Rethinking Military Gaming: *America's Army* and Its Critics

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Abstract

With the extensive use of military force by the U.S. government over the past decade, more scholarly attention has been directed at how mass culture is mobilized to support military objectives. Video games designed by the military or by civilians collaborating with military advisers are one of the major causes for concern, as these may provide ways of training players for military service or of building support for wars. This essay organizes prominent critiques of military gaming into structural/institutional, instrumental, and ideological perspectives and examines some of the most common arguments made from each. It argues that while critics of *America's Army* and other military games are right to be cautious about military influence on gaming, critics tend to judge military games more harshly than the evidence warrants.

At least since Bruce Sterling discussed the possibility of a new "virtual military/industrial complex" (Sterling, 1993), the link between the military and the gaming industry has been subject to careful scrutiny by scholars and journalists. This scrutiny has intensified as military simulations have become more heavily dependent on gaming technology and games have become more visually realistic simulations of

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war. Games studies have found strong connections between the American military and the gaming industry, and documented the military's increasing use of games as recruiting and military education tools (Halter, 2006; Lenoir, 2000; Stone, 1996; Wolf, 2008). Some have suggested that there may even be a natural link between games and warfare (Walther, 2009). A clear trend across these studies is that military gaming is described as something that is potentially harmful. Much of the scholarship on military gaming joins the long tradition of criticizing militarism in entertainment (Kellner, 1995; Ledivow & Robins, 1989; Markovitz, 2004) and military intrusion into social life in general (Lasswell, 1941).

Critics of military gaming raise many convincing arguments, and their concerns are understandable given the enormous influence that military interests have over contemporary social and political life. However, despite the intuitive appeal of many of the arguments against military gaming, it is important to assess the validity of the critiques and to determine the extent to which they are plausible. This essay will argue that many of the arguments made against military games suffer from serious limitations. Studies of military gaming tend to erroneously assume that any connection between the military and civilian entertainment is harmful to players and to civil society. Moreover, these studies often fail to explain the mechanisms that may produce this harm, and, when they do, they tend to mobilize arguments that make implausible assumptions about the military's interests. Finally, studies of military gaming rarely discuss the positive functions that military gaming might be able to serve, such as how *America's Army* has been used to improve the U.S. Army's ethics training. A critical examination of the literature on military gaming is needed to assess the quality of the arguments against military gaming and to help determine how game scholars should analyze military games as the genre continues to grow.

This essay will use the term *military gaming* to include games that are designed by the military, games that are developed to perform military functions, and games that are developed with material or technical support from the military. This does not include all war games. There are some, especially those set in historical conflicts or fantasy worlds, that have a military subject matter without having a strong connection to real world military institutions. Therefore, games such as *America's Army* and *Full Spectrum Warrior* qualify as military games. The former was developed by the U.S. Army and the latter was designed to be useable in military training. Drawing the distinction between these military games and other games about war and military activities is challenging, as it can be difficult to determine when a game serves a military function or has received military support. However, this is only meant to be an ideal type that can serve as an analytical tool. The purpose for drawing this distinction helps to identify and focus on the games that seem to have the most potential to be harmful to players and to society. The military games with a close relationship to the military or defense industries have generally faced stronger criticism than those that only have a military subject matter or a weak connection to the military. The main case for this essay, as it is in most research on military games, is *America's Army*. This essay will focus on how critical appraisals of military

gaming apply to *America's Army* and respond to these while also attempting to generalize from that game in a way that might provide insight into other military games. *America's Army* is a good starting place for this analysis of military gaming in general because it is by far the most heavily criticized military game and because its recruitment and training functions make it the game most clearly associated with military goals.

The first section of this essay will provide a brief overview of military gaming by discussing the controversy surrounding civil–military cooperation to produce games. It will show the limitations of critiquing military games from a structural/institutional perspective by arguing that military gaming is not harmful solely by virtue of how the games are produced. The second section will consider the instrumental argument, which holds that military games may make civilian players or soldiers more violent or less aware of the moral dimension of violence. It will argue that the power of military games to train civilians has been overstated and that games could be used for both positive and negative purposes in military training. The importance placed on ethically restrained fighting in *America's Army* and the development of military ethics simulations with the *America's Army* engine indicates that the game is being used to promote greater awareness of the moral dimension of war. This is one of the potentially beneficial consequences of military gaming. The third section assesses the argument that *America's Army* is ideologically biased. It will show that many of the critiques of the game make implausible claims about the game's effects on players and society and that they misunderstand the army's goals. While *America's Army* clearly supports a pro-American Army viewpoint, the game's ideology tends to be restrained and so overt that it is relatively easy to judge reflectively.

The Military Entertainment Complex

The history of military gaming has been discussed extensively in earlier studies (Halter, 2006; Huntemann & Payne, 2010; Lenoir, 2000; Nichols, 2010), so it will only be covered briefly here. Game developers and the military have cooperated in the creation of new technologies for decades. Game developers rely on the U.S. military for technical assistance, advisement, and financial support. The military borrows technology and technical assistance from civilian game developers (Manovich, 2007, p. 278). Game developers have an interest in cooperating with the military for funding and technical assistance. The U.S. military has a strong interest in simulation technologies, as it has long been an avid user of simulations and wargaming to train for future conflicts (Citino, 2004). Traditionally, the military's interest in simulations has been for internal use to train soldiers for war. The release of the first version of *America's Army* in 2002 marked a turning point in the history of military gaming, as it was the first game designed by the military for the purpose of influencing civilian gamers.

Much of the controversy surrounding military games is attributable to *America's Army*. Along with the *Grand Theft Auto* series, *Manhunt*, and a few other ultraviolent

games, *America's Army* is one of a few games so controversial that it has produced its own subgenre of critical studies (Dyer-Witherford & De Peuter, 2009). It seems to be a clear sign of critics' worst fears of military intrusion into civil society being realized. There is good reason for the widespread concern about the game. *America's Army* is the foremost example of military intrusion into gaming. It presents a positive image of military service for public relations and recruitment, and it shows a stylized image of war. For these and other reasons, *America's Army* is widely condemned for everything from training players to kill to building popular support for ongoing wars.

Although many war games may encourage military service by glorifying it (Schulzke, 2010), *America's Army* is unique in being specifically designed to teach players about the Army. Given the game's prominence in the scholarly literature on gaming, its popularity, and its status as one of the strongest examples of games bridging the civil–military divide, understanding *America's Army* is essential to theorizing the broader phenomenon of military gaming. With the military designing games for recruitment and game designers making games that they can be used to train military personnel, it seems as though there is a potentially dangerous link between the gaming and defense industries (Höglund, 2008; Leonard, 2007; Napoli, 2003; Sisler, 2008). Game scholars have interpreted military games from several different theoretical perspectives. There are three general types of analyses of military games. First, some focus on the structural or institutional link games create between the military and civilians. Second, others are concerned with the instrumental use of military games as training tools for soldiers and civilians. Finally, some focus on the textual content of military games and how the games reflect ideological biases.

Descriptive studies of military games tend to take a structural/institutional perspective. They analyze the material links and information sharing between members of the military and the producers of civilian media, and the military's increasing interest in gaming as a communication and training tool. The structural perspective is often implicit in the language of institutional links used to describe civil–military cooperation. In one of the earliest studies of military gaming, Herz popularized the term *military entertainment complex* (1997)—a reference to the more well-known concept of the "military industrial complex." The latter phrase comes from President Eisenhower's president speech in which he warned, with surprising accuracy, of the growing power of the military over social life. By taking the idea of a military industrial complex as a model, Herz gives his analysis a structural and institutional focus that parallels the broader literature on civil–military fusion (Feaver, 1999).

Other studies of military gaming have emulated this style of analysis, usually by providing detailed histories that show that the military's influence on civilian entertainment and its borrowing from video game developers (Crogan, 2003, 2007; Halter, 2006; Huntemann & Payne, 2010; Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter, 2003; Lenoir, 2000; Ottosen, 2009b). Huntemann and Payne provide one of the best examples of the structural perspective. They describe three types of civil–military interaction. First, there is the sharing of technological resources, which goes in both directions between the military and civilian game developers (Huntemann & Payne,

2010, p. 7). Second, they share personnel. "Both video game companies and the military fill their ranks with similar recruits. In other words, game firms need young wargamers, just as the Pentagon needs young warfighters" (Huntemann & Payne, 2010, p. 7). Finally, the military and civilian game developers face similar financial demands and rely on each other to offset these demands. Each of these points refers to structural or institutional links without taking up the question of what practical or ideological function military games serve.

Lenoir and Halter's studies of military gaming provide excellent examples of the structural/institutional perspective (Halter, 2006; Lenoir, 2000). Each traces the history of the interactions between civilian developers and the military. They are more reserved about making normative claims than most of the scholars of military gaming; their research is more descriptive than polemical. Nevertheless, one gets the feeling from these studies that the weight of the facts alone should be enough to convince readers that civil–military cooperation in the gaming industry is undesirable, even if the reasons that it might be harmful go unstated. These studies are extremely valuable, as they have helped to trace the history of military games and shown the interaction between civilian and military game development. However, the normative component of these studies tends to be underdeveloped. These studies imply that civil–military cooperation is inherently bad, but fail to provide reasons why all forms of civil–military cooperation should be threatening. The fact that the games are produced by the military or with military assistance is insufficient to show that there is actually something problematic with them. To make this normative point, structural analysis of military gaming must show that the games are harmful in some way.

Of course, not all structural studies of military games rely on implicit normative claims. Some highlight these claims and mobilize their empirical evidence to support them and to build a case against the military–entertainment complex. For example, Crogan argues that structural connection between civilian and military entertainment reveal "a significant moment in the pure war tendency, one in which a further stage of the merger between the spheres of military and domestic activity and concerns is reached" (2003, p. 280). Similarly, Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter develop their critique of military games by drawing on "the intersection of military planning, computer simulation, film studios, and video game developers" (2009, p. 102). However, even in these cases of scholars making explicit normative claims along with their structural analyses of civil–military cooperation, the arguments also rely on other strategies, such as ideological critique, which will be discussed later. The fact that these overtly critical studies of military games import the normative basis for the critique from one of the other analytical perspectives described in this essay suggests that a structural analysis alone may be insufficient to show that military games are considered harmful. There must be some analysis of what information the games present, how players experience them, or how they are used by the military.

Although the descriptive studies present irrefutable evidence of civil–military cooperation in developing video games, this evidence is insufficient to show that this

cooperation is problematic. Evidence of a structural or institutional connection is not, in itself, evidence that the military is using games as a tool for social control or indoctrination. There does not seem to be any reason to think that civil–military cooperation in creating games is intrinsically harmful. It may even be beneficial in some ways. If this association leads to improvements in gaming technology, more financial investments to help developers create new games, and a more diverse range of game producers, then it is mutually beneficial cooperation that leads to better games. Such cooperation should not be regarded as being intrinsically harmful but rather as something that has the capacity to have positive and negative effects depending on the form civil–military cooperation takes.

The fact that there is a structural–institutional connection between the gaming industry and the military is not in itself enough to demonstrate that this relationship is harmful. To the extent that structural and institutional studies go beyond descriptive analysis and make the normative claim that military gaming is harmful, they tend to do so by relying on an unstated assumption that civil–military cooperation is harmful or by also making the kinds of practical or ideological arguments that will be discussed in the following sections. The potential effects of military games can therefore only be judged by looking at the functions these games perform or the messages they are used to disseminate.

Military Games as Training Simulations

Opponents of violent video games often argue that these games are dangerous because train players to commit violent acts. Opinions differ about what causal mechanisms are responsible for this. Among the most commonly cited are that games teach people how to use weapons (Grossman, 1998; Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999) or that they desensitize players and make it psychologically easier for them to perform or tolerate violent acts (Waddington, 2007; Wonderly, 2007). Some critics of military video games make a similar critique, but rather than objecting to the effects of simulated violence as such, these commentators argue that games may impart training that is specific to war. As Leonard says, "war video games are no longer purely about training soldiers already enlisted; rather, they are about recruitment and developing future soldiers" (Leonard, 2007, p. 4). This captures the essential claim in the instrumental critique of military games. In order to assess the plausibility of this argument, it is important to assess the extent to which video games are a meaningful simulation of military activities.

Simulations designed specifically for military use and video games adapted as training tools have an important role in contemporary military education (Herbst, 2005, p. 315). Their continued use by all branches of the U.S. military over the past decade is strong evidence of the effectiveness of digital training simulations. However, utility of simulations may not be uniform across military occupations. Simulations can be more or less useful to the extent that they are effective models of an activity. They hold the most promise for training military personnel to perform jobs

that are largely or entirely mediated by computer systems, such as the operations performed by tank crews and pilots (Sterling, 1993). The apparent similarity between simulations and war is especially high when it comes to remote controlled drones like the Predator and the Reaper. Although these drones fly over contested areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan, they are, except during takeoff and landing, controlled by pilots based in the United States (Singer, 2009: Shaw, 2010, p. 790). The interface through which pilots remotely control the drones closely resembles a video game and the pilots lack the tactile feedback or threat of injury that pilots of warplanes normally experience. It is therefore possible for games that involve piloting drones could be used to present a relatively strong simulation of the experience of controlling a real drone. To the extent that games simulate military activities that are heavily computer-mediated, they have the capacity to be fairly accurate simulations. However, most military games simulate forms of combat that are largely defined by activities that are not mediated by digital technologies.

Despite the similarities between some military games and real military activities, there are important limitations on what kinds of activities can be simulated. Even in the twenty-first century, many military operations remain unmediated by computers or only make limited use of them. Infantry combat, the activity that is probably most often simulated in military games, is one such activity. *America's Army* and many other military games are primarily about infantry combat. Some of the activities infantry soldiers are mediated by computers and other machines. This is especially true in technologically sophisticated military forces, like the U.S. Army. Soldiers wear night vision goggles, aim their weapons, used special optical systems, and track movements on the battlefield using the Blue Force Tracker system (Robben, 2011). Nevertheless, even with these many sophisticated technologies to help soldiers, the mechanics of simulated infantry combat remain distant from the experience of video games. Military games hardly resemble real-life infantry combat, as the former is a digital simulation of an activity that does not involve interacting with a computer system. No amount of practice with a mouse and keyboard in *America's Army* can prepare one for firing a rifle or leaping over obstacles. The technological assistance that infantrymen rely on is qualitatively different from the heavily computer mediated activities like piloting a drone. The infantryman's experiences are largely defined by physical activities and psychological states that civilian video games have not yet been able to simulate. Thus, the strength of the claim that games might train players how to fight depends on what activity is being simulated, and at present, much of the simulation is of activities that are difficult to faithfully reproduce through digital media.

The element of *America's Army* and other military games that comes closest real military training is the tactical instruction. Military games teach players lessons in such tasks as maneuvering fire teams and using suppressing fire. However, here too it would be an overstatement to say that the game prepares players for war, for at least three reasons. First, the training in tactics is limited and mostly concerned with giving players a sense of how to work as a team. In *America's Army*, players do not

receive anything like the level of tactical training one would find in real Army training or even in the Army's field manuals. The game's training is limited to fairly basic tactical instructions such as the importance of not approaching enemies from their front.

Second, military training is contextually different from anything presented in video games. Recruits learning to be soldiers conduct far more extensive training than anything covered in *America's Army*. That training also presents tactical lessons in a much more meaningful way than video games can because the lessons are integrated with a larger body of professional training. Finally, studies of military training have found that the theoretical knowledge of military operations has little value without the practice of applying this knowledge in real world training activities (Doty & Sowden, 2010). Soldiers learning tactics in real-life military training continually practice battle drills until these become second nature. This kind of familiarity is essential when employing these tactics under the pressures of the battlefield, as soldiers must instinctively rely on their training when they face extreme stress. It is doubtful that the military video games currently on the market could provide players with this level of tactical competence, especially when they do not incorporate physical training.

Thus, when it comes to the infantry combat activities that are the central activity of military games, the argument that military video games impart military skills to players is relatively weak. This claim overlooks the differences between real military training and video game simulations, the much different context of real world training, and the incompleteness of virtual training. Games may become more accurate simulations of war as introduce tactile elements, but the current gulf between the activities soldiers perform in combat and those players perform in military games to support the contention that military games developed for civilian players can train players to kill. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the games have no pedagogical value from the military's perspective. As Nitsche correctly points out, the significance of *America's Army* lies not in its power to train players, but in its power to communicate with them. As he puts it, "*America's Army* is of value mainly for tracking social behavior of gamers, not for military training purposes" (Nitsche, 2009, p. 10). It is, as the game's developers have maintained, not a training tool but a tool of "strategic communication." This argument will be considered in the next section, as this claim tends to be made as a distinct critique of military games as ideologically biased media.

Closely related to the concern that games may train players to fight is the possibility that they may be used to make military personnel less morally restrained or to blur the lines between fantasy from reality. Poole argues that among the risks associated members of the military using simulations in training is that the growing similarity between computer-guided weapons and computer games may lead to an inability to distinguish fantasy from reality. Military games, he says, are not morally challenging because they are clearly fantasy; yet, the line between fantasy and reality is blurred with the weapons approximate the simulation (Poole, 2004, p. 228).

Payne makes a similar point, saying that in games like *America's Army* and *Full Spectrum Warrior* "production professionals function as techno-cultural brokers who fuse state-sponsored militarism and private-sector entertainment to produce video games that blur the lines between fantasy and fact, recreation and training, and entertainment and war" (Payne, 2009, p. 238). Finally, Nick Turse argues that the games immerse players in a world of virtual war that is often closely linked to real fighting (2008, p. 240). These are dubious claims, as it is not at all clear that games have caused any serious blurring of boundaries or inability to discern the real world from simulation among military personnel and civilians who play military games. The claims are especially problematic when judged against *America's Army* for at least two reasons.

First, *America's Army* is noteworthy for its lack of realism. The graphics are rendered well, but the game's weapons only cause barely visible wounds that give little indication of the destruction of war. When an avatar is shot, a small red mark indicates the wound and the avatar collapses. As Hodes and Ruby-Sachs put it, "despite the game's neurotic commitment to accuracy elsewhere, the small detail about killing people is brushed over gingerly" (2002). Stahl develops this point at length and connects it to the games recruiting function.

> A gory game where limbs are blown off would not only rouse the easiest kind of reactionary criticism, it would also limit the audience for the game by virtue of a stricter rating. Moreover, a game that seriously approached the horrors of battle would probably undermine the recruitment effort (Stahl, 2006: 124).

Given the stylized depiction of combat in *America's Army*, the game seems to be a poor candidate for blurring the boundaries between fantasy and reality or for desensitizing players. In fact, the violence is so stylized that it could more plausible lead to the opposite problem. The lack of realism in the presentation of violence gives the appearance of war without casualties and without noncombatant casualties.

Second, it is unfair to judge games like *America's Army* apart from the training functions they are used to perform. Even if one assumes that the critics of military games are right and that these games have the power to influence players, then it does not necessarily follow that the lessons the games teach are harmful. A military game like *America's Army* could be used to encourage players to fight indiscriminately or even to deliberately target noncombatants. It might reward players for performing actions that would be considered immoral if they were real. Such a game would be worthy of harsh criticism. By contrast, military games could also be used to impart more positive lessons about morally restrained fighting, and to emphasize the importance of minimizing dangers to noncombatants and friendly personnel.

America's Army takes the latter approach, as it requires players to follow rules of engagement and punishes players for killing allies, prisoners, and noncombatants; they must even minimize harm to local infrastructure. The game is far more rule-governed than most first-person shooters on the market (Salter, 2011, p. 369).

Moreover, it has also been adapted to improve ethics training for soldiers. One of the latest military adaptations of *America's Army* is "Moral Combat," which presents soldiers simulated ethical challenges ("CAPE Products," 2011). This kind of training could be used to make soldiers more conscious of the ethical implications of their actions on the battlefield and to train them to be more culturally sensitive to the people they encounter in other countries. The British Army also makes use of a video game simulation system that presents soldiers with ethical dilemmas to train soldiers to be more ethical. The fact that the military has shown an interest in developing ethics training programs that use video game simulations show that military games can just as easily be used to accomplish praiseworthy training activities as to desensitize soldiers. However, exactly what training function the games perform ultimately depends on what information the games present and the extent to which this information is ideologically biased.

America's Army and the Ideological Critique

The third major perspective from which military video games are studied is that of ideological critique. Many scholars advocate treating military games as forms of propaganda that promote a militaristic ideology (Crogan, 2003; Delwiche, 2007; Herbst, 2005; Nieborg, 2006, 2010; Ottosen, 2009a, 2009b; Power, 2007; Sicart, 2009). This is probably the most convincing of the three critical strategies, as military games often have strong ideological biases. This is certainly true of *America's Army*, as the game's purpose is to provide players with information about military service and to encourage them to join the Army. The game has been very successful in reaching players. Twenty-six versions of the game have been released, and these were downloaded more than 40 million times between 2002 and 2008 (Clyde & Thomas, 2008, p. 372). A 2005 study revealed that around 40% of enlisting soldiers had played *America's Army* (Barnes, 2005). There is not sufficient information to show whether the game was the decisive factor in leading recruits to the army or whether they only played the game because of a prior desire to join the Army. This question must still be resolved, but if only a small fraction of that 40% decided to join the army because of the game, the game remains a resounding success from the army's perspective. *America's Army* has also led to the creation of the virtual army experience and the army experience center, which allow people to take part in joint operations that provide an even more immersive experience of army life than playing the game at home (Huntemann & Payne, 2010, p. 3).

One of the types of ideological claims made against military games is that they initiate a perspectival shift for individual players or for entire societies—a shift that may increase tolerance of violence and promote war as a legitimate means of achieving foreign policy goals. For example, Payne argues that the collaboration between "new media cultural brokers" and the Defense Department creates a "militarized worldview" (Payne, 2009, p. 241). Elkus describes games like *America's Army* as being nothing more than tools of ideological domination. "For all the talk of

violence in shooting games, the real danger is the semifascist themes inherent in many of them, and the attitudes that they instill in players. With the notable exception of '*Grand Theft Auto*,' the player usually plays a figure of authority that must snuff out some undesirable" (Elkus, 2006). Similarly, Andy Deck argues that *Full Spectrum Warrior* and *America's Army* "call forth a cult of ultrapatriotic xenophobes whose greatest joy is to destroy, regardless of how racist, imperialistic, and flimsy the rationale" (Deck, 2004). Other studies make this argument somewhat clearer by focusing on specific elements of the game's, such as the way it depicts the terrorist opponents and the pro-American messages. As Ottosen says, "the game is, of course, extremely one-sided in its approach and offers the military solution as the only solution to a conflict (Ottosen, 2009b, p. 99). Ottosen and Allen both criticize the way the game only portrays conflict from the American perspective (Allen, 2011; Ottosen, 2009b). Finally, in Hodes and Ruby-Sachs (2002) the game teaches players that war is fun by presenting war as an enjoyable, entertaining experience.

As the quotations indicate, many of these harsh assessments of *America's Army* and other military games seem to be motivated as much by the use of military force as a foreign policy tool in the real world as by the content of video games themselves. Critics tend to associate military games depicting modern conflicts with ongoing wars. This is especially true of those studies that use gaming as a means by which to discuss the War on Terror (Leonard, 2006; Ouellette, 2008). This leads them to see the objectionable methods used to wage that war in the military games. However, those who accuse military games of promoting the War on Terror or building support for war in general tend to make two erroneous assumptions. First, that social militarization is in the U.S. military's interest. Second, those military games have the capacity to do bring about this perspectival shift. There is good reason to doubt these assumptions. The army clearly has a strong incentive for using *America's Army* to bring in new recruits, as the organization must have enough recruits to sustain itself. Nevertheless, recruitment is a much different goal from social militarization or promoting war. These goals are arguably not in the military's interest and, even if they were, they are beyond the military's capacity. Few groups have a greater interest in avoiding war and minimizing the duration of wars than members of the military, who suffer far more than most American civilians. In the United States, the burden of war on the civilian population is so light military personnel have become resentful at the civilian lack of awareness of ongoing conflicts (Hoffman, 2007, 2008).

It is important to remember that the American military lacks the power to declare wars. It, like most other militaries in democratic countries, is a depoliticized institution that is supposed to obey the orders of civilian politicians. It is civilian politicians, and not members of the military, who are usually responsible building public support for military action. This was made abundantly clear in the months leading up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq; the primary architects of that war the civilian politicians of the Bush administration, while General Shinseki, the Chief of Staff of

the Army, and others in the Army publicly questioned the invasion plan (Ricks, 2006, p. 68). Moreover, it is politicians and not members of the military who must manage public opinion about wars and who face removal from office because of the conduct of a war (Goemans, 2000).

If military gaming really is a way of generating support for ongoing or perspective wars, then one would expect to see some connection between those who have the power to declare war and whose job tenure depends on winning wars to have some role in developing military games. *America's Army* does not have a discernable partisan agenda, nor does it take a position on the United States' ongoing wars. As Bogost points out, *America's Army* promotes military service in a depoliticized and decontextualized way.

These tasks, like real U.S. Army missions, are decontextualized from geopolitics. Reward comes not from service completed in the conscious interest of a conflict, but from service completed in the absence of political circumstances. The U.S. Army recruit, one learns from *America's Army*, is an apolitical being (Bogost, 2007, p. 77).

The apolitical message of *America's Army* does sacrifice the game's power to take a strong normative position about the country's ongoing wars. However, this perspective is nevertheless desirable. Many scholars of civil–military relations have convincingly argued that a depoliticized military is essential for a democracy. It facilitates the military's subordination to civilian leaders and prevents soldiers from using violence or threats of violence to influence political decisions (Feaver & Gelpi, 2004; Huntington, 1959). A depoliticized view of the army and its missions is therefore an accurate representation of the Army and its values.

The game's apolitical stance makes the ideological biases of *America's Army* less powerful and less pervasive than it would be otherwise. Galloway argues that the ideology of *America's Army* mirrors that of games like *Special Force* (a shooter designed by Hezbollah) and *Under Ash* (a game that depicts Palestinians fighting against Israelis; Galloway, 2004). However, this is an unfair comparison. *Special Force* and *Under Ash* are highly political games that are set in ongoing conflicts. They are therefore not only propaganda but propaganda that attempts to influence players' views of a real conflict and that promotes acts of violence against specific opponents. While *America's Army* clearly promotes military service and it glorifies American soldiers as being the honorable and courageous, it does not take a position on any specific conflict, nor does it attempt to encourage players' to take any political action with respect to current or prospective wars. The game glorifies war, but it does so in an abstract way that does not lend support to a specific war. Its ideology therefore seems too limited to deserve some of the harsh criticisms it has received. The ideology of *America's Army* and other military games that depict hypothetical conflicts is much less threatening than in games that name specific enemies and that attempt to influence players' political views.

To some extent, it is fair to classify *America's Army* as propaganda. One can find obvious distortions and to interests that underlie them. It shows an unrealistically clean version of combat, it idealizes the army and its culture, and it only presents

an American perspective on war. Insofar as critiques of the game focus on these elements, they are right in characterizing it as ideologically biased. Critics are also right in arguing that this is potentially harmful because it creates the impression that wars can be relatively clean and that the U.S. military is always on the right side of a conflict. However, the potential harm of this bias is reduced because it is overt. The game does not attempt to hide its limited perspective or to disguise itself as a neutral source of information. Instead, it continually calls attention to its bias. Its affiliation with the army and support for the army's mission is overt. The game undermines its appearance of neutrality and reminds the player that the game is directing them toward a pro-American Army viewpoint. It is openly and self-consciously propaganda. This type of propaganda may influence players' views of the army and even encourage players to look favorably on U.S. military actions, but because the game's message is overt, *America's Army* casts itself as a biased source of information.

One could link the structural and ideological arguments by acknowledging that games do not have the power to indoctrinate players by themselves while maintaining that they participate in a larger military–industrial complex that is capable of producing this effect. This is an important concern as, the military and the defense industries that support it have enormous power in the United States and account for the majority of the federal government's budget. It is also a more plausible threat than games accomplishing this in isolation. However, at present, the military industrial complex and military games do not seem to have accomplished this. There is as much, if not more, distance between the civilian and military populations now than before the release of *America's Army* (Hoffman, 2007; Leal, 2007; Szayana et al., 2007). The threat of American civilians losing interest in how the military is used seems to be a more immediate threat than social militarization. American civilians have been largely insulated from the wars the American military has waged over the past decade (Leal, 2007). This raises the risk that ignorance or indifference, rather than militarism, may generate support for war.

As Li points out, military games may actually offer a solution to this problem (Li, 2003). These games can provide civilians with some sense of what the military is, what its capacities are, and what kinds of operations it is involved in (Li, 2003). They may be able to partially bridge the civil–military divide and make civilians more competent judges of how the American military is used. In doing so, they can perform an important function of keeping citizens informed about the military. Realizing this potential demands maintaining a careful balance in how military games present information. The information must be fairly accurate in representing the military in order to mediate the civil–military divide and its biases must be overt, so that players do not mistake military games for neutral sources of information about conflicts. Robertson's ethnographic studies of the army's virtual army experience supports Li's point, as he finds that the entertainment produced by the army tends to be far more diverse and multidimensional than critics recognize (Robertson, 2009). They are not simply propaganda but rather an attempt to show civilians a relatively accurate, albeit stylized, view of what the army is like.

Conclusion

This essay does not mean to imply that military gaming is unproblematic, that it cannot be used for malicious purposes, or that it cannot have harmful unintended consequences. The criticisms made against *America's Army* and other military games are plausible, and it is possible that in the future games will be developed that do attempt to train players to fight or that incite players to violence. Game scholars should continue to subject military games to critical analysis. The possibilities of social militarization and the spread of propaganda through games are serious concerns that may become more plausible as new games are released. This is especially true if future military games incorporate more sophisticated techniques of influencing players' perceptions or controls that allow these games to serve as more realistic training simulations. However, it is important to refrain from overstating the case against military games.

As this essay has shown, many of the arguments made against military video games suffer from significant limitations. Video games and other products of military entertainment should not be deemed problematic simply because there is collaboration in production. This may be an indication of bias, but structural links such as the sharing of information, finances, and technology, is insufficient to show that civil–military cooperation in the gaming industry is harmful. Showing this connection does not tell us what ideological message the games promote or military games are actually experienced. The argument that military games may train players or soldiers to perform immoral actions or lead to a blurring of the line between fantasy and reality is likewise incomplete. Some military games have a training function, but these are of limited utility to civilian players. Moreover, *America's Army* shows that military games can also be used for positive ends by teaching soldiers to be more ethically and culturally sensitive. The strongest strategy for judging military games is looking at the ideological content of the games.

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