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## America's Army: more than a game?

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## Introduction

Games are increasingly developed and used within the educational sector and visual simulation business. Whereas the research and development into simulation technologies was initially the domain of the military, the last decades the commercial game development industries introduced new modelling and simulation technologies. The outcomes of several research initiatives will ideally benefit both the Army and the game development industry. By the appropriation and adaptation of successful commercial techniques, the military contributes to specific areas of research and development but also taps into popular culture. As the US military uses the same technologies as commercial game designers, there is a blurring between commercial military games and governmental military simulations. The following analyses of the free state-of-the-art PC game *America's Army: Special Forces* has all the signs of a new shift in thinking about games/simulations and their relation with the US military: "We [the developers of AA, DBN] are well positioned for the future of defense modelling and simulation. And that future has a game face" (Davis, 2004).

The game is developed and published by the US Army to attract new recruits, setting it apart from many other games on the market. The US Army did have a requirement regarding the level of detail in their simulation: "That the game be played absolutely straight, as an honest representation of the service especially regarding ethics, codes of conduct, and professional expectation, and extending to accurate depiction of hierarchy, missions, weapons, equipment, uniforms, settings, discipline, tactics, procedure – in short this was to be a game a platoon sergeant could play without wincing." (Davis, 2004). These elements are simulated through both online and offline elements. *America's Army* is a First Person Shooter (FPS) game, but because of the lack of consensus on the division of games into genres the following definition of a FPS will be used here: "A three-dimensional navigation in virtual environments, through a first person perspective, in which the player interacts in single- or multiplayer combat sequences by means of using a range of weaponry in order to complete a mission or objective" (Nieborg, 2004). The first instalment of the game, *America's Army: Operations RECON* (version 1.0), was published on the fourth of July 2002. Since then the Army provides regular updates with new training modules, maps, bug fixes and enhancements. On December 23 2003, *America's Army: Special Forces 2.0a* was released and the following analysis is based on this version to which I will refer to as AA or 'the (Army) game'. This version has more than three million registered accounts. Knowledge about the game is gathered through more than 400 hours of play analysis (Aarseth, 2003), from AA version 1.0 till 2.0a. Non-play analysis within the domains of development and publishing, the game itself and reception of the game (Nieborg, 2004) supplement this play analysis.

The focus within this paper is especially on the interaction between the domain of the development and publishing and the domain of the game itself. From a game design perspective the difference between games and simulations will be addressed by a comparative analysis of AA to FPS games. This will be followed by a theoretical outline sketching four dimensions of the game.

## 1. First Person Simulations

Although it would be an interesting endeavour to make theoretical distinctions between simulations and games used by the military, it is not my intention to give a formal definition whether AA is a game, a simulation or a simulation game. To what extent AA is used and regarded as a game or a simulation depends on the framing of the game and is a matter of reception. When a US army soldier uses the governmental version of AA within an educational setting for training purposes, the text will likely be received more as a combat simulation. When a gamer plays the public version of AA online, AA is first and foremost a game. My purpose here is to better understand the inner workings of AA and what sets it apart from other games/simulations. Therefore it is worthwhile to look at the differences between games and simulations from a game design perspective. Game designers Zimmerman and Salen define a game, both digital and non-digital “as a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.” (Zimmerman & Salen, 2004, p. 80). Applied to AA this means that gamers from all over the world engage in virtual squad based combat, under strict Rules of Engagement (ROE) and laws of nature, resulting in a win or lose situation. When Zimmerman & Salen speak of games as “the play of simulation”, they see a simulation as “a procedural representation of aspects of ‘reality’, whereby every game can be understood as a simulation” (Zimmerman & Salen, 2004, p. 423). The characteristics of simulations, simulations are abstract, numerical, limited and systematic, are reflected in AA as a game. The simulation of combat is abstract, e.g., gravity does not affect bullet trajectories. Damage is numerically modelled; every bullet causes a certain pre-determined percentage of damage. The gamespace is geographically limited and the different simulated systems, such as weapon modelling and weather simulations, make up the final simulation. The result of the reductive character of simulations is that game/simulation designers have to make choices in design; hence games/simulations are “media of expression rather than a form of calculation” (Crawford, 2003, p. 4), turning the development of a simulation into an inevitable subjective exercise. As the analysis of AA will show, it is this subjectivity which makes AA an interesting object worth exploring. The broad-minded considerations about subjectivity in design in other media are absent during the reception of simulations because “the aura of digital precision that saturates our image of the computer, spills over into our appreciation of simulation, blinding us to the possibilities of the medium” (Crawford, 2003, p. 4).

AA is primarily a ludological construct. It is far more a rule based system than it conveys meaning through a narrative of pre-rendered or scripted material. Engaging in a game becomes a configurative practice resulting in emergent gameplay. Since AA is a game of emergence (c.f. Juul, 2002), gamers interact with AA as a rule-based text and come up with a desirable emergence (from a designers perspective), such as co-operation with fellow gamers, or undesirable emergence, such as spawn killing and exploiting bugs. For obvious reasons, which will be dealt with in-depth later, the undesirable emergence during the online play of AA is as limited as possible. AA could therefore, in comparison with other FPS games, be labelled as a top-down FPS, having strict rules both within the game and its community.

## **2. What kind of shooter is AA? A comparative analysis**

In order to get a clear picture of what makes AA distinct from other FPS games and the reason why it is such an interesting research object, I will analyse the game by defining it as a 'realistic online multiplayer tactical squad-based First Person Shooter'. By dissecting all the characteristics, the specificity of the different elements constituting AA as a game will be stressed. The complex question to what extent America's Army is a realistic game will be dealt with more extensively at the end of this paper.

AA is a multiplayer game, only a small part of the game is single player. The single player part consists of training sessions, which are obligatory in order to play online or to play certain roles, such as a medic or a sniper. While some gamers may spend hours to complete these parts of the game, the game is first and foremost meant as a multiplayer experience, played online, via the Internet, or on a Local Area Network (LAN). AA could be seen as a tactical squad based FPS. Two squads of two to sixteen players fight against each other on a virtual battlefield. Unique to AA is the use of a software trick, implicating that every gamer sees himself and his team as American soldiers and the other team as the Opposing Forces (i.e. 'terrorists'). It is impossible to play as a terrorist and gamers never have to intentionally kill an US Soldier. In some scenarios both parties are assisted by Indigenous Forces. The tactical dimension of AA derives from the fact that AA is objective based and from the impossibility to respawn, i.e. coming back alive during the same round. Every map in AA has a different objective, varying from rescuing a VIP to identifying weapons caches. Obviously the opposing team has to prevent this from happening. The tactical dimension is the outcome of the possibility to make choices that affect the virtual battle. These choices can be made on the technical level of strategy, choosing the right weapon for the right circumstances, or on the tactical level of strategy by using certain military tactics of movement such as flanking an enemy or using smoke to conceal ones position. Whereas early FPS games were chaotic high speed free-fire zones, providing deathmatch style gameplay, in which the sole objective was to kill all, a new breed of FPS games, with the game Half-Life Counter-Strike (Le, 1999) as originator, focused on different aspects. AA adapted many gameplay conventions of the tactical shooter genre and poured them into a more top-down approach to gameplay by focusing on strict ROE and an emphasis on the simulation of infantry combat.

## **3. The four dimensions of America's Army**

By analysing the production, distribution, the game itself and its reception (Nieborg, 2004), I will offer four different dimensions of the game, being a recruiting tool, a propgame, an edugame, and a test bed and tool for the US Army. These four dimensions of AA were briefly introduced in "Together We Brand: America's Army" (Van der Graaf & Nieborg, 2003), the accent in this article was the advergence dimension. The four dimensions are interrelated and show overlap in various degrees. For different recipients of the game certain dimensions may have a different significance. Whether gamers, as just one group of people who encounter AA, will value the game as "just a game" or as a "dangerous

propagandistic military training tool” is an interesting question, but lies outside the scope of this paper and has to be dealt with in further research. The four dimensions have their respective implications on the status of AA as a game and as a simulation and interact with technical (e.g., existing game design conventions) and socio-cultural dimensions (e.g., gamer demographics).

### **3.1 The advergaming dimension**

America's Army is first and foremost meant as an advergaming, which refers to “the integration of advertising messages in online games and [which] is increasingly being used as an integral part of Internet marketing and advertising strategies to promote goods and services to potential consumers” (Buckner, Fang & Qiao, 2002). Opposite to some advergaming, the Army does so without gathering explicit information about gamers. A new marketing campaign started in 2001 to brand the Army after recognizing the absence of a strong brand identity, resulting in Army recruiters who had to do their utmost best to get the minimum amount of new recruits. This new campaign used, and still uses, television and magazine advertisements but also banners on websites to generate traffic for the GoArmy.com website. This website is pivotal to the campaign and a central platform the Army uses to communicate the benefits of being a member in the ‘Army of One’ (Van der Graaf & Nieborg, 2003). With the launch of the Army game, the Army possessed a new vehicle to get their new message across to their target group, young adolescents and preferably High School drop-outs. The director and originator of AA exemplifies this rationale by stating that the games’ main purpose is to provide young Americans with “virtual experiences and insights into the development, organization and employment of Soldiers in AA. By creating a vicarious insight gamers are enabled to gain knowledge about the Army’s cornerstone values” (Davis, 2004, p. 8), i.e. Duty, Integrity, Honor, Loyalty, Selfless Service, Courage and Respect for others. While both gamers and the (gaming) press label AA as a recruiting tool or advergaming, the Army termed the game “a strategic communication tool” (Davis, 2004). The online availability and play of AA adds advantages from an advergaming perspective, being able to use the capabilities of the Internet for viral marketing (c.f. Van der Graaf, 2004). AA is extremely cost-effective comparing it with expensive TV commercials. At an expenditure of about one-third of one percent of the Army’s total marketing budget, “AA (was found) to be the Army’s most effective medium for reaching young Americans” (Davis, 2004, p. 9).

### **3.2 The propagaming dimension**

“From a propaganda perspective, though, the Army has seemingly hit the jackpot. And the Army readily admits the games are a propaganda device”, according to a CNN/Money reporter (Morris, 2002). A dimension of AA closely related to AA as a strategic communication tool is the notion of AA as a propagaming. This dimension may be arbitrary to some and refers more to the propagation of Army values, mostly derived from the advergaming dimension, than to the political connotation of propaganda. While the Army is an instrument of American politics, it can not be held responsible for strategic decisions and initiation of their actions, especially not on the level AA simulates, an infantry squad. The US Army, and

therefore its simulation, is a repressive state apparatus using force (repression) but functioning secondarily also by ideology (Althusser, 2001). This rationale is made explicit in the official 224-page game manual stating: “while tactical movement and communications are often essential to the success of a mission, the US Army exists to defend freedom, and employing force in combat is an important element of their job” (Tran, 2003 p. 36). As an important institution in the American society, the US Army (implicitly) represents the values of this society and its government. There are several instances where the representation and simulation of Army values interact with the other dimensions of AA and AA as a FPS game. In the FAQ section on the official website ([www.americasarmy.com](http://www.americasarmy.com)) is explained why someone outside the USA can play AA: “we want the whole world to know how great the US Army is.” In doing so the army deliberately chooses to make the game accessible for gamers worldwide and thereby challenges the original goal of recruitment, i.e. the advergaming dimension (Van der Graaf & Nieborg, 2003).

### **3.3 The edugame dimension**

Although AA was initially not designed to be a training system, but rather a tool introducing people to the goals and values of the US Army (Shilling, 2003), the public version consists of several elements giving AA an edugaming dimension. This dimension is in many instances closely related to the advergaming dimension of AA, i.e. educating the public about soldiering. The public version of the game educates gamers while the governmental version serves as a training tool for soldiers. Many aspects of both the game and its community are modelled in a way to gain knowledge and information about the Army. Through several training sessions, obligatory to unlock certain roles within the game, gamers are able to gain both explicit and tacit knowledge within educational settings such as a virtual classroom. One can learn to recognize shock in case of the medic training, or the fact that Special Forces have to learn a second language, in case of the Special Forces training. By simulating squad based infantry combat, gamers are able to gain information about the Army, such as the chain of command. Tacit knowledge (c.f. Brown, 2002), the understanding of the practices such as the reloading procedure of a M16A2 rifle, is gained by an in-game animation simulating a rifle reloading. Here knowledge is gained through repetitive exposure resulting in assimilation. According to the official FAQ, knowledge and information about basic rifle marksmanship does not teach young adults how to shoot a weapon, because “there is no way that manipulating a keyboard and mouse, as players do in the Army's game, can provide vital cues on key elements of marksmanship...”

This remark is put to the test when the use of AA within the Army is analysed. There are several cases where the Army uses AA, within different settings, as a training tool. The game can be used as an example within existing Army programs, for instance in-game screenshots can be employed to estimate target distances. Soldiers are even able, because of the careful modelling of AA, to practice these skills in the virtual environment of AA. Infantry soldiers at Fort Benning use AA before setting foot on the real range and freshmen at West Point use the game to prepare for land navigation training. According to a member of the AA development team the game is “an ideal platform for training tasks in an advanced distributed

learning environment that are procedural in nature. Research has shown that immersive, first-person perspective games enhance a person's ability to process information more quickly and can enhance learning and retention of procedural skills” (“Exclusive interview #2”, 2004).

### **3.4 The test bed & tool dimension**

AA is developed by a group of professional game developers, modelling and simulation researchers and graduate students from the Modeling, Virtual Environments and Simulation (MOVES) Academic Program of the Naval Postgraduate School. This institute provides both assistance to the game development team, but also uses the game as an “experimental test bed and tool” (Shilling, Zyda & Wardynski, 2003, p. 1). AA is used by the Army for several case studies, e.g., to examine the effect of vibro-tactile feedback on a user's degree of immersion in a synthetic environment (Mosbrugger, 2003) or to determine the role audio plays in evoking emotion in videogames (Shilling et al., 2003). And during the development of AA, new weaponry such as Pursuit Deterrent Munition and Bunker Defeat Munitions will be included into the game to test their use in the (virtual) field. Within the AA development team, two sub-teams were founded in 2004 to test new weapons within both the public and the governmental version of the game. The first sub-team, the America's Army Future Applications Team is “dedicated to using and promoting AA in Research, Development and Training with emphasis on new and developmental weapon systems”, while the second sub-team, the AA Government Applications Team, was “created for the development of key government applications and to evaluate new technologies for future AA game releases” (Bacchus, 2004). In upcoming versions, gamers will be able to play with new weapons and by carefully simulating their behaviour, the Army can harness the enormous amount of time gamers toy around with new weapon and deduct strategies and unforeseen use.

### **4. No bodily dismemberment**

By looking at the simulation of being shot in AA and comparing this element to other FPS games, the interesting interchange between FPS conventions and the four dimensions of AA result in interesting and omnipotent choices in design. The simulation of getting shot in AA is one of the most criticised elements of the game. Health is, in line with tactical FPS conventions, impossible to regain during a round. There are no health packages that can boost a player's health upwards. A shot or shrapnel from a grenade will cause a bleeding which is not a common FPS convention, of ones avatar while some injuries are more severe than others. A hit in the hand for instance will cause a bleeding but decreases only a slight percentage of the overall health. A hit in the torso will take more damage and a hit in the top of the head will result in a hundred percent drop of health, an avatar will die by a so called ‘headshot’. It is, in line with AA's advergaming dimension, impossible to bleed to death and the bleeding of an avatar is not graphically simulated. When a player looks at his hands, there is never blood on them nor do friendly or enemy casualties show any sign of injury. When a small player figure in the right bottom corner of the interface is ‘green’, there is no injury at all. By taking fire the health status of a player turns from yellow (injured) to red (critically injured). The bleeding of a player, represented by a blinking red drop in the interface, can

only be stopped by a specially trained combat life saver (medic) from the same team. Getting hurt in combat is thus represented through an interface with icons and indexes, not so much through the visual simulation of bodily dismemberment or representation of 'gore', i.e. splatters of blood and open wounds. This in contrast with the World War II FPS *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2003) where injuries are simulated through limping avatars or the FPS *Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix* (Raven Software, 2002) known for its 'realistic' simulation of human suffering, i.e. gory body damage and dismemberment.

Frasca (2001) argues that games not only are a trivial part of entertainment but could also be complex texts open to various readings. These readings can be delimited by the creator of the work through basic rules of system behaviour and thereby making the author of the game ideologically responsible for the representation. By looking at the graphical depiction of violence and the diverse constraints of designing a simulation which has several purposes and dimensions, the reductive character and subjective nature of simulations becomes all the more apparent.

## **5. Experience simulations**

To market AA as a combat experience and by simulating army values through a true-to-life infantry combat experience, the Army educates the general public of gamers about soldiering. The US Army has the enormous advantage of being able to tap into an existing leisure activity popular with male teens, i.e. FPS games. Where TV commercials and paper ads rely on representation for the conveying of their message, AA as a game relies mainly on the simulation of combat. "By creating leads and traffic through AA's design and characteristics, the Army's brand is not about 'just a logo'. It is much more, namely, it is the experience that occurs when a gamer comes into contact with the Army's game." (Van der Graaf & Nieborg, 2003, p. 329). Through a carefully branded simulation, AA enables consumers to "transfer meaning to themselves, defining themselves as cultural entities" (Pennington, 2001), i.e. being a soldier in the Army of One. The intangible and arbitrary associations of brands as symbols (Pennington, 2001) become tangible, allowing gamers to experience what it is like being a soldier by immersing them into a carefully constructed virtual simulation. A shift that is in line with the notion of "the experience economy", where the former offering of the commodity economy is replaced by an economy relying on staging memorable and personal experiences (Pine II and Gilmore, 1999).

The contents and theme of AA are familiar with many gamers and AA could be developed by a commercial game designer as well. The surplus value of AA as a simulation derive from the four dimensions of the game, the interplay between these four parts make AA a constant evolving text worth exploring. The advergame, propagame dimension pared with existing conventions for PC games versus the test bed and edugame dimensions are constantly balanced within AA, the depiction of violence proofs this. The modelling and simulation of virtual worlds, avatars, weapons and sounds can be done with implicit reference to other games within the tactical FPS genre. Existing conventions within FPS gameplay are conversed, bended or deepened, in some cases setting new standards for what is seen as the portrayal



of 'real combat'. The developers of AA are able to experiment and create their simulations within existing boundaries, building upon existing cultural, socio-economic and technological conventions and discourses; each having the respective input on the final product. The Army game is the centre of a growing community where gamers meet to experience a similar representation and simulation of war and combat to soldiers and vice versa. The success of AA has implications for thinking about games and simulations and the use of these interactive texts for advertisement, education, propaganda and training. Many gamers are perfectly aware of the limitations of AA as a realistic depiction of combat. The following signature of an anonymous AA player posted on the official game forum is exemplary: "America's Army is a video game. If you want complete realism, try this: <http://goarmy.com>."

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