the view of the controlling authorities? Or to pose the question critically from Dean's perspective on communicative capitalism, what kinds of political communication and activity can fully escape and undermine the internet ideology of publicity?

Subversion in the spirit of inventive play is a central part of gamer culture and practice. There is a norm in spaces of play of what the anthropologist Victor Turner termed "liminality" (1982). By this, Turner meant the quality of playfulness which operates as a threshold between reality and unreality – this in fact, is an essential attraction of the escapism or the freedom of play and games. This detachment from reality allows a temporary license within these spaces for the "safe" or inconsequential enactments of inversion, tricksterism, the carnivalesque, and other kinds of subversive or taboo activities and representations which would otherwise be unacceptable. Turner argued that it was this quality of play which makes it fundamental to play's "seriousness" as a socio-cultural practice.

In the case of *America's Army*, it is through this key game culture quality of liminality that the limits of officially acceptable public activity are found. There is an ambivalence over the official definition of what is and is not consequential – at what point does trivial playfulness turn into harmful subversiveness? This ambivalence exists because a degree of the subversiveness must be tolerated if the legitimacy of *America's Army* as a bona fide game culture and free arena for play is to be maintained for the players. Subversiveness which takes place merely on the level of alternative but not resistive communicative action within the public sphere (as in the fan artifacts, and the MoG repurposing) is "safe" as it does not escape or expose the underlying economic and technical operations of the enterprise. But there are subversive player interpretations of the official game context which threaten the project's formal economic logic and ideological communication function of the project and so cannot be easily suppressed by

enforcement nor effectively subsumed into the “free labor” economic dimension of the gamespace freedom.

A major example of this kind of problematic player subversiveness is the widespread understanding amongst the fan community that the Honor score system does not quite work as officially intended. This threatens the fundamental rationale of the game project as the Honor score system is the lynchpin of the game’s communication of Army moral values. Serious violations which lower a player’s Honor score dramatically such as the killing of teammates not only lead to the immediate expulsion of the player from the game in progress, but sends his avatar to a virtual representation of a real military prison. But the association of the Honor score with these kinds of structural and symbolic sanctions as well as the prestige of becoming expert at the game (better performances increase one’s Honor score) do not guarantee player adherence to the formal meaning of the Honor score system.

For instance, one topic of conversation and humor which arose in several game sessions I observed was the disregard with which many players view very high Honor scores. This was seen as evidence that the high Honor player possibly spends too much time playing the game, and consequently “has no life”. Interviewees also suggested that once a player gets over the Honor score levels required to play on advanced servers, and train for special units, higher scores lack practical and even symbolic significance. Furthermore, sanctions such as being thrown out of a game into virtual prison temporarily, and even the ultimate sanction provoked by the Honor score system – deletion of a player’s account if his score falls to zero – were often dismissed as trivial. One can always rejoin the game or move to another server, or create a new account. (1VB) B. expressed the frustration of military gamers with the poor attitudes of the majority of civilian players towards the values represented by the Honor score system and its promotion of teamwork:

"[the developers] tried to use the Honor system as a way to entice people to play as teams and lead... but I think that has not really worked... and if people do not really care to do it then it is not going to happen. It really is a player issue. In the general game world, everyone just kind of does their own thing, there is not really any consistent teamwork or leadership being displayed."

Implementing more serious sanctions – such as the complete and permanent banning or punishment of players who persistently subvert the Honor system – would also be seen as insisting upon and enforcing the official meaning of the game which would undermine the legitimacy of the gamespace as a freely liminal experience.

Another consequence of the attractiveness of subverting the game rules, and the lack of strong adherence or even respect for the formal ethics of gameplay is the widespread incidence of cheating. Cheating – seeking unfair advantages which either break or are not covered by the formal game rules is considered by many players to be something of an unofficial norm. Whilst it is also generally held that the institutional context and the attempt at embedding moral values into the game mechanics have had some success in that cheating appears to be less common than in other equivalent online FPS games (*Counterstrike* was frequently cited in interviews), there is also a conventional wisdom which puts the proportion of players who repeatedly cheat in some way at over 50%.

The most common way of cheating in *America's Army* is one which is actually tacitly facilitated by the official authorities. There are cheat codes built into the software by the developers who recognize the desire of gamers to use cheats, not primarily to gain advantage over others, but to experiment with overcoming various limits imposed by the game mechanics. These cheats are easily typed in, and can be readily found on many unofficial fan websites. They enable features which allow players to experience extreme

performances in the game such as cheating the laws of physics, becoming invulnerable, having access to weapons of your choice with infinite ammunition etc. New game experiences can be created from deliberate manipulation of these codes – for instance, a mission where all players are armed with sniper rifles, instead of the realistic distribution of weapons. These semi-official cheats are only operable though on unofficial servers (games on such servers do not affect a players' Honor score positively or negatively). This condition marks an attempt by the authorities to cordon off zones of subversive liminality at the same time as tolerating them.

Other kinds of cheating difficult to detect or to define precisely – for instance, maximizing the brightness of one's computer monitor screen in order to see better when a game mission takes place in virtual nighttime. An example of an ambiguous cheat is how the memorization of the exact geography of mission levels is a common kind of training for many clans. This memorization is undertaken to the point, for instance, when players can learn to predict the movements of enemy players, and fire grenades precisely at target areas beyond visual range. Such abilities are unrealistic, but not technically in violation of the rules.

The most severe form of cheating however, is the use of a hack – a program which interferes with the game on the level of code so that players may radically manipulate the mechanics of the game even on official servers. This is the most unacceptable form of subversive practice since it breaches the security of the game's technical structure itself. What makes this kind of subversion even more threatening to the official rationale of the game, is that the hacks are produced by a community of computer programmers ("hackers") with no interest in the game *other than to manipulate and master the game code*.

### *The Hackers*

The most popular hack program produced specifically for *America's Army* is known as "Evilhack". The creators of Evilhack suggest that perhaps two-

thirds of the total *America's Army* player community have used the program at some point. (eh) H., a core member of the Evilhack groups described to me how the hack operates:

"EvilHack is a program that injects its code into the runtime [software] environment of [the *America's Army* game]. It filters and modifies the calls which [the game] makes to your system. These calls are mostly limited to input/output devices of your system, but it also hooks calls that [the game's anti-hack precautions] would use to identify the presence of EH."

It is this technical level of code and machine operation which is of interest to the hackers, not the manipulation of the game environment in itself. The evilhack.sourceforge.net website is revealing in this regard. For one thing, it is hosted on a major open source software coder community site, sourceforge.net, which not associated with gamer culture in any way. The Evilhack website is very different from the gamer clan sites described previously. It is completely devoid of any *America's Army* imagery, or any decorative graphics for that matter. The website presentation style that of the, austere, generic sourceforge design. The core programmers of Evilhack whom I interviewed also stressed how they quickly lost interest in playing the game itself, and also how they identified themselves as programmers and not as gamers. As the founder of the evilhack group, (eh) E. remarked:

"Computer games only play an inferior role in my life. The army game was nice but it became boring very quickly so I decided to look what it does technically to see if I could somehow modify it to gain unfair advantages. Evilhack was born. Today I'm not interested in the game at all and I think I haven't played it for some months now."