Bringing Home America's Army

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Screenshots of America's Army by Gamers Hell, 2012

This game concept is the result of an ongoing series of conversations between two friends, curator Joseph del Pesco and game designer Al McElrath. McElrath was involved in the production of the single-player console (Xbox) version/translation of the popular PC game America's Army (AA), *the most successful tool ever deployed by the US Army's recruiting department. "The game had more impact on recruits than all other forms of Army advertising combined."[1] But AA is more than an advertisement. Like a flight simulator used for the education of pilots,* AA *purports to "provide players with the most authentic military experience available". In other words, it occupies a slippery ground between a simulator designed for soldiers-in-training and a commercial game intended for the entertainment market. In fact, its proximity to*

1   http://washingtonexaminer.com/politics/2009/11/video-game-veterans-and-new-american-politics/20385

"authenticity" may be the very thing that makes it such popular entertainment.

Following a brief overview of *America's Army* (*AA*), we'll outline our concept for a propositional or "paper" game, based loosely on the symbolic resistance strategy employed by The Weather Underground: "*Bring the War Home*".[2] This new game is intended not to counteract *America's Army*, but rather to enact a thought-experiment that might reveal its enrollment strategy, and make visible, through comparison, some of the facets and limits of the representation of war.

The PC version of *America's Army* was released via the Internet as a free download in 2002 and quickly became popular in the game community.[3] The Army had identified an overlapping demographic between gamers and potential and future recruits (sixteen to twenty year-olds) and spent sufficient funds on its production value (and continues to spend about six million per year) to secure the game lasting traction. *AA* simulates training exercises and combat scenarios in dozens of different locations that range from the generic to the suggestive. Each level offers abstracted obstacles in either urban or rural terrain such as: mountain passes, river basins, oil fields, collapsed tunnels, insurgent camps, and bridge crossings. Tasks in these locations include extraction, precious cargo recovery, and recon. *AA* is a single player (training) and multi-player (combat) game that compiles groups to form two teams in combat scenarios. In the game space *every* player and their teammates appear to each other as US Army soldiers. Through a trick of the game the other team appears as ambiguous others—foreign soldiers/terrorists. While the early versions of the game withheld the problematic politics of the enemy's identity or location, current versions identify The Taliban as an enemy and specific locations in the Middle East such as Afghanistan, marking the game as an explicit propaganda tool in the "War on Terror." Finally the most alarming feature: "To log onto the game, you have to connect via the Army's recruitment Website and give them your information. The gamers can also check out profiles

2   http://hnn.us/articles/93754.html
The Weather Underground conducted a series of bombings in the early 1970s which sought to symbolically "Bring the War Home" without loss of life. In other words, the goal was to subject Americans to some of the violence and destruction inflicted daily upon the Vietnamese people.

3   According to the *America's Army* website: *AA* is one of the ten most popular PC-action games played online.

of current Army soldiers and video testimonials of why they joined up."[4] *America's Army's* is tantamount to a sophisticated advertisement, but with potential consequences.

Bring the War Home

The game space of *Bring the War Home* is the gamer's current geographic location. For us, typing here in San Francisco, the game would model the streets of the Mission, the neighboring hill of Potrero, and the towers of the financial district. The game takes the familiar single-player role of eye-to-screen equivalence, an immersive experience where the camera angle is the same as the tilt of one's head. The player's task is to deliver food, water and medical supplies to shelters that house friends across the city. Using Internet connections and access to social media accounts, the game automatically finds friends in the player's city and includes their names in the game. So rather than running to Point X on a fictional map, the gamer is attempting to transport emergency supplies to close friends in their home city. The player doesn't have a gun (and at first can't pick one up) and the landscape is overrun with foreign and domestic armies in near-constant conflict.[5]

When a player is killed in the game, his or her body remains in the game space. The game never forgets. One can imagine a landscape strewn with bodies—not props, but symbolic markers of previous players. When a player finds a body, they can risk their life and resources to attend to it, which then yields information about the dangers ahead. This is important, because in this game a player can only die once, and when they die they're given the option to record information for the use of future players. In *Bring the War Home*, when a new player creates a

4   http://washingtonexaminer.com/politics/2009/11/video-game-veterans-and-new-american-politics/20385

5   If friends in the player's social network join the game and form a collaboration, the player is reassigned as a member of the budding resistance. They are then less likely to get killed (safety in numbers) because the game provides access to additional information about conflict zones and how to avoid them. (One might imagine knowledge of underground tunnels, large caches of supplies, or surveillance video). However, once in a group, it also becomes possible to find, pick up, and use a gun in the game, but this dramatically increases the player's chance of getting killed. We have also considered additional features such as: higher levels of the game establish pirate communications networks that allow players live audio communications during game play. Prior to this level, audio communication is only possible when in relative proximity to other players.

login, they also sign an anti-war statement emailed to local city and state representatives. This is repeated, with variations in the text and destination, each time the player signs in.[6]

The original strategy of symbolic resistance conceived of by The Weather Underground was intended to inflict significant and visible damage in the U.S. as a way to represent the atrocities of war happening elsewhere. To make the war felt (or in some way experienced, even if only virtually) at home by those in the U.S. is a problem that arises, in part, because of the sense of distance and the flatness of the already limited stream of images presented to the American public about the ongoing war. This is especially true for those who aren't directly connected to the war by a friend or relative enrolled in the armed forces. So, can another representational strategy, that of video games, conjure this sense of an embodied experience and inscribe a lasting—albeit fragmentary and limited—memory of war? What we do know is that *America's Army* has presented a compelling and active simulation, and successfully incubated potential recruits. Might we not use the power of the same tool for different ends?[7] The ultimate challenge (for us) here is to make a game that is entertaining and engaging in such a way as to encourage its popularity and therefore its distribution, but not so much that the gamer cannot access the meta-critical dimension that underscores the extreme conditions and costs of war.

What do we imagine might be the life of our game, and who might play it? According to the *AA* website, forty percent of the players of *America's Army* are outside of the U.S.[8] Can we not predict (with dread) the eventuality of someone in Iraq or Afghanistan playing *Bring the War Home*? Or more optimistically, might we allow ourselves to imagine

a community forming around the game, who establish correspondence (and an anti-war network) connecting players around the world? Might the anti-war emails sent to officials be administered by local activist groups in the places where the game is most popular, linking the incidental gestures of thousands to specific and timely anti-war struggles in their own region? In what way might our game risk escalating to an ideological struggle? Unlike *America's Army, Bring the War Home* doesn't claim explicit national affiliations, but how might it be understood in the international community? As an act of amelioration? Is the desire to end war not universal?

6   The email sent includes small print at the bottom that acknowledges the connection to the game. In their personal preferences, players are given the ability to opt-out of these automatic emails.

7   According to research compiled by game advocate Jane McGonigal, there are hundred eighty-three million active computer and video gamers in the U.S., who average thirteen hours a week playing games. Five million of those gamers play forty-five hours a week, which amounts to a full-time job. McGonigal identifies games as a powerful social tool, and gamers as an under-utilized cognitive surplus.

8   This fact seems to nullify the purported authenticity of *America's Army*. Are we so naive as to believe that the Army would give away training and combat secrets to anyone with an internet connection?