America's Army Game and the Production of War

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Videogames were attacked with a renewed fervour after two young men from Littleton, Colorado decided to gun down their schoolmates at Columbine High School with a shotgun that was "straight from *Doom*."[1] An utterance is certainly no reason to assume a causal link between videogames and violence but it is enough to become agitated about the possible connections, as many did. Much research has focussed on illuminating such connections but for fairly obvious reasons, findings have been rather inconclusive. While it is unfair to suggest that this research has been entirely fruitless, a common obstacle in these endeavours is the inability to size down the cumbersome heap of independent variables which would effect violent behaviour in individuals (whether this is even possible is questionable).[2]

This paper will take an approach where, rather than looking to individuals and behaviour, it will focus on the production of a discourse of war through a particular videogame, *America's Army: Operations* (AA:O),[3] to contemplate and complicate some of the ways in which war is made possible. My writing is oriented by a commitment to International Relations, specifically its subset Security Studies and as such, this paper is animated by a concern with security. Security has traditionally been conceived of as the protection of states from objective threats which originate from the outside of state borders. In light of much critical scholarship, punctuated by the events of September 11, this notion of security has become troubled. This paper strives to unsettle the notion that security can be *thought* and *written* outside of a discussion of representation.

It will be shown that what makes war possible in videogames is also what makes it possible outside of them. This will be done by treating war as a discourse. For the purposes of this paper a discourse is considered to be a symbolic system which subjectifies agents as well as organises all of the meaning which these agents are subjected to. A discourse is cultural or rather, it constitutes "the context within which people give meaning to their actions and experiences and make sense of their lives."[4] Representations are considered to be subsets of a discourse and representation spoken of as a process is that which constitutes a discourse. Discourses are total in that everything is within discourse or alternatively, the only way to *know* something is by reading it through a discourse. This is not to suggest however that discourses are totalizing. Discourses are produced by agents and, while they can come to take on fixity and the appearance of permanence, they are constituted iteratively and thus cannot be considered to be *natural*.[5] Videogames are considered a form of discursive production as they convey meaning through narrative — visually, textually, sonically, and in some respects through tactility. Furthermore videogames draw on and constitute representations of war. An explicit goal of this paper is to suggest that war is made possible within a field of representation and videogames, as products as well

[1] Steven L. Kent. 2001. *The Ultimate History of Video Games*. (New York: Random House), 545.

[2] Jonas Heide Smith. 2003. "Computer Game Research 101: A Brief Introduction to the Literature," December 13 2002 [cited July 26 2003]. Available from http://www.game-research.com/art_computer_ game_research.asp.

[3] America's Army: Operations is available at http://www.fileplanet.com/files/80000/89806.shtml

[4] Jutta Weldes. 2003. "Popular Culture, Science Fiction and World Politics: Exploring Intertextual Relations." In *Exploring New Worlds: Exploring Links Between Science Fiction and World Politics*, edited by J. Weldes. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 6.

[5] Judith Butler. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 24-25.

as producers of representations, are implicated in the construction of that possibility. By extension, videogames constitute security as a discourse which is concerned with war.

Representation constitutes security for the subject. It provides the vocabulary of security, setting up for the subject the ways in which security can be apprehended. Rather than merely a reflection of the world as it is, representation produces the world. This is not to suggest that the world is immaterial, only that materiality itself is mediated through representation. An illustration of this is provided astutely by Jutta Weldes in *Constructing National Interests*. She argues that the 'Cuban Missile Crisis' became cited as a crisis once it was interpreted as a threat to US national interests and this had particular implications for the various actors involved. However, the presence or absence of nuclear missiles themselves did not produce the event as a crisis. Her argument is bolstered by an exploration of the event from the point-of-view of the three key actors involved: the US, the former USSR, and Cuba. From each of the three perspectives, different representations of the event were produced and these representations in turn guided the actions and decisions that could be made by any particular actor or set of actors.[6] What Weldes's discussion of the "Cuban Missile Crisis" lacks in the context of this paper is an ability to acknowledge popular culture as a legitimate site of political discourse. A short discussion of popular culture and politics follows.

Most relevant to my argument, popular culture helps to create and sustain the conditions for contemporary world politics by reproducing the beliefs and allegiances necessary for its uncontested functioning.[7] Videogames in this respect play a role in constituting the discourses by which we understand politics and to the extent that they re-produce dominant discourses of politics, they serve to legitimate and perpetuate the status quo. Videogames contribute to making war and security imaginable by elevating them to common sense. This is not to say that videogames are the only generators of a discourse of war and security or even that there is a clear temporal dimension which can be traced in terms of cause and effect (the discourse being treated as an event prior to the effect). Rather, war and security are intertextual. They are materialized in and through the interplay of signifiers which populate the political imaginary. Videogames along with other forms of popular culture can be implicated in the production of war and security precisely because these concepts cannot be understood outside of discourse.

Popular culture renders intelligible those conventions of international politics which seemingly take on a natural character. As the most ubiquitous form of cultural engagement, popular culture becomes a convenient entry point into the political. Those of us who have come into contact with North American or perhaps western popular culture will most likely have seen cartoons such as the

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[6] Jutta Weldes. 1999. *Constructing National Interests: The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[7] Michael J. Shapiro. 1992. *Reading the Postmodern Polity: Political Theory as Textual Practice.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1.

Transformers, He-Man: Masters of the Universe, She-Ra:Princess of Power , Thundercats, and Voltron
to name a few. Each of these cartoons instantiates contemporary tropes of identity/difference,
gender/identity and more generally, war, peace, and security. To take but one example, the *Transformers*
narrative quite clearly performs a topology of politics which resonates dominant configurations and
understandings of international politics: Two dominant classes, the Decepticons and the Autobots, battle
each other for control of the Transformers universe. Underlying the antagonism between the two classes
is a power struggle for the management of "energon cubes," the energy source for all bots. The two
classes are neatly split between the good and the evil and the narrative lends itself quite affectionately to
a split between Liberalism and its other: fascism conflated with communism. Liberalism is embodied in
the Autobots who are anthropomorphised robots which transform predominantly into motor vehicles.
Autobots are peace-loving which is indicated by their convivial character. Humans are friends of
Autobots and depictions of the intermittent periods of Autobot dominance are characterised by a
sentiment of justice and equality which is signified by humans and Autobots engaging in such collective
activities as fishing, sightseeing, construction, and joyriding. The Decepticons on the other hand,
transform into various objects: weapons, aircraft, even a tape deck (perhaps performing the deceptive,
insidious KGB agent!), however each of these objects once given human tendencies takes on a rather
sinister and destructive edge. Social and spatial relations between the Autobots and Decepticons
(re)produce notions of who "we" are in relation to "them." This primary distinction then feeds into the
idea that evil is separate from good, both in terms of body and space and that a powerful force is needed
to "neutralize" the belligerent forces which threaten.[8] My short analysis does not preclude a critical
reading of the Transformers cartoon that might provide an alternate interpretation. The point to note is
that even seemingly benign forms of culture which are said to be confined to the realm of ludic
engagement can be implicated in producing a political discourse. Cartoons, comics, films, and
videogames then cannot and should not be ignored in a broader discussion of security.

Videogames like other forms of popular culture are implicated in the production of a political
discourse about security. As a consequence of technological and cultural shifts in the last twenty years,
videogames are no longer considered the pastime of unsociable children. In terms of scale, the
videogames industry generated $27 Billion globally in 2002 and is said to be growing at a rate of 20
percent per year in the US.[9] Videogames have also subsumed all of the traditional media into a unique
aesthetic combining filmic, literary and generally textual modes of representation. Thematically,
videogames have been categorized into conventional narrative genres such as action, adventure, horror,
science-fiction, and the like. While games have not been explicitly political in the past, a recent trend

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[8] This reading is derived from Transformers: The Movie. 1986. edited by N. Shin: De Laurentiis Entertainment
Group.
[9] Kevin Delaney. 2003. Are Videogames Ready to be Taken Seriously by Media Reviewers? *Wall Street Journal*,
November 3, 1.

suggests that developers are willing to experiment with videogames as a communicative medium. Among independently published games, the following are worth mentioning: Dar al-Fikr's *UnderAsh*[10] is a game which puts the gamer in the role of a Palestinian man who resists Israeli forces. *Special Force* is developed by Hizbollah's Central Internet Bureau and allows the gamer to virtually participate in operations of the Islamic Resistance in South Lebanon. The game's web space also claims to "render you a partner of the resistance."[11] Finally, *Ethnic Cleansing* developed by Resistance Records (supported by the National Alliance, a US based white supremacist and anti-Semitic organisation) pits the gamer against sub-humans — Black, Latino and Jewish characters — who must be exterminated before the "right" racial order prevails.[12] Within the realm of the mainstream videogame industry, a recent title comes to mind which produces a sophisticated political landscape: Eidos' *Deus Ex 2* immerses the player in a world which has come under the domination of the World Trade Organisation. Unlike the games mentioned above, *America's Army: Operations*, which is the primary subject of this paper, does not make any claims to the political. The following sections of this paper will show that this is simply not the case.

America's Army: Operations

Military interest in videogames was rekindled following a 1997 US National Research Council report outlining a joint research agenda for defence and entertainment modelling and simulation. Inspired by falling recruitment, the US Army had seen the need to bolster its efforts in attracting computer-literate youths for today's army and mounted a dialogue with the US Navy's Modelling, Virtual Environments and Simulation Institute resulting in the initiation of the Army Game Project. Prompted by the NRC report, The US Department of Defence invested in the Army Game Project and the joint effort has culminated in the production and distribution of *America's Army: Operations,* a game which simulates the US Army soldier's experience. On July 4, 2002 the game was made available over the Internet, free-of-charge, for those who have access to a broadband connection and own the hardware that the game demands.[13]

The first striking feature about AA:O is that it is an officially sanctioned videogame created to attract recruits. While videogames generally have aspired to reality, AA:O makes this claim explicitly and since it is authored by the US Army, the claim effects a congruence between the US Army and the

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[10] Dar al-Fikr. 2003. *Under Ash* 2002 [cited December 21 2003]. Available from http://www.underash.net.
[11] Hizbullah Central Internet Bureau. 2003. *Special Force* [cited December 21 2003]. Available from http://www.specialforce.net/english/indexeng.htm.
[12] Resistance Records. 2003. *Ethnic Cleansing* 2002 [cited December 21 2003]. Available from http://www.resistance.com/catalog/product_info.php?products_id=203
[13] Michael Zyda, John Hiles, Alex Mayberry, Casey Wardynski, Michael Capps, Brian Osborn, Russel Shilling, Martin Robaszewski, and Margaret Davis. 2003. The MOVES Institute's Army Game Project: Entertainment R&D for Defense. *IEEE Computer Graphics and Applications* 23 (1):28-36.

(re)presentations of it within the game. This is significant because it prompts the gamer to treat AA:O not only by the standards of a game but by the standards of reality:

> Nobody knows military simulations like the world's premier land force, the U.S. Army. So when the Army began making a simulation to let civilians experience the barracks to the battlefields, it sent its talented development teams to experience the Army as a recruit would. The developers crawled through obstacle courses, shot weapons, parachute jumped, and visited the Army bases, all to let you play Army in the most realistic way ever depicted in a computer game.[14]

AA:O begins with registration where the gamer signs in to the community and selects his/her character. The characters are generic men but skin tone can be customized. After registration a series of training missions has to be negotiated. These range from simple obstacle courses which familiarize the gamer with controls to weapons training. Once the mandated training missions have been completed, the gamer can choose whether to proceed with more advanced training in occupations such as medic, special forces, combat engineer and others or, to join multiplayer missions online with other members of the community. Given the rules of the game, in order to succeed only certain directions can be followed. Since this is a simulation which strives for accuracy in depicting its referents, the rules of engagement follow established guidelines. The gamer has access to models of real weapons, he/she plays on simulated terrain which mimics its material counterpart and he/she gets to play with team-mates and opponents who are other human gamers. The core part of AA:O is played online and as such, discipline is effected across the playing community. Unlike a game which employs artificial intelligence soldiers, AA:O builds a community and it enforces discipline across that community by means of an honour system. The gamer is punished for killing a team-mate by the machine, being forced to sit out of the map which is being played and loses a number of demerit points depending on the particular violation. By the same token, he/she is rewarded honour points for following the rules of the engagement, not only by being able to progress which is sanctioned by the machine but by being recognized by his/her team-mates. The game sets the rules and enforces them but to a certain degree, they are also reinforced organically by the AA:O gaming community. The result is a self-sustaining disciplinary system which produces gamers if not soldiers who learn to fight without ever having to confront the motivations or consequences of doing so. Rather than providing a walkthrough of the game, I will proceed by interpreting some of the dimensions of AA:O which create the conditions for war. AA:O produces war as a game. In order for this to be possible, some significant moves have to be made. First, AA:O effects a reduction of the soldier to his mechanical functions; secondly, the game obscures the enemy and concomitantly obscures the self; and finally, the game sanitizes violence. I will proceed with a short discussion of each of these elements in turn.

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[14] "About America's Army," [cited October 17 2003]. Available at http://www.americasarmy.com/about.php.

The Mechanical Soldier

The mechanising of the soldier in AA:O occurs intertextually. By mechanizing, I refer to the process by which soldiers are produced and prepared for killing. Beginning from the position that neither killing nor other more benign activities are natural, there is necessarily some form of discursive production taking place which renders killing meaningful, possible and in the context of a game, fun. It should be stated at the outset that killing in games is visual and textual but not material. In other words, bodies are not killed in games but virtual references to bodies are. I want to suggest that this is not enough to qualify the act of killing as meaningful and fun. AA:O dilutes the experience of the political precursors and justifications for violence. What is missing in the game is the fear, the consequences, the flesh and blood and the soldier lifestyle. Instead, the game is an instantaneous entry into the life of a soldier, without the hardships, the dilemmas, and the physical training and conditioning which is part and parcel of a soldier's life. In a sense, the game is not a simulation of a soldier's life, it is a simulation of a simulation of a soldier's life. The gamer is inserted into hypothetical scenarios which make up a limited range of soldier experience: weapons training, squad co-ordination, and shooting enemies. Gamers do not experience combat, they experience combat exercises. An intertext of the soldier will be examined in order to shed some light on the ability to kill and to enjoy the act.

Soldiers in the "real" US Army are produced as hypermasculine. This is achieved in many ways, sometimes contradictory,[15] but always relying on the marginalization of difference in order to settle a topology of human subjectivity. The soldier is produced as a hypermasculine subject by arranging his subject position in relation to its others. Most often other bodies which are inscribed by the discarded characters of the hypermale are undermined or culturally discredited.[16] Soldiers are produced through a range of strategies which begin with a flattening of individual identity. According to Sandra Whitworth:

> all evidence of the recruit's civilian life is stripped away: clothing hair and most belongings. New recruits are separated from families, undergo tests of physical endurance, sleep deprivation and are forced to participate in numerous arbitrary, often mundane and apparently irrelevant tasks. All have the same shaved heads, the same uniforms, eat the same food, sleep in the same uncomfortable beds and must conform to the same expectations and follow the same rules.[17]

This gives the new US Army slogan "Army of One"[18] a rather ironic twist. Humiliation strategies, physical violence, verbal abuse, and the threat of violence are all employed to "break" the

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[15] See Morgan, David H.J. 1994. "Theater of War: Combat, the Military and Masculinities." In *Theorizing Masculinities*, edited by H. Brod and M. Kaufman. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

[16] Sandra Whitworth. Forthcoming. *Men, Masculinities and UN Peacekeeping: A Gendered Analysis.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 236 (MS Copy).

[17] *Ibid.,* 238 (MS. Copy).

[18] See Paul Boyce and Matthew Jones. "A New Army Slogan." *Soldiers Online* [cited February 23, 2004] Available from http://www.army.mil/soldiers/feb2001/features/slogan1.html.

soldier and ready him or her for combat. Once the recruits have been rendered malleable, strategies to dismantle individual identity are coupled with methods of constructing a group identity. The soldier is positioned as an element within a fraternity and masculinity is a primary feature of this fraternity:

> The myths of manhood into which the new soldier is inculcated throughout basic training are highly specific and privilege: courage and endurance; physical and psychological strength; rationality; toughness; obedience; discipline; patriotism; lack of squeamishness; avoidance of certain emotions such as fear, sadness, uncertainty, guilt, remorse and grief; and, heterosexual competency.[19]

Collapsing masculinity and the characters mentioned above most notably involves violently mapping the threats to these characters onto "appropriate" others. Women are typically inscribed through insults directed at male recruits such as 'whore,' 'sissy,' 'cunt,' 'pussy,' and 'ladies,'[20] suggesting that women are cowardly, disloyal, and generally the opposite of what a soldier ought to be. Homosexuality, race and other forms of difference are also produced as threats to the soldier subject. Linda Bird Francke evokes a vintage cadence call which reaffirms the masculine bond: "LEFT! LEFT! Had a good job when I LEFT!/LEFT my wife with eight nigger babies,/ Hay foot, straw foot…"[21] The capacity for violence is produced in conjunction with masculinity and it becomes the benchmark by which masculinity is affirmed. Violence is enacted in insults, cadence calls, rape, harassment, and abuse within the family. It is also directed at the self and interpreted as endurance and psychological strength. Of primary concern in this paper, violence directed at the enemy other becomes the hallmark of militarised masculinity. Killing as an idea and as an act is the intended product of this masculinity and it begins to articulate itself with notions of courage, discipline, patriotism, heroism, and mental strength.

Videogame war is rendered intelligible through the hypermale subject described above. The game-ness of killing is enabled by the hypermasculine military ethos. In other words, killing can be juxtaposed with fun because it is subsumed into masculine notions of what constitutes courage, heroism, patriotism, and strength. AA:O is able to avoid the visual masculinization of players by a technological sleight of hand. Women are simply left out of the game and the male soldier is taken as pre-constituted, naturalizing him as an uncontested subjectivity. This is foregrounded at the very beginning of the game when the gamer is only given the option of playing a male soldier. Although there are no obvious references made to a gendering discourse, femininity operates subtly in AA:O and some connections can certainly be made.

Prior to playing the game proper, a short training level to familiarize the gamer with the controls is offered. This is quite conventional where first-person games are concerned but the format of such

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[19] *Ibid.,* 246 (MS. Copy).
[20] *Ibid.,* 239 (MS. Copy).
[21] Franke, Linda Bird. 1997. *Ground Zero: The Gender Wars in the Military*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 162.

training levels may vary. In AA:O, the training level is an obstacle course where each of the obstacles is named after one of the principles of the US Army: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honour, integrity, and personal courage. The obstacles visually enact a gendering discourse. Completing each obstacle, and this is not meant to be difficult, results in a congratulatory message from a Sergeant who oversees the training. Failing to complete the obstacle course however causes the Sergeant to encourage (literally) the gamer to try again. While this is a minor aspect of the game, the Sergeant's behaviour does not correspond to accounts of the "real" army and its training rituals. The opposites of the principles mentioned above tend to become associated with women and the feminine. Despite claims of verisimilitude with the "real" army, an explicit gendering discourse is unnecessary in the game because gender can be made less visible and the soldier treated as a pre-constituted subject. This pre-constituted soldier is established through the various dominant texts which inscribe soldiers as hypermasculine. Above, I mentioned a number of cartoons including the *Transformers.* These can be read as instantiating a discourse of hypermasculinity. In addition, recent films such as *Tears of the Sun, Blackhawk Down,* and *Pearl Harbor,* to name a few, along with various comics, books, and television programs, also reproduce notions of the hypermasculine soldier. The point to note is that killing in AA:O is made possible by the very same discourse that makes "real" killing possible in the army. Killing *makes sense* because it is subsumed within a hypermasculine discourse. This is not to suggest that gamers are killers, after all, bodies do matter. However, there is a connection here even if it is not faithful to a causal logic. The US Army is aware of this connection as well, which is why, I would assume, AA:O even exists as a recruiting tool. On an economic level, gamers will become "real" soldiers but more important than this, on the level of representation, soldiering is made possible because it becomes articulated with fun.

The Obscure Other
The mechanization of soldiers is accompanied by a refusal to name the enemy. Put into the context of security, militaries, and their various appendages, in this case the US Army, are established in service of states to render them secure. This is a fairly grand abstraction, parsimonious rather than insightful in any meaningful way, but it serves my purpose here. Militaries protect something or the other from some form of threat. Where the US Army is concerned, the American State is to be protected from threats, at least in principle. In AA:O the threat is obscured. While gamers have opponents, these are a generic opposing force but the subject — that which the gamer is mapped onto — is always clear: the gamer is always American. In fact, in a scenario where one team chooses to defend a camp and one team chooses to attack a camp, both teams play as the US Army, but they see the other side as a generic enemy. This is significant because in articulating the other the Army concomitantly constitutes its self. Such a claim becomes easier to understand in relation to the Cold War framework.

During the Cold War, roughly between the end of the second world war and the fall of the Berlin wall, the enemy other was a conveniently homogenised Eastern Bloc. Engaged in a sustained geopolitical

theatrics, both Eastern and Western blocs participated in constituting their identities against the other: the West was good because the East was evil. By extension, the US Army was good because it fought the evil Red army of the East. Following the collapse of the Cold War framework, it became a much more difficult task to orient US State identity and by extension, the role of its military.[22] Manifest in the game, the enemy other which would orient the identity and purpose of the US Army is absent. The ubiquitous Eastern other is replaced with an elusive, amorphous, viral object which can never be completely subject to control. What this means for the gamer is that a series of vital questions are left unanswered: What are we fighting for? Who are *we*? And, who are *they?* More importantly, the opportunity to ask these questions is never presented because the enemy is always assumed, always just out of reach yet close enough to be a threat. Similarly, the current western conception of the threat extended from the event of September 11 resembles the threat in AA:O. This can be seen in the first National Strategy for Homeland Security:

> We are today a Nation at risk to a new and changing threat. The terrorist threat to America takes many forms, has many places to hide, and is often invisible. Yet the need for homeland security is not tied solely to today's terrorist threat. The need for homeland security is tied to our enduring vulnerability. Terrorists wish to attack us and exploit our vulnerabilities because of the freedoms we hold dear.

> We remain a Nation at war. Even as we experience success in the war on terrorism, the antipathy of our enemies may well be increasing, and new enemies may emerge. The United States will confront the threat of terrorism for the foreseeable future.[23]

Notice that the "terrorist threat" is characterized by fluidity and un-specificity. Because of this character, vulnerability as well is extended indefinitely, enabling the conditions for a perpetual war.

Sanitary Violence

The sanitization of violence is another dimension of AA:O which brings into question the claim that it is an accurate portrayal of the soldier. Enemies, nameless though they are in AA:O, take on a rather ghost-like character and die like ghosts as well, with a bit of a red splotch where a bullet was to have caused a wound. Academic studies have not yet confirmed a causal link between media (including videogames) and violence however, much hysteria has generally surrounded the depiction of graphic violence whether this be in film, television, print, or videogames.[24] Taking this into account, the decision to make AA:O

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[22] David Campbell. *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and Identity.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 1-13.

[23] Office of Homeland Security. 2002. *National Strategy for Homeland Security* [cited December 22 2003]. Available from http://www.whitehouse.gov/homeland/book/.

[24] Jonas Heide Smith, and Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen. 2003. "The 6 Myths of Computer Gaming," July 4 2003 [cited August 6 2003]. Available from http://www.game-research.com/art_myths_of_gaming.asp.

minimally violent seems a prudent measure on behalf of the US Army. Nonetheless, the absence of violence in the context of a game which simulates the roles of a soldier seems somewhat inappropriate. This has the effect of reproducing combat in ways that are already prevalent: as something which is painless, distant and removed from subjective emotion. In some senses, this makes the simulation closer to common experience.

Some accounts suggest that the US Military has been notorious for unreasonably distancing itself from harm. This sentiment is reflected in what James Der Derian terms Virtuous War, a condition where the US Military espouses the "technical capability and the ethical imperative to threaten, and if needed, actualise violence from a distance, with no or minimal casualties."[25] Technology is at the heart of Virtuous War and it produces the conditions for war without violence: Fire-and-Forget, Beyond-Visual-Range and Laser Guided are all descriptive and functional terms for missiles. Each of these terms values distance. Drawing on Paul Virilio, Michael Shapiro argues that distancing technologies have replaced bodies with "coordinates and symbols arrayed by digital logic."[26] Distance is effected by the technology which categorises, organizes and designates targets by replacing bodies and objects with spatial markers. Discussing the Gulf War of the 90s, Shapiro remarks:

> The highly mediated relationship, in which both linguistic and weapons technologies intervened, rendered the relationship between viewing and fighting subjects complex, for the targets of violence were rarely available to anyone's direct vision and were hardly ever available for direct contact. There was very little actual touching.[27]

Where representation is concerned, the mainstream media has generally reiterated this exorcism of harm from war, making it much more palatable for consumption. The recent move of embedding journalists in Iraq however makes matters more complex. With the immediacy of real-time reporting, some depictions of violence did surface. It is difficult to reach any conclusions about representations of violence in this most recent conflict but if past conflicts are any indication, whether this be Vietnam, the Gulf War of the 90s, or Bosnia, it is reasonable to claim that violence was largely excluded from mainstream media representations. Consequently, it is not surprising that violence was left out of AA:O because it is in effect, an element which would make war less game-like. On the other hand, perhaps a violent simulation would too easily foreground the fact that AA:O *is* only game.

Videogames, especially those which re-imagine and reconstitute images of war, need to be thought of in the context of a contemporary lust for the real. Slavoj Zizek cites this as a twentieth century

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[25] James Der Derian. 2001. *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*. Boulder: Westview Press, xv.

[26] Michael Shapiro. 1997. *Violent Cartographies: Mapping Cultures of War*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[27] *Ibid., 93.*

"passion for the real"[28] which rests in a Lacanian repression of the real. On Lacan's terms desire is always a consequence of the haunting of the real. Leaving aside any theorizing of the origins of the desire for the real, I want to point to the rather pervasive deluge of popular imagery which is throbbing TV screens and that relies on scopophilic and panoptic logics to make its truth claims. Reality television programming and videogames can be read through an anxious lust for the real. This is an important reading because it highlights an economy of desire which needs to be interrogated to service the creation of alternate spaces for the popular imagination. Specific to this paper, such a reading aims to draw some linkages between the videogame and an aesthetics of the real suggesting that videogame war and by extension real war are possible precisely because they lend themselves to a scopophilic and panoptic logic.

The reference points at the nexus of politics and an aesthetics of the real are many. To tag but a few, the following images come to mind: visual reportage of September eleventh, embedded journalism during the most recent Iraq war, television shows such as *Survivor, Fear Factor, The Bachelor, The Bachelorette, Blind Date, Elimidate, The Apprentice, The Simple Life,* and finally, reality pornography which is making rounds on the world wide web. All of these strive for reality as videogames do but thinking across some of these images creates an accessibility to new interpretations. Reality television, embedded journalism and reality pornography all seem to fulfil a scopophilic and panoptic desire through speed, immediacy, and transparency. Time is reduced to speed as Paul Virilio might remark. Images of September eleventh are a cogent example of this: Real aircraft being swallowed by buildings creating an erupted haze of dust and debris signaled a disaster and disaster compressed time. Such a compression of time lent itself to a scopophilic orientation. The events of September eleventh could be viewed without getting "caught" and the discomfort between the beautiful and the grotesque began to give way to a kind of passivity (I am self-consciously assuming an I/eye in this formulation). Reality television shows can produce the same effects. Speed and immediacy subvert bad acting, transforming the banal to something worthy of viewing. In this instance the beautiful and the grotesque also surrender their mutual hostility. Images of September eleventh and reality TV might be considered violent but their violence, despite its referents, does not disrupt the conjunction of the beautiful/grotesque.

Videogames tend to subvert passive viewing because they are interactive. Nonetheless, videogame violence like television violence can either produce all-seeing scopophiles or engaged subjects. In the former case, the beautiful/grotesque violence becomes the source of *jouissance* and in the latter, it produces horror, fear or disgust. This recognition creates the possibility for the ludic engagement of violence. It is what informs such games as Raven Software's *Soldier of Fortune* and its sequel *Soldier*

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[28] Slavoj Zizek. 2002. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates.* New York: Verso, 6.

of Fortune II (SOFII).[29] The main character in SOFII makes reference to a real special forces officer, John Mullins, but the game narrative is largely fictive. Briefly, the plot follows the protagonist's subversion of a terrorist design to unleash a deadly virus on the world at large. The game is extremely violent, depicting blood, "motion captured death sequences," and dismembered limbs. What is surprising (or perhaps not so surprising) is that the graphic depiction of violence in the game is its selling point. Ghoul II rendering technology allows character enemies to be dismembered at thirty-six different locations on their bodies. The implication here is that violence itself does not produce the real. Moreover, violence has the potential of effecting a distance between the real and the subject. When taken in the context of a lust for the real, the sanitization of violence more effectively produces the conditions for war because it deters war from being completely consumed by pleasure.

The three conditions that I have outlined — the mechanization of soldiers, the obscuring of the other and, the sanitization of violence—have some important consequences when taken as a whole. Not only do these conditions make war possible in AA:O and outside of it, they make alternatives to war much more difficult to imagine.

Some Consequences

Manuel De Landa, in his text *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines,* uses the concept of the machinic phylum to organize the historical development of warfare. A machinic phylum can be described as "any process in which order emerges out of chaos as a result of its non-linear dynamics,"[30] or simply, "the flow of matter-movement conveying singularities."[31] Singularities are critical points which will render objects compatible or impose order on the arrangement of objects. De Landa argues that the alignment of singularities creates synergy and the misalignment of singularities will result in anything from an inefficient symbiosis to outright chaos. Extended to a discussion of human/machine interaction, the machinic phylum ought to cut across human and machine to join them together into a "synergistic whole."[32] Following De Landa's history of warfare, the US Military has generally sought to do the opposite, to take humans out of the loop:

> Events at the surface of a computer screen may become elements of different strategies.
> When used by the parasitic component of war machines (priests, spies, fanatics, etc.)
> simulated images can become simulacra…the simulated images populating computer
> displays can "hypnotize" their users and come to replace reality for them…The events
> on a computer screen may also become elements in a strategy to get humans out of the
> loop, to shorten the chain of command.[33]

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[29] Raven Software. 2003. *Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix* 2001 [cited December 22 2003]. Available from http://www.ravensoft.com/soldier2.html.

[30] Manuel De Landa. 1991. *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines*. (New York: Zone Books), 20.

[31] *Ibid*, 20.

[32] *Ibid*, 193.

[33] *Ibid*, 194.

AA:O can be read as an expression of the drive to take humans out of the loop. If we make the assumption that interactions with media have the potential to reconfigure our apprehension of the world, AA:O and its obscuring of the other, concomitant erasure of the self and its representation of sanitised violence, creates the conditions for a human/machine system which removes the humanity from the human. This is not to suggest that humans are somehow naturally humane, that there is some kind of essence which is being tainted with conditioning, but rather that the discourse of the game produces subjects in a manner which forecloses the space for a humane intervention. Consider Chris Gray's distillation of Lawrence Radine's argument:

> As part of a system the individual soldier has less of a chance to deviate from expected behavior…Through systems analysis, social psychology, behavioural sociology, personnel management, and computer-mediated systems, the individual soldier becomes part of a formal weapons system that is very difficult to resist…And "the structuring of a situation through the use of technologically developed equipment and realistic team training" produces a "degree of conformity and effectiveness" that is much better than traditional leadership, because it "is very difficult for the individual to sense the degree to which this form of domination can control his behavior." [34]

While De Landa as well as Gray are referring to simulations and training exercises which occur within the space of the military, given the characteristics of AA:O (that it is a simulation which, while it takes on the form of a first-person shooter, is said to represent a high degree of verisimilitude with the US Army soldier/s that it makes reference to), it is not far fetched to imagine that gamers who become soldiers become more machine-like. Jean Baudrillard's logic of simulation may also shed some light on the consequences of AA:O.

Thus far AA:O has been discussed as a simulation that represents a specific lived reality, that of the US Army soldier. Simulation taken in the way that Baudrillard understands it is "to feign to have what one doesn't have."[35] Rather than a simple act of misrepresentation, simulation no longer constitutes the imaginary in relation to the real, but instead comes to hide the fact that there is no real — what remains is the hyperreal, the precession of simulacra.[36] Deploying Baudrillard's concept of simulation, we can read AA:O as an expression of the desire for perfect security. Instead of reflecting a reality which exists outside of representation, AA:O participates in the construction of a discourse of security which is self-fulfilling. If we follow through with the assumption that "reality" is a product of discourse then war becomes more than a description, it becomes a simulation of peace. Peace as the *other* of war is invoked as the absence of war but the very presence of war feigns the possibility of peace. War makes security possible by creating that which is to be protected and what makes war possible in this instance is the

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[34] Chris Hables Gray. 1997. *Postmodern War: The New Politics of Conflict.* New York: Guilford Press, 200.

[35] Jean Baudrillard. 1994. *Simulacra and Simulation.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 3.

[36] *Ibid*, 3-7.

mechanisation of soldiers, the obscuring of the enemy and the sanitisation of violence. To prepare for military combat even if it is only through a videogame, is to take for granted that war is necessary, even inevitable — the game is a continuation of war by other means. Given the perpetual war against terror which has been repeatedly asserted by the Bush regime, videogames which produce war become increasingly important because they serve to indefinitely reiterate war. In the game world, the war is never over, and it is brought to the home, easier to access than it has been in the past. This is echoed in James Der Derian's notion of cyberdeterrence.

The obscuring of the *other* in AA:O creates the conditions for a new deterrence.[37] James Der Derian observes the US drive for technological superiority and suggests that the nuclear balance of terror has been replaced with a "simulation of digitised superiority —" cyberdeterrence:

> Internally, the cyberdeterrent is to be taken like prozac: a technopharmacological fix for all the organic anxieties that attend uncertain times and new configurations of power. Externally, it produces reality effects for a world in flux through a one-sided gaze — from the omniscience of the orbital geostationary platform to the beady eye of the unmanned aerial vehicle — that aspires not only to oversee but to foresee all threats, rooting out potential as well as real dangers with an anticipatory, normalizing panoptic.[38]

AA:O can itself be read as a cyberdeterrent both internally and externally directed. By internal I mean that the game, played by North American gamers or even gamers of the west at large, the target audience of the developers, takes on a particular meaning. With enemy obscured, the game reproduces an environment of cyberdeterrence: a space where the enemy is irrelevant and technology provides a virtual cure for a global insecurity. Within the game, the gamer fights (plays the game) because this is what the game tells him/her to do — a virtual army is produced and a virtual self is produced. On the level of recruitment, the game will most likely produce "real" soldiers and "real" war — gamers will eventually become soldiers. But for the rest of us, AA:O along with other military themed games and perhaps other forms of media representation, will continue to produce war as that which is always already present, with threats only just on the horizon and a security which rests on the logic of deterrence. Externally directed, AA:O deters against an imaginary threat. When non-American gamers play the game they get to experience some of what the US Army does. While this is within the limitations mentioned above, the

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[37] Deterrence or Rational Deterrence Theory is a Cold War body of knowledge which suggests, broadly, that two rational actors, namely states, will not attack each other if they both deem the costs of such an attack to be greater than the benefits. The object of policy informed by RDT was to deter a rival power from attacking by making the costs of such an attack as high as possible. See Keith Krause, "Rationality and Deterrence in Theory and Practice," in C. A. Snyder (Ed.), Contemporary Security and Strategy, New York: Routledge, 1999; and Phil Williams, *The Nuclear Debate: Issues and Politics*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984. Cyberdeterrence, in light of the collapse of the Cold War framework, seeks to project a preponderance of power by technological means, despite the lack of a rival superpower, in anticipation and hopeful neutralization of *any* threat.

[38] James Der Derian. 2001. Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network. Boulder: Westview Press, 114.

gamer is able to become virtually American for the length of the game session and come face-to-face with American technology and tactics, as diluted as they may be in this case. AA:O adds to the circulation of representations of America as an indomitable force.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to outline some of the ways in which *America's Army: Operations,* a videogame produced by the US Army, participates in the production of a discourse of war. Engaging a reading of the game, I have suggested that AA:O makes war possible by mechanising the soldier, by obscuring the enemy and the self, and, by sanitising violence. A number of consequences follow from such a representation. First, the game plays into a larger discourse which aims to remove the humanity from the human by making warfighting almost a mechanical function. Second, AA:O serves as a cyberdeterrent; it provides a space for war without the enemy and anticipates any enemies that may come to exist. And finally, the game simulates security by removing the need to confront insecurity.

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