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# The rhetoric of persuasive games

Freedom and discipline in *America's Army*



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## Summary

Computer games are one of the most popular entertainment forms of our time. But these games can also be used for overt military propaganda – as in the case of the US Army’s vastly popular recruitment game *America’s Army*. This thesis uses computer game theory (often known as ludology) to try to understand how computer games can serve as *representations* of ideas. Looking at three fundamental aspects of computer games – the gameworlds, the rules and the player roles – I find three rhetorical strategies connected with these aspects: *authenticity*, *legitimization* and *identification*, respectively. All of these strategies are connected with an emphasis on discipline and constraints on player behavior within the game, and contribute to a subtly formed *ethos* which lends credibility and authority to the game – and by extension, to the US Army. Based on an argument about the nature of freedom and discipline in computer games, I suggest a model for rhetorical analysis of persuasive computer games which focuses on the game’s balance of freedom and constraints in each of the fundamental aspects of the game; in which the gameworld is seen on a spectrum between authenticity and autonomy, the player role on a spectrum between identification and identity play, and the game rules on a spectrum between legitimization and opposition.

## Sammendrag

Dataspill er en av nåtidens mest populære underholdningsformer. Men disse spillene kan også brukes til utilslørt militær propaganda; noe den amerikanske hærens svært populære rekrutteringsspill *America’s Army* er et eksempel på. Denne masteroppgaven bruker dataspillteori (ofte omtalt som ludologi) for å forsøke å forstå hvordan dataspill kan tjene som *representasjoner* av ideer. Jeg ser på noen grunnleggende sider ved spillformen – spillverdenen, reglene og spillernes roller – og finner tre retoriske strategier forbundet med disse sidene: Henholdsvis *autentisitet*, *legitimering* og *identifikasjon*. Alle disse strategiene er forbundet med et fokus på disiplin og begrensninger på spillerens frihet i spillet, og bidrar til en subtilt formet *ethos* som gir troverdighet og autoritet til spillet – og dermed også til USAs hær. Ut fra en diskusjon om frihet og disiplin i dataspill foreslår jeg en modell for retorisk analyse av overtalende dataspill som fokuserer på spillets balanse mellom frihet og begrensninger i de ulike sidene ved spillet. I denne modellen sees spillverdenen som et spektrum mellom autentisitet og autonomi, spillernes roller som et spektrum mellom identifikasjon og spill med identiteter, og spillreglene som et spektrum mellom legitimering og opposisjon.



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Front page illustration: *America's Army* screenshot taken from the gamespot.com website (see <http://www.gamespot.com/pc/action/americasarmyoperations/screenindex.html?sid=6125475&page=5>, last retrieved March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2007 at 20:15 CET).

# 1. Introduction

“Guns don’t kill people; bullets do! They just make them fly really, really fast.”  
 (“Charlton Heston” in *That’s My Bush!* Parker and Stone 2001.)

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002, a unique computer game was launched. *America’s Army* (US Army 2006)<sup>1</sup> was not just the first publicly distributed computer game<sup>2</sup> officially endorsed by the US Army; according to Zhan Li it was also “the first state-production of video game popular culture for the purposes of strategic communication with the public” (2004: 5). Designed as a recruitment tool for the US Army, this technically advanced game was made available for download free of charge from the website [www.americasarmy.com](http://www.americasarmy.com) – a website closely connected with the army’s main recruitment website [www.goarmy.com](http://www.goarmy.com). Since then the game has been updated with numerous new expansions and new versions, and has become one of the world’s most popular games in its genre.

*America’s Army* belongs to a genre often known as “tactical shooters”, in which players engage in virtual combat similar to that found in simpler first person shooter action games, but with a wider range of tactical options available to the player. *America’s Army* simulates US Army training and combat, and consists of two main parts. The first part, “Basic Training”, is made up of a series of single-player missions that simulate the basic training for a soldier in the US Army. Training missions take place in 3D simulated spaces built from models of real-life Army training camps; these camps and their function in the real US Army are presented in the mission briefings. The second part of the game is a multiplayer online game, where the players log on to game servers to play in teams with other players to solve specific missions in combat with opposing teams.

From the point of view of the US Army, *America’s Army* has been a great success. In the course of four and a half years, more than 8 million players have registered to play the game; of these, around 4.5 million have completed the “Basic Training” elements necessary to play the online multiplayer version, conducting a total of about 116 000 hours of play per day on average the last 30 days. That is modest compared to *Counter-Strike* (The Counter-Strike Team 2000), the most popular game in the genre, which has seen a total of 3.42 million player hours per day the last month, according to statistics by game

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<sup>1</sup> The game was initially released as *America’s Army: Recon* on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2002. Since then it has been upgraded and expanded in 22 new versions. The observations and analyses in this thesis, except where otherwise stated, are based on the version which is officially known as *America’s Army: Special Forces (Link-Up)* (v.2.6.0). It was released February 9<sup>th</sup> 2006, and contains the main content of all previous versions, though some elements have been altered. I have played this version extensively in the period March 2006 – February 2007, reaching a “honor level” of 20 (see below); not enough to impress any regular player of the game, but enough to know the game well. Version 2.7.0 “Overmatch”, which was released September 14<sup>th</sup> 2006, will be commented briefly at the end of chapter 3; whereas version 2.8.0 “Coalition”, which was released December 21<sup>st</sup> 2006 will not be analyzed in this thesis. For a full version history, visit <http://www.americasarmy.com/intel/versions.php> (last retrieved February 11<sup>th</sup> 2007 at 17:00 CET).

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, the terms ‘computer game’ and ‘videogame’ are treated as synonyms, and refer to what Espen Aarseth calls “games in virtual environments” (2004a: §10). For further discussion of these terms, see chapter 2.



distributors Steam – but it’s good enough to put *America’s Army* in the top ten list of the popular game server network *GameSpy.com*.<sup>3</sup> After the first presentation of the game at the E3 in Los Angeles may 2002, eight gaming publications selected the game for best-of-show awards – infamously, one of them called it “Best Misappropriation of Taxpayer Dollars Ever” (Halter 2006: ix). According to calculations by Shenja van der Graaf and David B. Nieborg, the game would only have needed to gather 120 recruits for the real US Army in order to justify the cost of producing it (van der Graaf and Nieborg 2003: 328). Four years later, officials claim that “[s]urvey results find *America’s Army* to be the Army’s most effective sponsorship effort for reaching young Americans” (Callahan 2006: 1). According to Michael Zyda, the leader of the Army Game Project, traffic on the GoArmy.com recruitment site has increased 28% because of the game, and “[t]he Army estimates *America’s Army* has the potential to save some \$700M-\$4B per year” due to the low cost of the game compared with other forms of advertising (quoted in Nieborg 2005a: 105). The continued interest in military computer game projects is another indication that the game is considered a success by the military institutions (see chapter 3.1).

*America’s Army* is probably the most technically advanced, the most expensive and the most popular advergaming (advertising game) to date. It is probably also one of the most controversial, mainly due to its propagandistic purpose. The *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (2004: 427) gives the following definition of ‘propaganda’: “Any form of communication in support of national objectives designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly.” Considering this definition, and the uniqueness of *America’s Army* as the first large-scale attempt to use an online computer game for such purposes, *America’s Army* must be judged as state of the art propaganda.<sup>4</sup> It is the aim of this thesis to try and understand how this new innovation in propaganda technique has been constructed as a work of rhetoric. For these reasons it is not just interesting in itself, but also as a prime example of a persuasive game.

The potential of computer games to express serious ideas and serve functions that go beyond mere entertainment has been a central topic in the short history of computer game studies. The popularity of computer games as means of entertainment is well established; already in 2002, the year that *America’s Army* was first released, the global sales of computer games was reported to be higher than the global box office earnings of the Hollywood film industry (Halter 2006: xviii), and according to the most recent official statistics of the Entertainment Software Association, computer game sales in the USA have almost tripled over the last ten years (ESA 2006: 11). Claims that the computer games industry is outgrowing other entertainment industries may be overstated, but even so there is little doubt that computer games

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, Feb. 16<sup>th</sup> 2007. See appendix A for details of these sample play statistics.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the propaganda aspect of *America’s Army*, see Nieborg 2005. In his master’s thesis (2006b) he separates the advertising and the propaganda dimensions of the game, a distinction which does not seem relevant for this thesis. Nieborg also analyzes the use of *America’s Army* as an edugame and as a testing tool for U.S. soldiers; topics which will not be at the main focus of this thesis.

have gone from a niche phenomenon to an important mainstream entertainment industry, both in terms of financial value and media attention.

In this situation one question seems more and more urgent: How can computer games be used for something more than entertainment – in education, in political art, in advertising, or even in political campaigns – and how should the use of computer games for such purposes be analyzed and evaluated? What is the expressive language of computer games? The application of computer games in all of the aforementioned fields has been greatly anticipated, but so far the impact is far from clear. The effectiveness of computer games for educational purposes is disputed, commercial computer games with serious artistic ambitions remain a marginal phenomenon (much more so than serious literature, or independent film), and the resources used for games for advertising or as tools for communicating political messages are minimal compared to more traditional media.<sup>5</sup> The academic literature reflects this: Many of the most significant contributions either focus on adapting methods and analyses of traditional media such as film or literature (Murray 1997, Manovich 2001), or are speculative, discussing possibilities and obstacles for designers of future games (Frasca 2001a, c, Bringsjord 2001).

With the introduction of *America's Army* we have the possibility to examine a popular, high-budget and technically advanced game that is, quite literally, dead serious. Considering that the main purposes of this game are, on the one hand, to promote the values and the image of the US Army, and on the other to increase the recruitment of soldiers at a time when the personnel resources of that army is strained by its engagement in multiple wars worldwide, this is as serious as it gets. *America's Army* is probably the largest and most ambitious attempt to use a computer game to explicitly promote a specific message, and so it is one of the best examples of a *persuasive game* that has been published so far.<sup>6</sup> How has the design of the game been shaped in order to efficiently communicate this message? In what ways is the message communicated not only through text and audiovisual content that supplements the actual gameplay, but through the game's fundamental structure: Game rules, gameworld, gameplay – and the relationship between these elements and the ideas and messages encoded into the game?

A basic assumption of this thesis is that the existence of persuasive computer games indicates the possibility to formulate a rhetoric of these games. Theories of rhetoric applied to non-verbal forms of expression, such as still images and film, have been formulated, re-formulated and heavily debated for decades already; and so the theoretical discussion in chapter 2 starts with some brief samples of theories of rhetoric in modern media, such as televised speeches, photography and film. However, computer games are arguably even more complex and diverse phenomena, and so it seems necessary to focus a large amount of attention on the basic nature of the phenomena themselves. What are computer games? Are

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<sup>5</sup> According to Jason Chambers, of the \$4 billion worldwide sales of the world's largest game publisher Electronic Arts in 2004, only \$10 million came from in-game advertising; and while product placement in movies brought in about \$4 billion in 2005, "recent projections estimate that advertising revenue from in-game advertising will approach \$260 million by 2008" (Chambers 2005: 4).

they fictions, or virtual objects, or real? And how can they be seen as representations of objects and ideas? At the end of chapter two, these two lines of thought – rhetoric and computer game theory – meet in a brief discussion of Ian Bogost’s work on computer game rhetoric.

However, when I turn to the analysis of *America’s Army* in chapter 3 it is not with a fixed set of rhetorical terms or figures, but rather with some basic analytical categories taken from the field of computer game studies – in particular the game models formulated by Jesper Juul and Espen Aarseth. Comparing the game in detail with two other central games portraying modern combat, *Counter-Strike: Source* and *Battlefield 2*, I find some significant differences between the ways these games have been designed. These differences are used to identify three basic rhetorical strategies that seem to have been at work in the design of *America’s Army*. These strategies – identification, authenticity and legitimization – all seem to have a common denominator: a general tendency to put constraints on the player’s behaviour, and enforce a strict discipline in a medium known for its anarchic tendencies.

In chapter 4 I take these insights as a basis for a fresh look at some contributions to the field of computer game theory, to try to see how the analysis of *America’s Army* can be related to the wider discussion of computer game rhetoric. Looking at some theoretical works which are prescriptive in their approach, I find that the models suggested in these works tend to work with either strict constraints on the player’s behaviour, parallel to those found in *America’s Army*; or with the exact opposite: A radical freedom to engage with the game. This perspective is then used to sketch a model which incorporates both of these tendencies, in order to outline a way of discussing the rhetorical strategies at work in other computer games than the one analysed here. The findings in this thesis, focusing on the analysis of one particular, persuasive game, can of course not be used to establish a general theory of computer game rhetoric; but it is my hope that my model can serve as a starting point for future research on the topic.

Ultimately, the answers that are given to questions of the kind raised in this thesis may have consequences for several, related debates. How can games be designed to effectively communicate messages of a political, commercial or social kind? In a broader sense, how can games be designed to encode meaning, in a way that relates to the world outside the game? And how can we decode and analyze meaning in games, political, artistic, social or otherwise, including in games where no intentions of promoting a product, message or set of values are explicitly stated? Indirectly, these kinds of analyses will also have clear implications for the debate about learning in games, and the design of games for educational purposes.

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<sup>6</sup> For a definition of persuasive games, see chapter 3.

## 2. Persuasive games and rhetoric

The study of rhetoric in computer games is, just as computer game studies in general, a young field of study. Therefore no comprehensive theoretical framework or method is readily available for this special field of rhetoric. Apart from the rapidly developing debates and theory-building about the aesthetical analysis of computer games, where several important perspectives have already been established (Aarseth 1997, Murray 1997 and Juul 2005), there have also been significant efforts done by researchers such as Gonzalo Frasca (2001a, c) and Ian Bogost (2005a, b, 2006a, b) to establish theories about the rhetoric of computer games – computer games as sites for expression and debate of ideas. However, as will be explained further in the paragraphs to follow, neither Frasca's nor Bogost's approaches are directly applicable to the case of *America's Army* (from now on: *AA*). And so, even though it is beyond the ambition of this thesis to create a comprehensive theoretical framework for the study of rhetoric in persuasive games in general, there is a need to establish at least a specific theoretical starting point, from which to analyse *AA* as an instance of computer game rhetoric.

After clarifying what I mean by 'persuasive games', I will discuss some attempts to expand rhetorical theory into analysis of other forms of expression than that which it was originally designed for, unmediated political speech: Televised political speeches, images, living images and ergodic works. In order to reach a more precise understanding of computer game rhetoric, however, it seems necessary with a precise understanding of the fundamental nature of computer games – what are they? In what sense can computer games be viewed as media of expression, as opposed to just facilitators for play and human interaction? With a discussion of some important computer game theories, I will try to reach a basic understanding of these questions. This understanding will then form the basis for the rhetorical investigation of *AA* in the following chapters.

### 2.1 Persuasive games

What are «persuasive games»? I have borrowed the term from game designer and scholar Ian Bogost, who has done much work on this topic, both through academic discourse and actual game design through his firm Persuasive Games. However, although I share some of my perspective with Bogost's work, I find his use of some terms unclear. I will discuss Bogost's work in more detail later; for now, I will only give a preliminary explanation of what I mean by «persuasive games».

In the most basic sense, these are simply games that have an agenda beyond entertainment, an agenda that entails some purpose of persuasion: Most importantly political games and advertising games (advergames), but educational games (edugames) should also be included in the category. Some kinds of art games should probably also be included, but not all, since artistic agendas don't necessarily entail any clear ambition of persuasion. It should also be noted that by 'persuasive' I don't mean to make any

statement about the effects the games have on actual players: A game is taken to be a persuasive game if it is published with the *purpose* to persuade players about a certain message, a set of values etc. What the exact purpose actually *is* may of course not always be clear; even if it is explicitly stated, that statement may not tell the whole truth. For this reason, any statement about the exact purpose or intention behind a game will always be an interpretation of the game itself, and the context it appears in, rather than a simple, provable fact.

Furthermore, some of the categories mentioned above are hard to define: Certainly all games may be considered to have a political dimension, as with any other form of human communication or social activity. Since all games require the player to learn how to play it, there is always also an educational element; and the distinction between art and non-art is as complex and problematic in the field of games as in any other field where the question is raised. Therefore, we should treat «persuasive games» as an open and flexible category that includes games of different kinds that (in different ways and to varying degrees) fill political, educational or artistic functions. *Advergames*, however, is a special case of games which normally have clear and explicit agendas, and therefore are clearly defined as persuasive. An advergame may, or may not, also be considered a political, educational and/or artistic game; but one may not doubt that it is carefully and deliberately constructed in a certain way in order to promote a certain message, and with it, a certain point of view and certain values.

What is the purpose behind AA? The “Frequently Asked Questions” section on the game’s website makes no secret of it:

Q: Is this a recruiting tool? [...]

A: The game is designed to provide young adults and their influencers with virtual insights into entry level Soldier training, training in units and Army operations so as to provide insights into what the Army is like. As in the past, the Army's success in attracting high-potential young adults is essential to building the world's premier land force. With the passage of time, elimination of the draft and reductions in the size of the Army have resulted in a marked decrease in the number of Americans who have served in the Army and from whom young adults can gain vicarious insights into the challenges and rewards of Soldiering and national service. Therefore, the game is designed to substitute virtual experiences for vicarious insights. It does this in an engaging format that takes advantage of young adults' broad use of the Internet for research and communication and their interest in games for entertainment and exploration. (“Windows FAQs: Parents Info” 2007)

The short version of this lengthy answer is, of course, “yes”. At the end of the 1990s the US Army was facing a dramatic reduction in the number of new recruits, missing its recruitment targets three of the last five years of that decade.<sup>7</sup> When the recruitment figures hit a three-decade low in 1999, Ed Halter explains, “the Pentagon increased recruitment budgets to an unprecedented \$2.2 billion a year, and Congress called for ‘aggressive, innovative experiments’ to increase enrollment” (Halter 2006: xvi). And

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. “Army Announces New Advertising Campaign” (2001: §10).

so the Army's Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA) initiated the Army Game Project as a cost-efficient tool for reaching a target group which not only has become harder to reach through TV advertising,<sup>8</sup> but which also are characterized by their familiarity with modern technology: US teenage PC gamers.<sup>9</sup>

However, viewing the game only as a recruiting tool would be a little too simple. The FAQ defines it simply as "part of the Army's communications strategy", and indicates that this strategy is directed not only towards potential recruits:

Q: I am not in the United States, can I still play the game?

A: Yes, we have official servers in Europe as well! There are no restrictions on who can play America's Army. We want the whole world to know how great the U.S. Army is. ("Windows FAQs: Miscellaneous" 2007).

And so it seems that the purpose of the game is not just to gather more recruits for the army, but also to strengthen the image of the US Army among the public, both domestic and international. Whether we choose to call this advertising or propaganda, or whether we choose to include further dimensions to the game's purpose, such as the 'edugame' and 'test bed and tool' dimensions described by Nieborg (2005a), is not of any great importance here, since these dimensions all seem to rely (in varying degrees) on the same rhetorical strategies described later in this thesis.

The values that the US Army wishes to communicate through AA are quite clearly stated by the game, as shown by the image below. Taking this as a comprehensive and truthful account of the values incorporated in the game would of course be a little naïve. However, it is not the main goal of this thesis to reveal or criticize the "true" values of the game, but rather to identify the rhetorical strategies that have been followed in order to reach the main purpose of improving the US Army brand image. Commissioned, developed, published and distributed by the institutions of the US military with this explicit purpose in mind, AA is a unique case of political advertising/propaganda through a computer game. In fact, it is probably the world's best known, most expensive (in terms of production value) and most played advergaming to this date. It is political, explicitly promoting the values of the US Army; it is educational, teaching players about the army and training them in combat tactics; and in addition to the obvious artistry necessary to create a believable 3D human environment, the strong conflation of life and virtuality achieved in AA may certainly be considered an artistic endeavour. For all of these reasons, AA seems like an ideal starting point for a theory about the rhetoric of persuasive games.

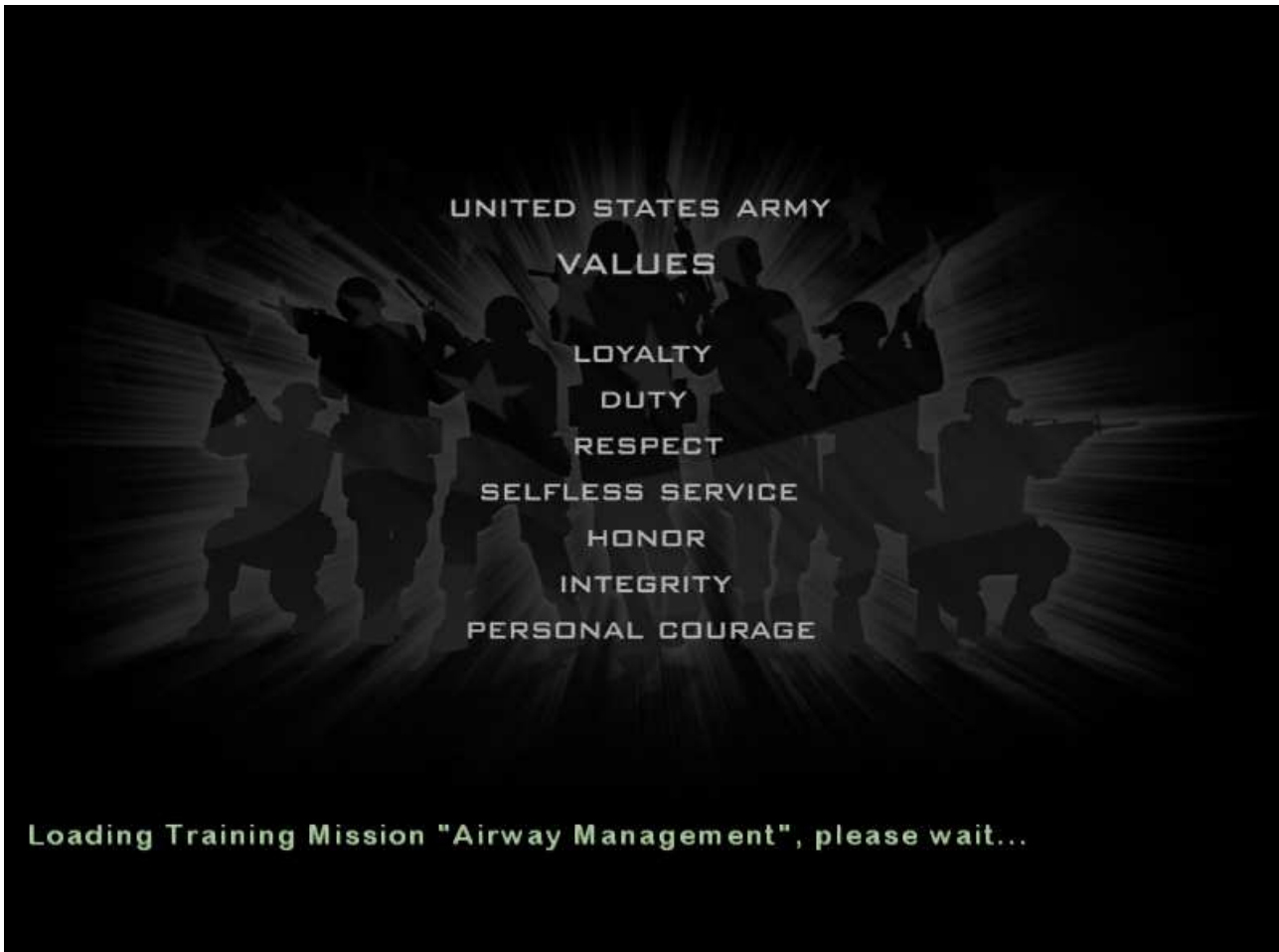
Nevertheless, in forming this theory we can not automatically assume that the theories and categories of traditional rhetoric are directly applicable, since these theories have been developed to analyse quite different kinds of expression. The following subchapter discusses some different views on the discipline

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Chambers 2005

<sup>9</sup> For further details of the institutional context and advertising strategies behind the game, see Halter 2006 and Li 2004.

of rhetoric, and its potential in analysing different kinds of texts, from political speeches to still images and film, to see if these approaches can provide us with tools for the understanding of rhetoric in a setting which differs radically from all of them.



*Figure 1. The seven US Army values: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity and Personal Courage (LDRSHIP). In-game screenshot (from a training mission loading screen) taken by me.*

## 2.2 Rhetoric

Focusing on rhetoric as a tool for analysing computer games is controversial. As we shall see later, an important group of game scholars known as “ludologists” have argued strongly against the danger of “colonising attempts” from more traditional fields, in particular film studies and literature (Aarseth 2001b: §6).<sup>10</sup> Instead these theorists argue that we need to search for new theory that is sensitive to the unique character of games; and in fact the approach in this thesis is heavily inspired by some of these theorists. But if the ludologists are right, shouldn’t the entire idea of rhetoric in games be rejected as theoretical colonialism from one of the oldest fields of academia, dating back at least two and a half thousand years? What we are talking about is not only analysing the rhetoric of traditional text within the

untraditional context of computer games – such as verbal oratory or written text, or even text in the expanded notion of the term (such as the many images, symbols and preproduced audiovisuals that make up parts of computer games) – but *a rhetoric of the computer game form itself*, a rhetoric that relies on the interplay of the basic elements which constitute a computer game: Gameworld, game structure and gameplay.

The existence of such a thing as persuasive games in general, and AA in particular, indicates that there is strong belief among certain people and institutions<sup>11</sup> that computer games can be used as means of persuasion. And although it is easy to agree that concepts and methods established through analysis of older media shouldn't be imported uncritically into computer game analysis, this shouldn't stop us from searching for ways to understand how computer games can be persuasive, and how we can identify and adequately critique the meaning of a computer game. Computer games cannot be entirely unrelated to previous forms of human expression; how would we then be able to understand them and play with them, in ways which (for many players) indicate a strong degree of intuitive understanding? Thus I will speak about rhetoric in persuasive games in general, and in AA in particular, even though this rhetoric is not constructed entirely from terms and concepts inherited from traditional rhetoric. I will take as my starting point Aristotle's own, broad definition: "Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle 1991 [ca. 334 B.C.]: 36; brackets in the original) – but my goal is to find and describe the means of persuasion in AA mainly through the concepts of game theory, rather than through concepts of traditional rhetoric.<sup>12</sup>

### **2.2.1 The rhetoric of political speeches**

Classic rhetoric, such as that of Aristotle, was formulated as a way to analyse the techniques by which a political speaker would try to persuade his listeners. However, in Aristotle's days political debate generally took place in public spaces, without the use of technological means or any other media than the human voice and body. In his book "The credibility of the speaker: Technical and cultural conditions for political rhetoric"<sup>13</sup> Anders Johansen (2002) takes Aristotle's theories as a starting point for an analysis of the rhetoric of political speech in the modern media society, where political debates more than anything take place through the media of television.

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<sup>10</sup> A number of my references in this thesis are to unpaginated articles downloaded from the internet. In those cases I refer to paragraph numbers instead of page numbers, were appropriate.

<sup>11</sup> Such as the OEMA office, which initiated the project which brought about *America's Army* – see above.

<sup>12</sup> In other words, my use of rhetoric is a parallel to the idea of "rhetoric convergence" introduced by Anders Fagerjord, although his concept of rhetoric goes beyond persuasion to describe more general means of expression. For his more elaborate argument for using rhetoric to describe means of expression in hypertext, see Fagerjord 2003: 6-11.

<sup>13</sup> My translation. Original title in Norwegian: *Talerens troverdighet: Tekniske og kulturelle betingelser for politisk retorikk*.



According to Aristotle, Johansen summarises, a speaker has three means of persuasion, three “means of evidence”: *Ethos* (moral character), *logos* (reasoning) and *pathos* (emotional affect). Aristotle says *ethos* might be the strongest of the three, arguing:

[There is persuasion] through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence... And this should result from the speech, not from a previous opinion that the speaker is a certain kind of person. (Aristotle 1991 [ca. 334 B.C.]: 38; brackets in the original)

In other words, *ethos* is to be regarded as an effect brought about by rhetorical technique, more than an issue of who the person really is or how the audience related to her prior to the speech. Both *ethos* and *pathos* rely on the practical performance of a speech, *actio* (Johansen 2002: 28-34). Hence *actio* becomes a focus for Johansen’s analysis of political speech in modern society. At the centre of his analysis is the observation that technologies such as the microphone and the photographic camera, and above all their culmination in modern television technology, have made it possible for the great masses to observe political speakers *up close*. This has changed the conditions for political rhetoric: Traditional speakers on platforms in front of thousands of people relied on large gestures, a loud voice and other theatrical techniques to win their audience, whereas the politician in front of the TV camera, like the actor in front of a movie camera, must exchange the theatrical techniques for minimal gestures, both physically and verbally, in order to be seen as *authentic*.

Although both the medium (television) and the form of rhetoric (political speeches) that Johansen analyzes are quite far removed from the main topics of this thesis, I think there are two points mentioned here which are important for the analysis of AA. The first is the observation that the apparent intimacy of modern media can give great significance to quite small and seemingly unimportant signals. It could be argued that computer games such as AA give an even stronger appearance of intimacy than TV or film; given that the player is not only watching her character/avatar<sup>14</sup> up close all the time, but is also controlling the avatar’s actions, and suffers the consequences of events more directly. Although a film viewer might feel emotionally attached to an important character and be shocked if the character dies, it doesn’t mean that she has to sit around and wait for up to 10 minutes before the action continues; but this is a quite common experience for players of AA. Against these observations one might hold the arguments of Jesper Juul, who claims that in many games, and in particular in “highly replayable multiplayer games” such as AA, the players can “gradually begin to ignore the fiction” of the game (Juul 2004: 6). If so, the players may stop seeing the avatars as characters and rather as empty “placeholders” for themselves in the game. But even if the figures aren’t perceived by the players as characters with personal identities, I think it would be bold to assume that they are replaced by abstract computerized objects in the players’ minds. I

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<sup>14</sup> In literature about computer games, the term *avatar* is commonly used to refer to the virtual figure(s) controlled by a player. In this thesis, an effort will be made to distinguish clearly between avatars, which are virtual object, and the characters (fictional or not) which they represent.

think rather the opposite is happening: If the players of multiplayer games start ignoring the fiction and rather focus on the function of the avatars as “vehicles” for themselves in the game, that actually implies a closer identification with the avatar (as opposed to the fictional character represented by it), and a more intimate relationship to the game: If your avatar is shot, it is not some character dying, it is you losing the game. This is an intimate relationship indeed, but it is an intimacy that is quite different from the intimacy of the television set. Instead of bringing viewers (apparently) closer to remote persons (politicians on TV), this intimacy brings players closer to a system, a virtual world; and so it is in the system itself we might find the rhetorical “gestures” we’re looking for here, rather than in some person’s face or voice.

Is there any reason to believe that we could find such minimal gestures in something as abstract as a computer game system? It may seem a little far-fetched, and the answer ultimately lies in the analysis which follows later in this thesis. But Jesper Juul does make an observation, in his comparison between the two games *Quake III Arena* (iD Software 1999) and *Counter-Strike*, which points to how very small changes in the rule system of a computer game can have great implications for the experience of playing a game (Juul 2005: 89-90). If the assumption is correct that we can identify a kind of rhetoric in a game’s interplay between game structure and gameworld, these small changes are very important.

The second observation in Johansen’s book that seems relevant here is his emphasis on the importance of an appearance of authenticity in the politicians’ rhetoric. “Authenticity is the most modern of the values that I am trying to analyze here”, Johansen says (2002: 72),<sup>15</sup> and describes how an appearance of authenticity can be more important than issues of competence or even truthfulness in the ways in which politicians shape their roles: “Speaking the truth is nothing compared to *being* true” (80, italics in the original),<sup>16</sup> as opposed to “being fake”. Again, in Johansen’s analysis this is mainly a question of personal appearance, whereas in this thesis we are talking about the appearance of an impersonal computer game system. However, there are many tendencies in modern popular culture that indicate that expressions seen as particularly authentic have a special attraction to modern media audiences, from politicians’ use of their private personae to the popularity of “reality” television, the return of rock and acoustic (“unplugged”) music in the computer era, the popularity of “spoken word” and “poetry slam” performances in literature etc.<sup>17</sup> Realism – or photorealism, in Lev Manovich’s terms (2000: 200-201) – has long been a selling point for the most advanced 3D computer games. And when we look at the main marketing slogans of AA, these are exactly the terms used: “No other Army game is this real, because nobody gets the Army, like the Army. Designed, Created and Developed by the U.S. Army” and “The Most Authentic Army Game Ever! The Power to succeed. The courage to exceed” (Army Game Project 2003: 12, quoted from Nieborg 2006a: 111). This claim of authenticity will be one of the central topics for the analysis in the following chapters.

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<sup>15</sup> All quotes from Johansen 2002 are my translations from Norwegian, unless otherwise indicated. Original quote: ”Autentisitet er den mest moderne av verdiene jeg forsøker å utrede her” (72).

<sup>16</sup> Original quote: “Å snakke sant er ingen ting mot å *være* sann” (80).

### 2.2.2 *The rhetoric of the image*

The article “Rhetoric of the Image” by Roland Barthes (1977 [1964]) is one of the most famous attempts to apply rhetorical analysis to non-verbal text. Barthes takes as his example a magazine ad, because

in advertising, the signification of the image is undoubtedly intentional; the signifieds of the advertising message are formed *a priori* by certain attributes of the product and these signifieds have to be transmitted as clearly as possible. If the image contains signs, we can be sure that in advertising these signs are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading: the advertising image is *frank*, or at least emphatic. (33)

Barthes describes the image he is analysing, which shows a shopping bag full of ingredients for a pasta dish, as consisting of several signs that are defined by the constellation of certain elements or aspects of the image and the connotations they are presumed to cause among the target audience of the ad. Thus, one sign refers to the idea of returning home from shopping at the market; the next refers to Italy, “or rather *Italianicity*”; the third communicates “the idea of a total culinary service”, and the fourth refers to the genre of still life through the composition of the image (34-35). However, Barthes stresses that the order of the signs is not important, since the signs are not linear; and he doesn’t make any attempt to imagine them as a linear chain of signs.

The message of the image is then analyzed on three levels: The linguistic message, the denotative message (or the uncoded, iconic message) and the connotative, cultural or symbolic message, which is seen as a coded, iconic message. It is on this third level that Barthes identifies the rhetoric of the image, within a very ambitious totalizing perspective:

[I]f connotation has typical signifiers dependent on the different substances utilized (image, language, objects, modes of behavior), it holds all its signifieds in common: the same signifieds are to be found in the written press, the image, or the actor’s gestures (which is why semiology can only be conceived in a so to speak total framework). This common domain of the signifieds of connotation is that of *ideology*, which cannot but be single for a given society and history, no matter what signifiers of connotation it may use.

To the general ideology, that is, correspond signifiers of connotation which are specified according to the chosen substance. These signifiers will be called *connotators* and the set of connotators a *rhetoric*, rhetoric thus appearing as the signifying aspect of ideology. (49)

In other words: Within a given society there is one and only one ideology, which is expressed by a rhetoric consisting of signifiers of connotation, which take different forms in different substances, such as objects and behaviour. Barthes asserts that the rhetoric of the image is “general to the extent that the ‘figures’ are never more than formal relations of elements”, and claims that in an inventory of such

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<sup>17</sup> For an in-depth analysis of this modern trend, see Gran 2004 and Strand 2006.

elements will be found “some of the figures formerly identified by the Ancients and the Classics” (49-50).

And in a footnote Barthes goes on to proclaim:

Classical rhetoric needs to be rethought in structural terms (this is the object of a work in progress); and it will then perhaps be possible to establish a general rhetoric or linguistics of the signifiers of connotation, valid for articulated sound, image, gesture etc. (50n1)

Bold as these claims are, and instructive as they may be for the analysis of photographic images, they don't seem to offer anything which might be directly useful in my analysis of the rhetoric of AA. In fact, even the (presumably) simpler task of expanding Barthes' analysis from the rhetoric of still images to the rhetoric of moving images has proven to be a matter of much controversy.

### 2.3.3 *The rhetoric of moving images*

Many film theorists have tried to build on Barthes' and others' theories to formulate a rhetoric of the film medium. In his article “The Rhetoric of the Living Images: Overview of a Problem” (1994),<sup>18</sup> Peter Larsen gives an analysis of some such attempts, in order to show the dangers of this approach. Larsen points out that Barthes combines terms and dichotomies from three traditions: Classic rhetoric (metaphor and metonymy), structural linguistics (paradigm and syntagm) and Freudian psychoanalysis (condensation and displacement). He remarks:

The three dichotomies originally had each their area of validity, but within the theory of images and film (among others) they have been replaced by one grand dichotomy – which divides an expansive, complex and heterogeneous field. (76)<sup>19</sup>

The problem, according to Larsen, is that “the three dichotomies come from three different traditions and only have limited validity within mutually different areas [...] they are *homologous*, but *not identical*” (77, italics in original).<sup>20</sup> He points out that the linguistic terms of paradigm and syntagm are forms on a different level than the rhetorical forms of metaphor and metonymy (78). Although both dichotomies refer to connections of either similarity or closeness, “[t]he linguistic terms of paradigm/syntagm are ‘positional’”, while “the rhetorical superfigures metaphor/metonymy are ‘semantic’” (80).<sup>21</sup> Hence Larsen, quoting the linguist and film semiologist Christian Metz, presents a more complex model where the two axes give four basic forms: Metaphors (figures of similarity) and metonymies (figures of

<sup>18</sup> All quotes from Larsen are my translations from the original text in Danish, unless otherwise indicated. The original title: “De levende billeders retorik: Oversigt over en problematik”.

<sup>19</sup> Original quote in Danish: “De tre dikotomier havde oprindeligt hvert deres gyldighedsområde, men er inden for (bl.a.) billed- og filmteorien efterhånden erstattet af én eneste, stor tvedeling – som spalter et omfattende, komplekst og heterogent felt”.

<sup>20</sup> Original quote in Danish: “De tre begrepspar stammer fra tre forskellige traditioner og har, ret beset, kun begrænset gyldighed inden for indbyrdes forskellige områder [...] de er *homologe*, men *ikke identiske*”.

<sup>21</sup> Original quotes in Danish: “De lingvistiske begreber paradigme/syntagme er ‘positionelle’”, og “[o]mvendt er de retoriske superfigurer metafor/metonymi ‘semantiske’”.

closeness) that are presented either syntagmatically (both elements of the figure present, after each other) or paradigmatically (one element suppresses the other).

However, whereas the elements of verbal language are mostly quite clearly delimited – words with spaces or pauses between - it is not so clear what the individual elements of a rhetorical figure are, when we are talking about film. Hence, it is actually possible with combinations of the basic forms: Unlike in verbal language, a metaphor in film can be *both* syntagmatically and paradigmatically presented, and at the same time it can be overlooked completely by the viewer and still make perfect sense – like the famous end sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, where we see the hero pull the heroine into his bed in a train compartment, before we see the train drive into a tunnel. The Freudian images of the train entering the tunnel follow after the images showing the hero and the heroine going to bed together, as a syntagmatic metaphor; but at the same time they also stand in for the images of the actual erotic scene, as a paradigmatic metaphor; while they also have a straightforward, non-figurative meaning. This leads Larsen to postulate “the general problem of film rhetoric: The terms don't quite fit the material, because they were really developed to describe figures of verbal language” (88).<sup>22</sup> He concludes:

In other words, Barthes was wrong when he tried to semiologize rhetoric by generalizing it: There isn't one general rhetorical form, which works independent of the possible substances. But [...] there is *a rhetorical work*, some general processes of signification that are acting in many kinds of substances and that organize many kinds of forms. [...] “The rhetoric of the living images” – that is [...] not fixed figures, but *floating figurations*. (90)<sup>23</sup>

Larsen goes on to describe what he considers to be more genuinely filmic figures, in the climactic sequences of the Hitchcock movie. What is particularly interesting for this thesis is that the defining criterion for which elements Larsen chooses to describe as rhetorical figures seems to be those moments of the film when the film language is used in a way that is contrary to the norm, defined by an idea of film conventions. In this case it is the convention that the camera will normally focus on the most significant part of the events, balancing the emotional immersion of a close-up with the explanatory overview of a more distant image, which is challenged:

Take the image of the villain's foot: It starts as a “normal” close-up; the camera simply advances on that which in the moment is the most important happening, in order to properly demonstrate the cruelty of the villain. But when the foot falls to the side, the image changes and gets an unmistakable character of metonymy, of *pars pro toto*: The totality of the villain is suppressed and represented instead by a (body) part; and in the

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<sup>22</sup> Original quote in Danish: “filmretorikkens generelle problem: Begreberne passer ikke rigtigt til materialet, for de er egentlig udviklet til at beskrive verbalsproglige figurer”.

<sup>23</sup> Original quote in Danish: “Barthes havde altså uret, da han forsøgte at semiologisere retorikken ved at generalisere den: Der eksisterer ikke én generel retorisk form, som fungerer uafhængigt af de mulige substanser. Men [...] der eksisterer *et retorisk arbejde*, nogle generelle betydningsprocesser som er virksomme i mange slags substanser og som organiserer mange slags former. [...] ‘De levende billeders retorik’ – det er [...] ikke faste figurer, men *flydende figureringer*.”

same movement that which is most important for the narration is also suppressed: the death of the villain – which is instead represented by a foot which is slipping. (89)<sup>24</sup>

In other words, the close-up of the foot isn't a metonymy as long as what it is showing represents the most crucial part of the action, it only gets this metonymical character once something happens outside the picture frame which would normally (according to the conventions of Hollywood film) make the camera angle shift. This way of reasoning assumes that there is a norm which identifies the standard, "transparent" use of film techniques, and metaphors and metonymies can be defined as different kinds of deviations from this norm. This is not unproblematic, considering the rapid development of film techniques and styles, as well as the more fundamental difference between film language and verbal language that Larsen himself points out: Film language isn't organized into discrete units (words, signs) with references that are fixed, i.e. that can be listed in a lexicon, and grammatical rules for combination into utterances that can be listed in a grammar. So although the idea of identifying rhetorical figures as (meaningful) deviations from the norm is analogous to the way such figures are identified in verbal language, this strategy doesn't give any promises of a clear, precisely defined taxonomy of film rhetoric. Of course one might argue that such clarity was never within reach for verbal rhetoric itself. Roland Barthes has already warned us against the "taxonomic frenzy" inherent in classic rhetoric and pointed out that the idea of a total taxonomy of "manners of speaking" would be a mirage (1994 [1985]: 85).

Certainly, talking about the rhetoric of games, which is a field that is just barely beginning to be explored, we should have no ambitions to create a taxonomy of clearly defined rhetorical figures. However, as Larsen points out, the inability to define fixed figures doesn't mean that one can't identify rhetorical work, or rhetorical processes or strategies, in the object that is studied. In studying the rhetoric of AA, this will be my point of focus, rather than identifying single figures of rhetoric. How, if at all, can such things as game rules and world-designs come to *mean* things? As Larsen does when he is identifying the "floating figurations" of film rhetoric, I will focus my search on those elements of the game rules and game structures that run contrary to the conventions and genre expectations, and try to identify how these deviations can change the meanings that players attribute to the game.

#### **2.2.4 The rhetoric of ergodic works**

Televised speeches, photographic images and film all belong to the category of non-ergodic forms of expression. The term "ergodic literature" was introduced by Espen Aarseth in the book *Cybertext*, and refers to literature where "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1997: 1). Although *Cybertext* only deals with works based on verbal text, the term 'ergodic' has since often been

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<sup>24</sup> Original quote in Danish: "Tag billedet af skurkens fod: Det starter som et 'normalt' nærbillede; kameraet rykker simpelthen tættere på hvad der i øjeblikket er den vigtigste begivenhed, for rigtig at demonstrere skurkens grusomhed. Men idet foden falder til siden, forvandles billedet og får en umiskendelig karakter af metonymi, af *pars pro toto*: skurkens totalitet fortrænges og repræsenteres i stedet ved en (legems)del; og i samme bevægelse fortrænges også det fortælle-mæssigt vigtigste: skurkens død – som i stedet repræsenteres ved en fod der glider."

used to describe the special characteristics of all computer games and other works of digital media that require active participation from a user in order to be properly experienced. While TV, photos and film do not usually require an observer to participate in any other way than by observing and mentally processing the sensual impressions, new media forms such as hypertexts and computer games require users to make active choices and invest effort in order to traverse through the content of the work; not just to *observe* and *interpret*, but to actively *configure* the work (cf. Eskelinen 2001).

How does the active nature of ergodic works affect the potential to use them as means of rhetoric expression? This broad and complex question has already been debated for some time, and in particular in relation to the media of hypertext.<sup>25</sup> However, my theoretical perspective on the phenomenon of computer games (which will be further elaborated in the paragraphs to follow) is that they are forms of expression which are fundamentally different from hypertext; in fact, it is far from obvious that games should be seen as texts, or even forms of expression, at all. Also, much of the literature about hypertext rhetoric has a prescriptive approach, focusing on guidelines for production of hypertexts, while my aim is only to describe and analyse the rhetoric of an existing game. I will also use a concept of rhetoric that is slightly narrower than in many of these theories – as means of *persuasion*, rather than as means of *expression* in a more general sense.

Peter Larsen's criticism of film rhetoric can be expanded into a more general observation: That figures and analytical terms of rhetoric developed for one medium cannot be applied to another medium without thorough scrutiny, not just of the theory and the terms themselves, but above all of the new medium which they should be applied to. And so, before we try to find an understanding of rhetoric in computer games, we have to ask the most basic question of them all: What are computer games? This question is one of the most heavily disputed in the young field of computer game studies, and since the rhetoric-based approach of this thesis has obvious connections to the debate about text-based approaches to computer game studies, a review of this debate seems in place. However, perhaps it should be stated in advance that the main purpose of the following paragraphs is not to formulate a grand, unified theory of games, but only to arrive at a model of the game form that may provide a basis for the analysis to follow.

## 2.3 Game theories

When academics in the field of arts and humanities turned their attention to the new forms of expression made possible by the development of computer technology, and the growing popularity of games as an application of that technology, it is not surprising that the idea of computer games as literature or drama was quickly put high on the agenda. Brenda Laurel was one of the pioneers of this line of thought, with works such as *Toward the Design of a Computer-Based Interactive Fantasy System* (1986) and *Computers as Theatre* (1991). Her perspective was further developed by literature scholar

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<sup>25</sup> In, for instance, Landow 1991, Moulthrop 1991, Liestøl 1999 and Fagerjord 2003.

Janet Murray in the widely debated book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), which could be seen as the formulation of one of two competing paradigms for the analysis of computer games. Some of the main principles of the other paradigm were formulated the same year with Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997). The disagreement between Aarseth and Laurel/Murray is not only a question about ontology and methodology, but also about the possibilities and the value of computer games as literature; and hence about if, and how, computer games can be media for expression of ideas. In the following paragraphs we shall trace some strands of this debate, via Jesper Juul's ontological game model and the academic criticism of it, to a revised version of the game model which incorporates a perspective on games and representation. Finally, I will also introduce a new concept, that of player role, which mirrors the 'model player' term introduced by other theorists. The insights reached through this discussion will form the basis for the analysis of *America's Army* in chapter three, and are crucial to the central arguments in this thesis.

### **2.3.1 Janet Murray: *Hamlet on the Holodeck***

Common for both Murray and Aarseth is that they don't write exclusively about games, but about a range of different kinds of texts mainly facilitated by computers. Murray sees the computer as a new technology for storytelling – "a truly revolutionary invention humankind is just on the verge of putting to use as a truly spellbinding storyteller" (Murray 1997: 2) – and in her discussions she refers to everything from mainstream computer games to hypertext fiction, virtual reality simulations, live-action role-playing games and so on. For instance, the "holodeck" of the title refers to a feature in the science fiction TV-series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (and following *Star Trek* series), an advanced virtual reality device that is able to project

an illusory world that can be stopped, started and turned off at will but that looks and behaves like the actual world and includes parlor fires, drinkable tea, and characters, like Lord Burleigh and his household, who can be touched, conversated with, and even kissed [...] a universal fantasy machine. (Murray 1997: 15)

The Holodeck is a future (fantastical) ideal, compared to which the computers of our time are "fantasy machines" of a lesser technological sophistication, but with exciting possibilities nonetheless. The key question for Murray then becomes how to make literature, or more specifically narrative, of serious, high quality in this new machine – cyberdrama: "Will the literature of cyberspace be continuous with the literary traditions of the Beowulf poet, Shakespeare, and Charlotte Brontë as the Star Trek producers portray it, or will it be the dehumanizing and addictive sensation machine predicted by dystopians?" (24). In Murray's view, this represents the two alternative paths that computer games and other computer-mediated literature can take. In order to avoid developing into a form of low and depraved culture, it is necessary for the medium to mature into a medium fit for storytelling at the same artistic level as traditional, serious literature.



This view has a corollary which many see as derogatory towards computer games: That expressions which don't fit comfortably into the narrative paradigm will be judged as inferior art. This is also some of the basis of the fundamental disagreement between Janet Murray and Espen Aarseth.

### 2.3.2 Espen Aarseth: Cybertext

Like Murray, Aarseth formulates his theory as a theory of computer-mediated literature, or more precisely *ergodic literature*. Examples of such texts are hypertexts, adventure games and MUDs (multi-user dungeons, which can perhaps most easily be described as the verbal-text precedents to the present genre of massively multiplayer online games). The ergodic is described as a perspective on literature, while the related concept of *cybertext* is to be understood as “a broad textual media category” (5), not as a literary genre, and specifically not as a subcategory of narrative: “To claim that there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore essential qualities of both categories” (5).

Due to the timing of the two publications, Aarseth does not directly comment on *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, but he does present a critique of (among others) Brenda Laurel's application of drama theory to computer games which has direct implications for Murray's storytelling paradigm:

Especially, I wish to challenge the recurrent practice of applying the theories of literary criticism to a new empirical field, seemingly without any reassessment of the terms and concepts involved. This lack of self-reflection places the research in direct danger of turning the vocabulary of literary theory into a set of unfocused metaphors, rendered useless by a translation that is not perceived as such by its very translators. (14)

Aarseth instead suggests a view of text “seen as a machine – not metaphorically but as a mechanical device for the production and consumption of signs”, and this machine has three elements: The verbal signs themselves, the physical medium and the operator of the machine (21). The most significant new feature of this definition is that the text is seen as “a device capable of manipulating itself as well as the reader” (24). The problem with a traditional semiotic approach to computer texts is that this “*unique dual materiality of the cybernetic sign process is disregarded*” (40). In other words, in order to fully understand an ergodic text, it is not sufficient to study the surface behaviour of the text; one must also study the principles that govern the behaviour of the text-machine. Aarseth dismisses the terms non-linear fiction and interactive fiction, and instead suggests the field of “cyborg aesthetics” (51). “The key question in cyborg aesthetics is... [w]ho or what controls the text? Ideologically, there are three positions in this struggle: author control, text control, and reader control” (55).

Based on this struggle, Aarseth suggests a typology of texts based on user activity and mode of traversal through the texts (62-65). He analyzes examples from four important genres of ergodic literature in detail: Hypertext, adventure games, automated poetry and MUDs. The model put forward by Aarseth is rigorous and complex, but it cannot be directly applied to 3D graphical computer games of the kind that

are discussed in this thesis, since Aarseth's definition of text is limited to verbal text: "Any object with the primary function to relay verbal information" (62).

### 2.3.3 Ludology

A number of scholars have been inspired by Aarseth's work, and have levelled criticism against what they see as an uncritical use of analytical theories derived from the fields of literature and film studies. Gonzalo Frasca has expressed the need for a "discipline that studies game and play activities" to complement "the narratologic approach" to the study of computer games, and has proposed the term 'ludology' for this discipline (Frasca 1999). Several scholars contributed with arguments for analyzing games separate from stories (Juul 2001, Eskelinen 2001, Frasca 2001c, Tronstad 2004, Aarseth 2004a). I will not go into details of this debate (for one account from either side of the trenches, see Frasca 2003a and Jenkins 2004). I will only confess, in Gonzalo Frasca's words, that I too was "a teenage narrativist" (Frasca 2003a: 4), but gradually I have been converted through what appears to be the better arguments, and today I am convinced that the approaches presented by these scholars offer the most powerful analytical tools. In particular I find that Jesper Juul, in his recent book *Half-Real* (2005), has formulated a productive theoretical foundation for game analysis.

### 2.3.4 Jesper Juul's game model: Half-Real

The title of the book refers to Juul's fundamental belief that computer games are of a dual nature, consisting of two different things at the same time: Real rules and fictional worlds. "[V]ideo games are *real* in that they consist of real rules with which players actually interact, and in that winning or losing a game is a real event. However, when winning a game by slaying a dragon, the dragon is not a real dragon but a fictional one" (Juul 2005: 1). By letting fiction be one of the two central elements of his game model, Juul might seem to offer a synthesis between the ludological and the narrativist approaches. He does indeed revise his own, previous claims that the fiction in a game is unimportant, and that the relationship between the two are arbitrary. (13) Even so, rules are the defining element of what Juul calls "the classic game model":

*A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable.* (36, italics in the original)

However, this model is challenged by the development in computer games, where the emphasis on building fictional worlds create new forms of games, such as games of progression (for instance adventure games) and open-ended simulation games like *Sim City* (Maxis 1989) and *The Sims* (Maxis 2000): "In having fictional worlds, video games deviate from traditional non-electronic games that are mostly abstract, and this is part of the newness of video games" (1).

According to Juul, the fictional world of a computer game is the world in which the game takes place as it is imagined by the player: “Games project fictional worlds through a variety of different means, but the fictional worlds are imagined by the player, and the player fills in any gaps in the fictional world” (121). Juul relates this to the concept of possible worlds in analytical philosophy, and draws a distinction between the fictional world as it is described and the fictional world as it is imagined by the player. The description of a fictional world will always be incomplete; the player (or reader, listener, spectator) fills in the gaps.

### **2.3.5 Criticism of the half-real model**

As stated above, I find the half-real model to be a productive starting point for a better understanding of computer games. However, there are some important objections to this model, which have to do with the characteristics of virtual environments.

On the one hand, Andreas L. Gregersen (2005) criticizes Juul’s use of the term ‘rules’. Gregersen points out that most of the rules that regulate the environment in a virtual world are complicated pieces of mathematical functions and computer code, which probably couldn’t be formulated comprehensibly in natural language at all. Hence they are of a quite different nature than the relatively simple and propositional rules that describe non-computer games. This difference is characterized by a distinction between that which is *possible* and that which is *allowed*, a distinction which becomes important when we are moving from games that take place in the real world to games in virtual environments. The large complex of computer programming that defines not what is allowed but merely what is possible in the computer simulation should be considered as laws, parallel to the physical and biological laws of real-world environments, rather than rules, says Gregersen:

I take it as a defining characteristic of a rule that it is actually possible to state the rule in natural language, but I would also like to hang on to the idea that *game* rules are fundamentally conventions: Players are supposed to understand, acknowledge and follow these rules, as emphasized by both Caillois and Huizinga. Following this, a modern game world is governed by mechanics that I would rather call simulated laws, since they do not regulate what is allowed but rather what is *possible* in that universe. (Gregersen 2005: 48, italics in the original)

This distinction becomes particularly important when looking at how players learn and interact with virtual environments, according to Gregersen. His perspective is on the embodied aspect of learning and interaction, and he points out:

*[A] very significant aspect of interacting with virtual worlds is not based on cognizing rules or other linguistic constructions. These aspects of virtual worlds are grasped and reacted to as regularities by the embodied player, just as similar relationships in the real world. (49, italics in the original)*

I think Gregersen has a good point, and it seems that it would make good sense in many discussions to distinguish between the rules of a game and the laws of the simulation the game takes place in – in particular in discussions concerned with topics of learning and interaction. However, I am not convinced that the distinction is equally important for our present discussion, about how to analyze the rhetoric of the computer game *AA*. On the other hand it is not very hard to incorporate Gregersen's concern into the model. So let us say, then, that a computer game is made up of a fictional world and real rules and laws; and discuss the rules and the laws separately in those contexts where it seems to matter; in other contexts, I will not necessarily make an effort to distinguish clearly between rules and laws.

The other part of the formula, that of fictional worlds, seems much more problematic when it is made subject to a thorough inspection. On first glance it seems reasonable: A world full of dragons and wizards and magic, such as the worlds of *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999) or *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) is obviously a world of fantasy and so it would seem natural to describe it as fiction.<sup>26</sup> However, these are also worlds in which a significant number of people invest a large amount of time and effort, as well as money, and in which real people meet other real people and perform a variety of social exchanges. As Edward Castronova has shown (2001), the activities and economic transactions going on in a world like that of *Everquest* can be described as a small economy where players spend time and effort to get increased skills, money and valuable objects. Furthermore, players buy and sell game objects, or even just amounts of in-game currency, for real money at online auction sites like eBay. Hence an exchange rate can be calculated between the in-game currency and real-world currencies, making it possible to calculate a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of the gameworld. At the time of Castronova's article, the GDP per capita in *Everquest* corresponded to the GDP per capita of countries like Bulgaria and Russia (2001: 32-33).

The extent of the time and effort that some players invest in their games can be extreme. In 2005, a South Korean man was found dead at an internet café “after playing computer games non-stop for 86 hours”; and another Taiwanese man is said to have played for 32 hours straight until he died from exhaustion, “foaming from the mouth and bleeding from the nose” (Garite 2003: 1). Another South Korean gamer was found dead under similar circumstances (BBC News 2005b). The same year the Chinese gamer Qiu Chengwei was given a suspended death sentence for having killed another player, after he found out that the other player had sold Chengwei's virtual sword for 7,200 Yuan (around 700 € at the current exchange rate). According to a BBC report, Chengwei had tried to take the matter to the police, but they had rejected the case “because there is currently no law in China to protect virtual property” (BBC 2005a). The interest and attention invested by real people in online computer game makes rare game objects valuable; and through this process a virtual sword came to cause (indirectly) the real death of

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<sup>26</sup> Since I personally know *World of Warcraft* much better than *Everquest*, I will use examples from *World of Warcraft* rather than *Everquest*. *World of Warcraft* has in the last couple of years taken over the position as the world's most popular MMOG, and the small differences between the game doesn't seem to have any bearing on the discussions here.

a human being. How can it then be considered only a fictional object? Can it be true that the gameworld is just a fictional space?

Juul's model only allows for two categories: Fictional worlds and real rules. However, if one concludes that the space of *Everquest* is a real social space in which real human beings interact, and therefore decides to consider it as a real space filled with real objects, one has assigned it to the category of rules. Of course, since computer games are basically pieces of software, it is probably possible to view any part of a game as a rule or a set of rules. For instance, a corridor in a labyrinth could perhaps be described by the following rule: "For the next ten metres you can not go more than 50 centimetres east or west." For something as simple as a chess game it is certainly possible to describe the entire playing space by the following rule: "The game takes place on board formed as a square grid of 8 by 8 squares, numbered 1-8 in the one direction and A-H in the other, where every other square is black and every other square is white, and 1A is black". However, to describe a large, open 3D landscape such as the ones used by *Everquest*, *World of Warcraft*, *America's Army* and many other contemporary computer games in this way, one would need not volumes, but libraries – if it at all would be possible, as Gregersen claims it would not. Anyway, this descriptive chaos would certainly be quite useless for analytical purposes.

Building on arguments closely related to these, Espen Aarseth in a recent article (2005) presents an alternative analysis of fiction in games. Although the article doesn't explicitly address Juul's work, it may be read as a criticism of his (and several others') understanding of fiction in games, and points to an answer to the problems mentioned above. Starting with the example of dragons, Aarseth compares a dragon in Tolkien's fantasy literature with a dragon in the computer game *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999-2006), and concludes: "One dragon is clearly fictional, but the other is simulated. [...] One is made solely of signs, the other of signs *and* a dynamic model, that will specify its behavior and respond to our input" (Aarseth 2005: 59). Aarseth draws a distinction between the fictive and the simulated, pointing to the two kinds of doors that can be found in many computer games: Those doors that "are merely textures on the walls that look like doors, but whose function is purely decorative" and those doors that "actually do behave in a door-like manner; they can be opened, closed, seen through, walked through and fired through" (61). The first kind of doors is fictional, he says, but the last is not:

For the sake of well-conceived theory it makes more sense to conclude that there are both fictional and non-fictional doors in these games, and that the non-fictional doors are virtual, a mode of existence that is neither fictional nor real. These doors are simulated, like a game dragon but, importantly, *unlike* a game labyrinth, which is both virtual and real: virtual in a physical sense, but real in a conceptual sense. The virtual doors and dragons, however, are neither physically nor conceptually real, but merely simulated. So what should we call them? Virtual or simulated, both terms will probably do.

It follows that there are at least three different ontological layers to game content: the real, the virtual and the fictional. (61)

So Juul's dual model is replaced with a three-layered model; but there also seems to be more fundamental differences between the two models. Many of those things that would be taken as part of the 'fictional world' category in Juul's model are categorized as 'virtual' in Aarseth's model. Moreover, the category of the real is not just reserved for rules, but is also open for spaces and objects of some kind, not just labyrinths but even currency and "real estate":

As is well known, game objects and player characters and, not least, in-game currencies can be bought and sold on web-sites like Ebay and Playerauctions.com, and this effectively means that EverQuest money, the Platinum or Plat, is a real currency, just like the Brazilian Real, the Korean Won, or the European Euro. The value of every currency in the world is relative to other currencies, and there is no absolute value that can be maintained independent of a currency's exchange value. This makes MMOG money just another currency, as real or virtual as my monthly paycheck. (61-62)

Considering Aarseth's remarks, I think it is worth noting that even if the Plat may be considered a real currency, it is certainly not *just* like the Real, the Won or the Euro. These are fiat currencies that are legal tender in their respective countries by the authorization of the government (or in the case of the Euro, a union of governments). The Plat on the other hand is two different things: In the gameworld it is the official currency of a medieval fantasy world, the political and economic system of which I must admit I do not know in detail, and in fact I suspect it may not be described in detail anywhere at all. However, in the real world the Plat is a private currency, which is not legal tender in any country; only within the confines of a computer game system, which is in its entirety owned by a private company – a company which also claims ownership rights to every object within the game system, including every unit of Plat.<sup>27</sup> This objection might be of lesser or greater importance, depending on how much one agrees with the following attempt at a synthesis between Juul and Aarseth's models.

### **2.3.6 Games and representation**

The question of fiction in computer games is important for the topic of this thesis, because by challenging the idea of computer game worlds as fictional worlds, Aarseth's criticism of the term also makes it harder to describe the rhetorical elements of a game like AA. Fiction is an aesthetic category, something which is brought about by a particular use of language or other forms of expression; and so, if one can speak about a gameworld as a work of fiction, it is not so hard to imagine how one also can speak about it as a work of rhetoric. But if the gameworld is not fictive (except in some special cases such as doors that look like doors but don't work that way), but rather virtual and/or real, this leaves open the entire question of how the gameworld may be seen as a work of rhetoric – or even as a form of expression at all. How do you describe the rhetoric of the virtual, or the real? How does virtuality relate to language and signification, how can it be seen as a mode of expression? Furthermore, how can the 'real' be treated as an aesthetic category? Since AA is a game which presents itself as more authentic than all other games

in the genre, it seems necessary to be able to evaluate the authenticity of the game. How can we evaluate the authenticity of the real? Could the real be unrealistic?

Aarseth's observations are not so easy to dismiss. But while his project in the article mentioned above is to qualify the use of the term "fiction" applied to computer games, it seems necessary for the purpose of this thesis to qualify the use of the term "real". AA may be, in the words of the game's marketing, "the most authentic army game ever", but that doesn't mean it is the same as the real thing. Speaking about the rhetoric of AA implies, rather, viewing it as a kind of *representation* which has been constructed in a certain institutional context and published with a certain agenda (part of which is explicitly stated, and part of which can be inferred indirectly). This is a perspective on games which might be seen as alien to ludological theory; Gonzalo Frasca, for instance, formulates his theory of simulation and ludology in direct opposition to the term representation (2001b, 2003c). However, if ludology is to have anything to say about the rhetoric of AA, it must be able to incorporate some understanding of representation.

However, since the starting point of this discussion is the question of reality versus representation, it seems that using AA as the primary example would unnecessarily complicate the issue, since it is modelled very strictly on objects, environments and institutions from the real world. In order to make it easier to keep the real and the unreal apart, I will start by using a game which is clearly based on a fantasy world: *World of Warcraft*, and supplement it with other examples where necessary. Later on I hope to make clear the consequences of the model suggested here for the analysis of AA.

Consider a simple example: I have agreed to meet a friend of mine inside the game *World of Warcraft* to play around for an hour or two. But I am late for my appointment, and when I log into the world I find my avatar in a far-off rural district, far away from where I was supposed to meet my friend. So I start walking as fast as I can to the nearest place where I can find a "Gryphon manager", a computer-controlled character which rents out the services of certain flying creatures, so I can get where I need to go faster. Once I find him and have paid him, I am suddenly sitting on top of a "gryphon" – a lion with wings – carrying me high above dragons and magical lands on the way to my friend.

Then my cell phone rings (outside the game), and my friend's angry voice can be heard:

*"Where the hell are you?"*

To which I reply:

*"Sorry for being late! I am on a gryphon, flying to meet you now. I'll be there in a minute or two!"*

Is my answer fictional? If so, one might expect my friend to reply something like:

*"Oh come on, don't tell me fairy tales – get here right away and then we can start playing make-believe!"*

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Taylor 2006: 125-150.

This answer would of course not make any sense unless my friend took my explanation to be fiction in the other meaning of the word: That I was lying. Our appointment is real, and I am really not there when I should; and my friend is sitting there, in reality, waiting for me. The distance between us in the gameworld is real: It separates us from seeing each other and interacting with each other (except, of course, through devices for remote communication, such as telephones or internet chat programs). But does that mean that I am really flying on a gryphon? Obviously not, in that case I should have been making my career (and a lot of fame and money) in zoology, not in media studies.

I think the best way to describe the situation above is in terms of representation. It is an obvious fact that any fiction relies on some kind of representation – typed words in a book, drawings in a graphic novel, or spoken words in a camp fire tale. But what about the virtual world of a computer game? Of course where there are fictions in the form of audiovisual cutscenes or verbal-text descriptions, these fictions rely on representation. But does the gameworld itself represent something?

The concept of representation in computer games is discussed by Gonzalo Frasca in the article “Simulation 101: Simulation versus Representation” (2001b). Frasca explains that

games are ontologically different from narrative because they are not just based on representation. Instead, they rely on simulation, which is a way of portraying reality that essentially differs from narrative. (Frasca 2001b: 1)

As the title indicates, Frasca contrasts simulation with representation. However, this seems not so much to be founded on a specific understanding of *representation*, as to be part of a strategy to make clear the unique characteristics of simulations as compared to *narrative*. Frasca doesn't give any definition of representation, and in fact he acknowledges at the end of the article that while he has to some extent been treating the terms ‘representation’ and ‘narrative’ as equivalents, a narrative is in fact a special kind of representation: “a way to structure representation” (4). It is a simple enough observation that the illustrations that Frasca uses to explain the difference between representation and simulation, actually show that the final simulation *relies* on the initial representation: Taking Rene Magritte's famous painting *La Trahison Des Images* (“The treachery of images”), which shows a painting of a pipe with the text “This is not a pipe”<sup>28</sup> underneath, Frasca makes a new version of the image with some interactive elements, turning the image into a simple simulation of a pipe. The new version includes a button which is labelled “Suck”; when it is pressed, some cartoonish lines appear at the mouth piece of the pipe, indicating smoke; and when the button is released, small clouds of smoke rise up from the tobacco end of the pipe. It is clear that the final version, the simulation, is significantly different from the first, the non-interactive image. But it is also evident that the final version still uses the original image (plus some new images) as a visual representation of the simulation.

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<sup>28</sup> In French: “*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*”.



One might of course ask oneself if the simulation would still be possible without the representation – could one strip the image of all its visual elements, keeping only the interactive functionality and code without the visual representation of it, and then have simulation without representation? It is self-evident that in this particular example it couldn't be done, since it would at least imply removing all the essential visual elements – the pipe, the air sucked into it and the smoke coming out the other end – and hence the simulation would become impossible to observe, and impossible to interact with (turning the remaining caption – “This is not a pipe” – into something of a tautology). Whether the program still working in the background, handling the suction of invisible air into an invisible pipe with invisible smoke coming out as a result, could qualify as a simulation, seems a little dubious to me. Whether or not a more complex example would make it possible to imagine a simulation that doesn't in any way (e.g. visually, verbally, numerically) represent that which is simulated to some observer, remains to be argued – in my ears it sounds a little like a tree falling in the forest when no one is around to hear it.

Looking up the word ‘representation’ in *Oxford English Dictionary* gives a long list of possible definitions. Discussing all of them here would over-complicate the issue, so I will just mention a few of those variations which seem most relevant for this discussion:

2. a. An image, likeness, or reproduction in some manner *of* a thing.
  - b. A material image or figure; a reproduction in some material or tangible form; in later use *esp.* a drawing or painting (*of* a person or thing).
  - c. The action or fact of exhibiting in some visible image or form.
  - d. The fact of expressing or denoting by means of a figure or symbol; symbolic action or exhibition.
- (*Oxford Eng. Dict.* 1989, italics in the original).<sup>29</sup>

So according to the dictionary, a representation is a visual image, or a reproduction in a material or tangible form, or some other kind of figure or symbol or likeness that stands for some other thing. Now, let's look at Gonzalo Frasca's definition of simulation: “Simulation is act of modeling [sic] a system A by a less complex system B, which retains some of A's original behaviour” (Frasca 2001b: 3).<sup>30</sup> While it is easy to see how this definition supports that which is Frasca's main point – to clarify the difference between simulations and non-interactive texts such as printed text, still images and video – it is not as easy to see how this could clarify the difference between simulation and *representation*. Judging by the simple dictionary definitions of representation quoted above, Frasca's definition could just as easily be seen as a modern, more technically sophisticated branch on the tree of possible modes of representation: A representation which not only provides a likeness in visual appearance, or auditory appearance or other

<sup>29</sup> One of the other definitions mentioned in the dictionary actually equals representation with simulation: “3 b. Acting, simulation, pretence” (*Oxford Eng. Dict.* 1989). But this is marked as a rare meaning, and the sidelining of the three terms in the quote, as well as the illustrating example (from a 19<sup>th</sup> century text) indicates that it has little or nothing to do with the notion of simulation discussed here, and has little bearing on the present argument.

<sup>30</sup> In the article “Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology”, Frasca gives a slightly different version of the definition: “to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviors of the original system” (2003c: §7).

sensual or cognitive impressions, but also the behaviour of the thing represented. In other words, something (i.e. system B) stands for something else (i.e. system A) in some kind of material or medium (i.e. simulation technology).

This seems to be in concurrence with the view on the relationship between representation and simulation that is implied by Aarseth in the following passage from *Cybertext*, where he is discussing cellular automata such as John Conway's *Game of Life*:

These systems are not models or representations of something else but, rather, evolving, self-organizing entities whose behavior cannot be described as the sign production of a human programmer. It would be wrong to classify them as simulations (dynamic models that mimic some aspects of a complex process), since there does not have to be any external phenomenon they can be said to describe. (Aarseth 1997: 30)

In other words: These objects are not simulations because they do not represent anything beyond themselves – and so it seems that representation is a necessary characteristic of simulation. Even if my view of simulation as a special kind of representation should be dismissed, by pointing to characteristics of simulation which could not be well described as representation, a weaker claim would still hold true: That simulation (or at the very least all the simulations which are discussed in this thesis) relies on representation in order to be comprehensible to human observers.

So far we've established that simulation relies on representation. But what is the relationship between simulation and computer games? Frasca points out at the end of his article that though he wants to understand computer games in terms of simulation, the two are not the same (2001b: 4). Unfortunately Frasca doesn't explain this any further (it is just stated to be the topic of a forthcoming article), but I can imagine at least two reasons for this claim. The first is that computer games in general are *games*, and hence they have game structures with "variable and quantifiable outcomes" which are valorized.<sup>31</sup> There are a few exceptions to this rule, such as *SimCity*, *The Sims* etc., which are commonly known as "sim games" – i.e. simulation games, or in Juul's terms: "Open-ended simulations" (44). So one might say, following Aarseth, that computer games are games played in computer-simulated environments.<sup>32</sup> This claim implicitly opposes Frasca's claim about the relationship between computer games and representation. Simulation is not that which separates computer games from representation, quite the contrary: simulation is part of the way in which computer games *represent*; and what separates computer games from narratives is not primarily that they are simulations, but that they are games. Games, unlike simulation, are not (primarily) representations; games are systems of rules which define and facilitate

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<sup>31</sup> According to Juul's definition. See Juul 2005: 36 and paragraph 2.3.4 above.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Aarseth's distinction between two categories of digital games: "1), *digitized* versions of traditional games (card games, board games, dice games, mechanical arcade games such as Pinball etc), and 2) *games in virtual environments*. (A virtual environment is a simulation of a physical world, not necessarily our own, and usually much less complex.)" (2004a: §10).

player activity, where each player according to Juul's definition "*exerts effort in order to influence the outcome*" and "*feels emotionally attached to the outcome*" (2005: 36).

The other reason for saying that computer games are not the same as simulations is that not all games seem to be simulations of anything else. Consider *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1986): What does it simulate? Explaining *Tetris* as a simulation of oddly shaped bricks falling inside a box in a low-gravity environment, where completing a row makes all the bricks in the row magically disappear, isn't really an answer to the question. First of all there is nothing in the game which points to some referent beyond the game itself, and second of all this description seems closer to a description of what *Tetris is* than what it *simulates*: It seems impossible to describe the original system A in any further detail than the simulator system B, without retorting to an interpretation that is quite far-fetched from the observed properties of the system.<sup>33</sup> But this could also be described in terms of representation: *Tetris* is not a simulation because it doesn't represent anything other than itself. Speaking about non-digital games, and their digitized versions, it is easy to come up with a wide range of examples that fall into the same category: Ludo/Pachisi, *Yahtzee* (1954) or sports such as soccer or volleyball – it's hard to see what games such as these should simulate or represent. However, speaking about games in virtual environments it is not so easy to come up with a wide range of examples. It would not be sufficient to point out that the things simulated are not real, such as a dragon in *World of Warcraft* or a ghost in *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980).<sup>34</sup> It seems more sensible to look at something like that simply as a simulation (or representation) of something that doesn't actually exist. So it seems that *Tetris* and a small group of very simple games similar to it are special cases of games that are based on virtual environments, but where the virtual environment can not easily be described as a simulation of any other, recognizable or imaginable system. And certainly neither *World of Warcraft*, *Everquest*, *AA* nor any of the other games discussed in this thesis belong to that group.

I hope the reader doesn't too quickly dismiss this argument as just a question of terminology. The point is this: If we look at the situation from *World of Warcraft* described at the start of this paragraph as something taking place in a simulation of a magical fantasy world, and if we agree that simulation is a kind of representation (or at least relies on representation to be perceived and understood by human observers), then we have to separate the question of what an object in this world *is* from the question of

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<sup>33</sup> The following exchange between Janet Murray and the Finnish writer Markku Eskelinen about possible interpretations of *Tetris* is memorable. Janet Murray: "This game is a perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s – of the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules and clear off our desks in order to make room for the next onslaught" (Murray 1997: 144). Markku Eskelinen's answer: "It would be equally far beside the point if someone interpreted chess as a perfect American game because there's a constant struggle between hierarchically organized white and black communities, genders are not equal, and there's no health care for the stricken pieces. Of course, there's one crucial difference: after this kind of analysis you'd have no intellectual future in the chess-playing community" (Eskelinen 2001: 28).

<sup>34</sup> If we were to reserve the term 'simulation' for systems that model systems and objects from the real world, we would not just have to disregard the important use of simulations to illustrate and support unproven or speculative scientific theories and hypotheses, but we would also end up with an analytical category which would rely on a quite problematic claim of truthfulness in its very definition. Actually it is quite easy to argue that even a game like *America's Army* does not simulate reality, but rather a highly selective and distorted *image* of the real – as I will show in the analysis in chapter 3.

what it *represents* or simulates. Was the gryphon from my *World of Warcraft* experience real? Well, no, there is no such thing as gryphons. But was the thing that my avatar was riding on, real? Yes, otherwise my avatar couldn't be moving so fast, racing to meet up with my friend's avatar and enable some quite real exchanges to take place. So what was it? Basically, an object made out of a certain amount of data and a certain amount of code,<sup>35</sup> carefully pieced together into a software object functioning – in a simplified manner – the way one might imagine a tame gryphon to do in a fantasy environment such as the one in *World of Warcraft*. Was it real? Yes, but it wasn't a real gryphon. It was a real simulation of something which wasn't real. What did it represent? An unreal creature, a creature out of fairy-tales – something which could best be described as a fiction. What about the landscape we were flying over? It is real, but not real landscape. It is real in the sense that it takes real time and effort to cross it, and that it puts real constraints on real players' behaviour – but it is not real landscape, which is an amount of land with physical properties that this mixture of data and software code doesn't have. Moreover, the landscape that this virtual object *represents* is unreal, or fictional; because no such landscape exists in the physical world.

This way of describing the virtual worlds set up by a computer game, seems more or less compatible with Juul's model, with some small modifications. Where Juul says that computer games consist of real rules and fictional worlds, I say (like Aarseth) that they consist of real rules and virtual worlds. Virtual worlds, in my description, are real simulations made out of materials which are real (though not physical): Data and code. However, the virtual world also represents something more than itself, which makes it possible for it to incorporate such entirely unreal things as magic, science fiction technology and the ability to die over and over again in endless, perpetual battles against evil terrorists.<sup>36</sup> My distinction between the virtual objects themselves and the things they represent, is of course closely related to Juul's distinction between the fictional world as it is described and the fictional world as it is imagined by the player (see 2005: 121-123 and paragraph 2.3.4 above). However, the difference between these two models is significant, because the virtual world is more than just a "description" of a fictional world; it is also a world in its own right, a space of real (non-physical) dimensions: An *arena*, an environment for the game to take place; a space for exploration, communication, social and economic interactions, for points to be scored and matches to be won or lost. One could say that the gameworld *is* function and *represents* fiction (or, in some special cases, an image of the real which is not entirely fictive); deciding which of the two purposes are most important might ultimately be a question of investigating the individual preferences of a wide variety of players in a wide variety of games, and is not central to the topic of this thesis.

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<sup>35</sup> Someone with a more detailed insight into the programming of advanced computer games could probably describe the exact composition of in-game objects more in detail than I can, i.e. what kind of data and what kind of code is used in what way to create these objects; but that does not seem necessary for this discussion.

<sup>36</sup> As in the theatre, one of course doesn't need real magic in order to *represent* magic in a computer game: It is just a matter of data manipulation, represented as magic.

This “function vs. fiction” model also concurs with most of the observations in Aarseth’s article. For instance it is easy for me to agree with Aarseth’s description of the dragons of *Everquest* as something radically different from the dragons in books by Tolkien, as this is essentially the same example as my example of the gryphon above. As Aarseth says: “Simulations allow us to test their limits, comprehend casualties, establish strategies, and effect changes, in ways clearly denied us by fictions, but quite like in reality” (2005: 59). Quite like in reality, or in other words: Virtually real. If one of these fantasy creatures can bring you were you need to go faster than you could get there by your own powers, it obviously has the power to effect some real change. However, keeping in mind that the virtual objects also represents something beyond themselves, allows us to describe them as playing a role in a fiction as well as in the virtual world. The dragons are virtual game objects, yes, but they also represent something fictional (a magical animal) – and being able to describe how this representation takes place is important for the purpose of my discussion.

Taking this perspective allows us to analyse in greater detail the question of the fictional versus the documentary. Aarseth compares the two games *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2003) and *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30* (Gearbox Software 2005). Both are action games set in World War II, but the first is based on action sequences from fictional movies, whereas the second “is based on historically accurate action accounts and faithfully modelled on historical post-D-day battles and environments”. Aarseth asks:

Are the events and the existents of *Call of Duty* fictional and those of *Road to Hill 30* real? In the case of a documentary vs. a fiction film or text, this question would have been easy to answer in the positive. The two games, however, are ontologically similar, and practically identical for the purpose of this discussion. To classify one as fictional and the other as documentary would make little sense. A virtual bullet fired in one game is neither more documentary nor more fictional than a bullet in the other. (Aarseth 2005: 59-60)

I think it would be hard to disagree with the central claim in this passage: The games *are* ontologically similar. And a bullet fired in the one game is just as real (or virtual) as a bullet fired in the other game (although they aren’t real bullets, only virtual ones).<sup>37</sup> However, looking at the worlds which are *represented* by these computer gameworlds, we could still consider the one world fictional and the other documentary – just as a 3D model of a real landscape used by architects, scientists or urban planners might be considered a documentary 3D model.<sup>38</sup> There is a further step, though, from calling a gameworld documentary, to calling the game itself documentary, since there is more to the game than just the

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<sup>37</sup> For the sake of splitting hairs, a documentary film and a fiction film are also ontologically similar: They both consist of series of photographs, usually shown at a rate of 24 or 25 per second; and “bullets” fired in one or the other film are equally real, since they are made of the same material: image data (in the case of digital film; visual imprints on a light-sensitive material, in the case of analogue film). (On the other hand, of course, the bullets fired during the *recording* of the two kinds of film may be of a quite different nature.) The difference between these two genres, as far as I can see, is in how the *representations* of people and events in the two kinds of films relate to *real* people and events.

<sup>38</sup> ...although ‘documentary’ is usually used to describe a specific kind of journalistic or artistic expression, with emphasis on a comprehensive presentation of facts; and since science is always required to be comprehensive and faithful to the factual truth, describing a scientific model as ‘documentary’ might be a pleonasm.

gameworld and what it represents. In Aarseth's view, "[a]ny game consists of three aspects: (1) rules, (2) a material/semiotic system (a gameworld), and (3) gameplay (the events resulting from application of the rules to the gameworld)" (Aarseth 2004b: 47-48). The gameworld is only one aspect of a computer game, just like a soccer stadium or a tennis court is just one aspect of the games of soccer and tennis, respectively; one also needs players and rules. And as I have stated above, the game form itself (as opposed to, for instance, the phenomenon of simulation) doesn't seem to rely on representation. Indeed, comparing a game to a theatre play seems to indicate that the activity of gameplay is fundamentally alien to the act of representation. Imagine a theatre performance which includes a game being played – for instance a theatre adaptation of Kenneth Branagh's famous film version of *Hamlet* (1996), in which the duel at the end is played as a modern fencing match. Imagine then, that the actor playing Laertes at some moment got so engaged by the fencing that he stopped thinking about his performance, and instead started fencing at his very best, as if it was a real fencing match. Catching his opponent by surprise, the actor in the role of Laertes beats the sword out of Hamlet's hands, winning the duel and avoiding the tragic ending in the script, where they both end up mortally wounded from the poison-smearred sword. Hurray! The victorious "Laertes" running rounds of triumph in the theatre hall would probably provoke amusement and/or embarrassment among the audience, rather than admiration: Theatre play is all about giving an aesthetic performance for the sake of the audience, while the play of games is all about making an effort to win.<sup>39</sup> Hence I will consider gameplay and game rules as basically non-representative elements of computer games, and it wouldn't make sense to refer to these elements as fictional or documentary.<sup>40</sup>

However, this leaves the question of the status of the simulation laws. If we accept Gregersen's distinction between game rules and simulation laws, and view the rules that regulate the behaviour of a gameworld as a kind of laws of the virtual world, it should follow that these laws have the same reality status as the world they are a part of. In other words, in a virtual world representing a fictional world, we should be able to find virtual laws representing fictional laws. And so we do: For instance, when playing

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<sup>39</sup> And ideally, the effort should be made for one's own sake, rather than for the sake of an audience. In professional sports with audiences an element of performance enters in. And in the special case where the game has been fixed in advance, as is said to be normal in certain types of wrestling, the resulting performance may indeed be considered as a kind of drama, rather than a game – as it was interpreted by Roland Barthes in his famous article about wrestling in *Mythologies* (1957: 15-25). Role-playing games are another borderline case where it sometimes may be hard to distinguish between gameplay and representation.

<sup>40</sup> In my view, if we chose not to describe game events, but rather *situations*, i.e. the setups at the start of each separate part of the game, one could consider these a part of the game's initial design rather than the result of players' gameplay, and hence one could interpret them as representations of situations. A representation of a situation from reality might then perhaps be considered documentary; such as the situation presented in *JFK Reloaded* (Traffic 2004; cf. also Bogost 2006b). But the events as they unfold after the player has started acting in the situation are results of the interaction between the game system and the player, which (as I have argued above) is better seen as a contest than a performance, and hence it would be problematic to say that it represents anything at all.

If this thesis had been a thesis about documentarism in computer games, it would also be important to make one further distinction: Whereas photography and film are iconic text forms which can be used to *record* images and events (Barthes refers to photography as "a message without a code" (1977: 42-46)), a computer game needs to be carefully constructed and coded. Hence, the game itself can never serve as a *recording* of images and events from reality (even if such images and film can be included in a game); and a film reel of an important event such as the death of John F. Kennedy, for

with a *World of Warcraft* avatar who is a mage (a magician), I can see two bars in the upper left corner of the screen: One green bar, which indicates my avatar's health, and one blue bar, which indicates the level of my avatar's 'mana'. Whenever I use magic to do something, such as hurling balls of fire at a monster, the 'mana level' is reduced, and if it gets too low I have to refill (by any of a number of means) before I can do more magic. The health bar is a standard convention of computer games such as first person shooters and a variety of other games, but that doesn't make it any more realistic: Whenever my avatar is hit by, let's say a ball of fire from an enemy, the health bar is reduced, and if it reaches zero, my avatar is dead. When my avatar dies, I am relocated to take control of the avatar's ghost at the closest churchyard, and may either revive my avatar there at a certain cost, or I may wander out to find the body to rejoin it with its spirit (at a cost of time and effort). I hope that by now my point is obvious: That these laws are real in the same way that the virtual world is real – in that they regulate the real threats and the real possibilities each player is faced with – but they also represent something else: the entirely fictional workings of the health and the magic power of a magician.

Compare these representations of “magical health” with the way health is simulated in *AA*: When an avatar is hit by a gunshot which doesn't kill it right away, it starts “bleeding”, which means that the health status of the avatar drops a little over time. If the wound is serious and the bleeding isn't stopped, it may kill the avatar; and once the avatar is dead, it remains dead until the next match begins. However, if a player who has the role of medic reaches the wounded in time, she may treat the wound to stop the bleeding, in which case wounded avatar's health status is stabilised (but not improved). This does certainly not qualify as a scientific simulation of human injury, but it is certainly much closer to a simulation of real injury than the health bar of *World of Warcraft*, which refills itself from near death to full health in a few minutes, even when no action is taken by the player. It is also more realistic than most other games in the same genre as *AA*, as we will see later. Looking at other elements of the gameworld of *AA*, in particular everything that has to do with the way weapons are operated and distributed among players, one can find many such laws which are relatively faithful depictions of how these things work and behave in real life.

Does that give us a reason to say that *AA* is a documentary game? I certainly do not think so: As a representation of the real world *AA* displays a highly selective view of the truth, and in particular of the manner of real combat.<sup>41</sup> And I hope to make it clear throughout this thesis that *AA* is, in Alexander Galloway's words, “thinly veiled propaganda” rather than a documentary simulation of the US Army's operations. But I think that exactly this veil of authenticity is central to the way the game functions, and as

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instance, will always have a different status as recording, compared to the simulation of the same event in *JFK Reloaded* – which will always be a *recreation*, rather than a record.

<sup>41</sup> It seems reasonable to describe the documentary genre, as it appears in film, as a genre based on a social contract of trust between the film's publishers and its viewers: The viewers expect the filmmakers to give a comprehensive, truthful and (relatively) balanced representation of a topic. By contrast, nobody expects advertising to be comprehensive and balanced – not even truthful, except perhaps regarding very specific facts.

a means to study the fabric of this veil it seems useful to have an idea about what a documentary gameworld would be like. I will discuss this in more detail in the coming chapter. For now, I will just assert that in my model of the computer game it is possible to imagine documentary gameworlds, run according to documentary laws, just as it is possible to imagine fictional gameworlds run according to fictional laws – as these are represented by the virtual world and the virtual laws of the computer games themselves.

Finally, one last example may serve to point out why I do not entirely agree with the assertion that of the three aspects of a game (rules, gameworld/semiotic system, gameplay),

the semiotic system is the most coincidental to the game. As the Danish theorist and game designer Jesper Juul has pointed out (Juul 2001b), games are eminently themeable: you can play chess with some rocks in the mud, or with pieces that look like the Simpson family rather than kings and queens. It would still be the same game. [...] Unlike in music, where a national anthem played on electric guitar takes on a whole new meaning, the value system of a game is strictly internal, determined unambivalently by the rules. (Aarseth 2004b: 48)

It is hard to disagree with this as long as we are talking about chess, but it is certainly possible to point out counter-examples where it does not seem possible to describe the value system of a game only with regard to the game's rules. The Norwegian literature student Christian Daae Gruehagen, in his master's thesis on fiction and rhetoric in computer games, describes the following excellent example of two games with nearly identical rules, but entirely different political content: In one of the minigames in *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game* (Bogost and Frasca 2004), the player controls an election campaign volunteer with a sign saying "Howard Dean for Iowa". Steering the avatar left and right along a city pavement, the player must wait until she finds as large a crowd of pedestrians as possible, and then click on the mouse to wave the sign and receive a score according to the number of people who read the sign. In *The Suicide Bomber Game* (fabulous999 2002), the exact same game mechanic is used; the only difference is that in this game, one controls a suicide bomber which detonates his bomb when the mouse is clicked – and then the player receives a score according to how many people she has managed to kill. These two games clearly have different political implications, but I think it would be hard to describe this without reference to the things that are represented by the gameworld – rather than just the rules of the games.

### **2.3.7 Player roles**

Above I have quoted Aarseth's model for the three basic elements of a computer game: Gameworld, rules and gameplay; and I have stated that I consider representation to be a function of the gameworld and the simulation laws governing it, rather than the rules and the gameplay. This does not mean, however, that the other two elements are irrelevant for the rhetorical game analysis of AA. I will try to make it clear exactly how these elements contribute to the rhetorical work of the game in the analysis of the game. However, there is one last methodical question that must be clarified first. Since, in this thesis, I have



chosen an approach which does not include collecting data about actual players' encounters with the game, I cannot truly give a comprehensive analysis of the gameplay of AA. The reason for this is that doing that kind of research would be a much too large project to fit in as a small part of this thesis – as is made clear, for instance, by the work of four Carnegie Mellon University students in their 88-page report “Detailed Analysis of Factors Affecting Team Success and Failure in the America's Army Game” (Carley et al 2005). However, I am using data from both this report, Zhan Li and David Nieborg's master's theses (see paragraph 3.1.1, below) as well as other players' posts on discussion forums to supplement my own experiences, in order to be able to make reasonable judgements about some of the main characteristics of the game's gameplay.

There is, however, one aspect of the game which, during my work with this thesis, has come to seem central to the rhetorical work conducted in and through AA, and which therefore deserves a separate description: Player roles. When the player enters a gameworld, she is normally not free to enter it whatever way she might please; she must take up one or several *roles* offered to her by the game. The way that these roles are formed (and the constraints and possibilities they embody) has a large impact on the player's experience of the game – and therefore this aspect must also be important for the game's persuasive power.

The player role is not meant as a fourth element of the game, to go alongside Aarseth's three basic elements; rather it is a *perspective* on the game. In *Cybertext*, Aarseth actually includes a variable of a similar kind:

*4. Perspective:* If the text requires the user to play a strategic role as a character in the world described by the text, then the text's perspective is personal; if not, then it is impersonal. A text such as Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler...* (Calvino 1993) pretends to involve the reader as a participant, but there is nothing for the real reader to do but read. In a MUD, on the other hand, the reader is (in part) personally responsible for what happens to his or her character. (Aarseth 1997: 63)

However, as pointed out above, Aarseth's typology is designed for a different set of objects than the ones which are analyzed in this thesis, and so a new definition seems in place. In his master's thesis, Gonzalo Frasca introduces the concept of “the model player”, based on Umberto Eco's concept of the model reader:

[W]e could suggest that simulations need a “model player” who is supposed to deal with the model and retain from it similar laws and characteristics to the ones that the author intended when she designed it. (Frasca 2001a: 44)

Gruehagen expands on this concept, building on Eskelinen and Tronstad's (2003) distinction between interpretation and configuration in games, and says that for him, the model player is not someone who seeks identification with the avatar she is controlling:

The model player, as I define her, is not willing to play in such a way that what Kendall Walton (1990) calls the game of make-believe becomes an important aspect of the game. The fiction is not relevant for the model player, since she is a ‘player’, not a ‘reader’. The model player is a hypothetical player who configures a system, and is only interested in referential elements and filmatic sequences to the extent which they reveal something about how the game is configured. The model player is someone who only wishes configurative meaning. Identification with the avatar, or interpretation of interpretative meanings, on the other hand, is up to the empirical player. (Gruehagen 2005: 56)

This concept seems quite useful for a number of purposes – among which is to describe what I mean by player roles: It is all those aspects of the player’s presence in the game which are irrelevant for Gruehagen’s model player. The model player doesn’t care if she is playing as a terrorist or as an American soldier, if characters are represented in stereotypical ways, or if her actions in the gameworld would be morally sound if acted out in the real world; what matters is what kind of weapons she is carrying, how vulnerable she is confronted with the enemy’s weapons, what kind of terrain they will be fighting in etc. The player role is that which is described by the interpretative aspect of the player’s presence in the game, whereas the model player is exclusively concerned with the configurative aspect.

I hope it has already been made clear that what I mean by ‘role’ in this context is not quite the same as a role in a theatre play. As stated before, players of a computer game are primarily participants in a contest, rather than a performance in the theatrical sense. But at the same time, it is not possible to separate these two aspects entirely. When the player interprets the game’s representations, even if this is only in order to understand how to best play the game on a configurative level, she is already engaging with the game on its interpretative level. And so there is always at least the possibility of regarding her own actions not just as configurations of the game system, but also as actions with dramatic significance; such as a magic hero conquering a murderous monster, a heroic soldier successfully repelling a terrorist attack, or a brave rebel sniping American soldiers in a guerrilla war.

To make this clearer, it might be useful to have a look at the ways in which some first person shooter games<sup>42</sup> introduce their players to the game. The following example is taken from the manual of the game which is known as the one that gave the genre its mainstream breakthrough, *Doom* (id Software 1993). In this game, as was common in many older games, there is a relatively long, written presentation of the game’s background story, along with a separate, detailed description of how to interact with the game. The manual starts with the story, getting straight to the point: “You’re a marine, one of Earth’s toughest, hardened in combat and trained for action,” (*The Doom v1.2 Manual* 1993: §7) and goes on telling over a few paragraphs about how this marine ends up alone outside a space station filled with monsters. “As you walk through the main entrance of the base, you hear animal-like growls echoing throughout the distant corridors. They know you’re here. There’s no turning back now” (§13). After this dramatic introduction,

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<sup>42</sup> For a more detailed genre discussion, see next chapter.

the manual suddenly jumps to such mundane issues as “INSTALLING DOOM” and “OBJECT OF THE GAME”, and goes on to explain in detail for the player how to actually *play* the game. In the manual, then, the issue of player role and gameplay seem quite clearly separated; whereas the ‘story’ section could be read as one actor’s instructions at the beginning of a piece of improvised theater, the gameplay instructions focus on the things that are important for success in the game, as well as issues of human-computer interaction such as which buttons to press in order to do what.

When actually playing *Doom*, the player sees the world through a camera placed where the avatar’s eyes would be, and so the avatar is not visible in the main screen – only the tip of the gun can be seen in the middle of the lower part of the screen. However, below the main part of the screen, which shows the avatar’s view of the world, there is a “status bar” with various information of importance to the player. On this bar, there is also an image of the avatar’s face. The manual explains the purpose of this image quite vividly:

YOUR MUG: This portrait isn’t just for looks. When you’re hit, your face looks in the direction from which the damage came, telling you which direction to return fire. Also, as you take damage you’ll begin to look like raw hamburger. (*The Doom v1.2 Manual* 1993: §42)

In other words, this image serves a double function. First of all, it represents the avatar to the player, in the most simple sense: It lets the player know what the avatar looks like. Secondly, it gives the player some important information: How badly she is hit, and from what direction the damage is coming. In other words, this is information that the player can interpret in order to act accordingly on the configurative level.<sup>43</sup> The fact that the information is presented in this way – instead of, for instance, the way it is represented in *Half-Life 2* (Valve Software 2004) and *Counter-Strike: Source* (2004), where damage is shown simply by a numerical “damage meter” as well as some red lights indicating the direction it came from – is of no great consequence for the model player.<sup>44</sup> However, it has some clear consequences for the player role: The furious “hamburger face” of the badly injured *Doom* avatar portrays a raw fighter who knows no other law than testosterone, whereas the blinking, red “01” of the *Half-Life 2* health display doesn’t reveal any emotion, any traits of character other than perhaps the mathematical, analytical gaze of a theoretical physicist (which is the profession of Gordon Freeman, the main character of the game).

In newer games, when introducing the player to the game the tendency is to try to avoid making her read lengthy explanations, and so the two elements of the introduction – the “dramatic” introduction to the player’s role, and the “pedagogic” part teaching her how to play – are often fused together in various ways. For instance, the game *Batman Begins* (Eurocom Entertainment Software 2005) starts with a

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<sup>43</sup> And in fact, this element of the *Doom* interface has often been praised as an example of good interface design (see for instance Rouse III 2005: 139).

<sup>44</sup> Although the *Half-Life 2* version may be faster and more efficient to interpret during a moment of intense action.

dramatic video sequence compiled from short excerpts of the movie by the same name (Nolan 2005). This sequence ends by (literally) throwing the main character/player avatar into an intense action scene which pauses at vital moments, bringing up a text box on the screen explaining the player how to punch an opponent in the face, perform a special move, or “finish” the interrogation of a crook. A little later, after more glimpses from the movie giving story background information, the player is guided through a tutorial level which is based on the martial arts training course depicted in the movie, in which the martial arts trainer lectures about the fighting techniques “in character” (i.e. without reference to the situation as a computer game simulation controlled by a player), while pop-up text messages on the screen explains which buttons the player should press to make the avatar do the actions required by the trainer. In *Half-Life 2* (Valve Software 2004), *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North 2005) and many other games, similar techniques are used.

Although AA breaks with the tendency of avoiding lengthy explanations, and instead includes a large amount of written instructions for the player to read prior to missions, during the training missions the same technique is used as in the games just described: A drill instructor gives instructions in character, without referring to the game or the simulation, and pop-up text messages explain what buttons to press. Prior to entering these training missions, however, the player is presented with a relatively long, written text (see transcript in appendix B) telling her about the training which is about to take place. Since these training missions are modeled quite closely on selected parts of the real-life training of US Army recruits, the text is able to give this information not by talking to the player about the game, but instead by addressing the player as a potential recruit, and telling her about the real-life training she would have to go through if she were to join the army. In fact, two thirds of the text describing each of the basic training missions is a general description of the training program and the facilities. Only the last third describes the actual training the player is about to engage in, but still through describing the real-life equivalent, not the simulation itself:

Congratulations, soldier! You have made it to week five, the end of the White phase of Basic Combat Training. [...]

Successfully qualifying with the M16A2 rifle will make you the most feared combat system on the planet: a U.S. Army Infantryman. Qualifying ‘Expert’ will allow you the opportunity to attend Sniper School. Failure will give you the coveted opportunity to enjoy weeks three and four of Basic Combat Training one more time.

Task: Qualify with the M16A2 rifle. [...]

Standards: In a combat condition, while being presented with 40 targets, engage and hit 36 targets to qualify for Expert Marksman, 30 for Sharpshooter, or a minimum of 23 to qualify as Marksman. (US Army 2006: “Marksmanship” mission description. See appendix B for full text.)

In this way, these texts manage to serve not just a double function, but a triple one: First of all, introducing the player to certain aspects of the gameplay; secondly, introducing the player to the role she is assuming by entering the game; and thirdly, telling the player about the training of real life recruits, thereby serving the recruitment purpose of the game. These texts are themselves interesting objects for rhetorical study; however, the focus of this thesis is on the rhetoric of the game form, and so I am only commenting on these texts where it seems relevant for the game analysis.

Player roles can vary greatly between game genres, and between individual games. In most single player first-person shooters and many similar games, such as the *Half-Life*, *Doom*, or *Grand Theft Auto* series, players control an avatar which represents a character which is also a part of a fictional story told through the game's cutscenes, prescribed events etc. However, in most online multiplayer shooters, such as the *Counter-Strike*, *Battlefield* or *Call of Duty* series, although players control an avatar in mostly the same way as in the single player games, this avatar does not represent a character that has a place in any great story; furthermore, players can often choose which kind of avatar they want to control – terrorist or anti-terrorist in the case of *Counter-Strike: Source*, US/European soldier or Chinese/Middle Eastern soldier in the case of *Battlefield 2*. In other games, such as role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* or *Everquest*, players can build up a number of characters and play with different playing styles and identities – in fact, this is probably a significant part of the attraction of these games, as described by numerous theorists (Bruckman 1992, Turkle 1995, Bartle 1996, Tronstad 2004, Taylor 2006). This is also the case for the popular *The Sims* games, whereas in so-called “god” games like *SimCity* and *Sid Meier's Civilization* the player's character hardly appears in the game, or not at all; instead the player plays the role of a god-like administrator acting directly or indirectly through her control of the other characters in the game, and the system itself. In some games, it is not necessarily so that the player plays any role at all; for instance, it is hard to describe any player role in *Tetris*.

As will be made clear in my analysis in the next chapter, the way that player roles are offered in *AA* is quite unique and seems to have a special significance for the game's rhetorical techniques. But before we move on to the analysis, I will look at one prominent example of current work on computer game rhetoric, in order to show how the theoretical perspective I have established renders the analytical tools in this work inadequate for the analysis of *America's Army*

## 2.4 The rhetoric of computer games

Some of the most significant contributions to the study of rhetoric in computer games, in my opinion, are those provided by Gonzalo Frasca (2001a, c). However, these are works which are mainly prescriptive in their approach and do not give any tools which seem directly applicable to the task of analyzing the rhetoric of *AA*. For this reason I will leave the discussion of Frasca's theories to chapter 4, where I try to sketch a more general model for computer game rhetoric based on my findings in the analysis. On the other hand, scholar and game designer Ian Bogost has published several articles where he discusses the

issue of rhetoric in relation to computer games from an analytical perspective. Currently Bogost is in the process of publishing a book about the issue, titled *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Bogost 2007, forthcoming); but since this thesis is due to be completed before the publication of the book, I am unable to provide a review of it here. However, it is possible to comment on Bogost's approach in the articles he has published.

In the article "Playing Politics: Videogames for Politics, Activism and Advocacy" (Bogost 2006b), which is based on a chapter in the forthcoming book, Bogost outlines his idea of 'procedural rhetoric' through a discussion of recent examples of computer games designed to express political ideas in a US context. Bogost starts out with Janet Murray's description of procedurality as one of the four essential properties of digital artifacts (Murray 1997: 71-74), and indicates that computer games are particularly well suited for taking advantage of this quality. Bogost explains procedurality in the following way:

In computing, procedurality refers to the core practice of software authorship. [...] To write procedurally, one authors rules that generate many instances of the same type of representation, rather than authoring the representation itself. [...] Procedurality is the inherent value of the computer, which creates meaning through the interaction of algorithms. This ability to rapidly execute a series of rules fundamentally separates computers from other media. (Bogost 2006b: §9)

However, just a few sentences on, Bogost goes on to observe that "While such ability is magnified in the computer, it is not unique to the computer. In fact, any system that seeks to establish patterns to define meaning can be deemed procedural" (§11). Bogost refers back to his previous work *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*, in which he analyzes both videogames and traditional works of film and printed literature as instances of procedural expression, suggesting that "any medium – poetic, literary, cinematic, computational – can be read as a configurative system" (Bogost 2006a: 3). Thus it seems somewhat unclear what precisely is meant by the word "procedural" in this context – it can certainly not be just the material organization of the work, which is fundamentally different in a printed text and a computer game.

Bogost's discussion of concrete examples in the rest of the article gives a clearer impression of what it is he is trying to describe; procedural rhetoric seems to deal with the representation of dynamic systems, which react to the user's input and behave according to certain rules and principles. This is most clearly expressed when Bogost compares his concept of procedural rhetoric in computer games with Gonzalo Frasca's thoughts on simulation authorship:

"Simulation authors," says Frasca, "do not represent a particular event, but a set of potential events. Because of this they have to think about their objects as systems and consider which are the laws that rule their behaviors. In a similar way, people who interpret simulations create a mental model of it by inferring the rules that govern it" (Frasca, 2001).<sup>45</sup> In such simulations, says Frasca, "... the goal of the player would be

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<sup>45</sup> This reference corresponds to Frasca (2001a) in my reference list.

to analyze, contest and revise the model's rules according to his personal ideas and beliefs." Under this rubric, games become rhetorical opinion texts that players can explore rather than merely read or view. (Bogost 2006b: §34)

This is a starting point for investigating rhetoric in computer games, more than a theoretical framework for identifying rhetorical techniques. But Bogost has also published one article in which he attempts to uncover some more specific rhetorical structures: "Frame and Metaphor in Political Games" (2005a). Based on a notion of frame and metaphor as the primary organizers of political discourse adapted from cognitive linguist George Lakoff, Bogost describes three ways in which games function in relation to ideological frames and metaphors: reinforcement, contestation and exposition. The simple game *Tax Invaders* (Kenney 2004) published by the US Republican party, serves as illustration of what is meant by reinforcement: In this game, the player controls an image of George Bush shooting down "money blocks" representing future tax increases. The player enacts a procedural representation of the metaphor of John Kerry's tax policy as an invasion which Bush wants to defend the American people from, and thereby the game *reinforces* a metaphor which is already in use in the Republican Party's verbal rhetoric. A more sophisticated game like the video surveillance game *Vigilance 1.0* (Le Chevallier 2001), in Bogost's interpretation *contests* or "*challenges* the ideological frame it purportedly represents" (2005a: 5), by forcing the player to take on the role of a pedantic, authoritarian surveillant.

Finally, in order to illustrate the concept of exposition, Bogost looks at the ideological framing underlying the much larger, mainstream computer game of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North 2004). In this game the player controls an inner-city gangster in an open environment roughly modeled on the three cities Los Angeles, San Francisco and Las Vegas and the surrounding countryside. On the face of it, the games in the GTA series may seem to indulge in entertainment-style nihilism without any regard to moral values at all, and certainly not conservative ones. But Bogost claims that, because the game's non-player characters (NPCs) respond to the players black-skinned gangster persona in the same way no matter who they are or where they are encountered, the game's

procedural interaction of space and character creates a frame in which the player's street gang persona does not participate in any historical, economic, racial, or social disadvantage. [...] By failing to generate responses across the socioeconomic boundaries of the game's virtual space, *San Andreas* exposes something closer to the conservative ideological frame on crime. If the game's NPC logic were to admit to cultural and economic disadvantages as factors that mediate interaction between characters, it would also have to admit that such factors are external to CJ (the player's character) and thus attributable to something outside CJ's character and self-discipline. To play *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is to participate in the metaphor of crime as decadence. (2005a: 7)

Bogost concludes that *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (from now on: *San Andreas*) is an example of a third rhetorical function: Not reinforcement or contestation, but exposition.

Looking at the two first of these three terms, they seem somehow related to Roland Barthes' (1977) description of the two rhetorical functions a linguistic message (for instance a title or a caption) can have in relation to an image: *Anchorage*, which means that the linguistic message reinforces one particular perspective or understanding of the image, and *relay*, which means that the linguistic message brings in meanings "that are not to be found in the image itself" (1977: 41). Perhaps one could say that the *procedurality* of *Tax Invaders* reinforces the meaning that is already stated by the game's *representation* in a way which is similar to the functioning of an anchoring image caption; and that the *procedurality* of a game like *Vigilance 1.0* brings in an element of perversion which is external to the representations in the game, and in other words work as a contestation of the ideological frame through a technique of *relay*.

However, Bogost does not seem to separate clearly between the representational and the non-representational (or material) aspects of the games. This problem is not made acute by the first two examples, since they are pretty simple games with clearly political agendas, but when we come to the case of exposition in *San Andreas*, it gets confusing. What does exposition mean in this context? How, precisely, does it work? It is unclear to me what this term is meant to describe in general, outside the specific discussion of *San Andreas*, and I believe that this is because the term is not precisely defined in relationship to the representational and the material aspects of the game.

In Bogost's interpretation of *San Andreas*, when the player engages in the missions to help her climb the hierarchy of organized crime, she "does so willingly, not under the duress of a complex historico-social precondition" (2005a: 7). The precise way that this is formulated, it is obviously true for many players, and obviously irrelevant: Why should I, a Norwegian man living in Oslo, be under a historical or social precondition to engage in gangster activity in Los Angeles? Clearly, Bogost cannot be talking about the player, but about the fictional character CJ represented in the game. But to what extent is this character making choices of his own, free will? The first thing that happens in the game is that CJ is kidnapped and framed by the crooked policeman Tenpenny, and from this moment on, he knows that he must either carry out the gangster missions Tenpenny send him out on or get sent back to jail. Moreover, the character CJ does not have any viable alternatives to a life as a gangster: No job opportunities, no skills, no social network, no money, and no car. It is true that the interactions with the NPCs in the game do not simulate any racist structure, but they also do not simulate any kind of human tolerance: Every person CJ runs into on the street is equally hostile, and the world he encounters in *San Andreas* is consistently cynical, amoral and repressive. The only chance he has to make a decent life for himself is by being the toughest criminal in a world full of criminals.

If we look away from the game's fiction and just look at the game as a game, it is true that *San Andreas*, like the other games in the GTA series, offers an impressively open and interesting gameworld, and that the player is free to engage in a lot of playful activities outside the mission structure of the game. But none of these activities are of the kind that one would recommend to a troubled youth trying to build a healthy life as a good, peaceful and law-abiding citizen. In fact, trying to play any GTA game without hurting



anyone or committing any serious crimes will leave one without any other choice of meaningful actions than going to the park to watch the sunset, as in the famous machinima<sup>46</sup> spoof “My Trip to Liberty City” (Munroe 2004).<sup>47</sup> I am not saying that the player of *San Andreas* is not experiencing great freedom of choice, she definitely is; but this is a freedom on the level of play, i.e. what game to play next: Reckless car races, vigilance cop missions, or running errands for the mob? This is a freedom of choice which relates to the game’s user-friendliness, and which therefore is highly relevant to the player’s playful activities in the game, as long as we consider it simply as a game and not as a representation of something else. However, translated into the fictional world represented by the game, this freedom means choosing at any moment from a bouquet of depraved, horrendous criminal activities – not choosing whether to be a criminal or not. That choice is simply not implemented in the game.

Therefore, if *San Andreas* is exposing the metaphor of crime as decadence, it is *not* by creating a simulated world in which a criminal career is something which is freely chosen among a variety of equally good options, but rather by setting up a nihilistic, immoral world where horrible, homicidal crimes are turned into a fun and engaging activity for the player. How is this done? Why is it fun to drive through narrow city streets at maniacal speeds, running over innocent pedestrians and risking a horrendous car crash at any moment? I think freedom is a good term to describe this, but not in the metaphysical sense of “freedom of choice” which seems to be implied in Bogost’s article. This is something more like a freedom of transgression, a freedom from consequences: In *San Andreas*, running into the front of an approaching truck at 150 km/h will usually only mean that the car is finished, forcing the player to jump out and spend a few moments looking for a new car to steal. And even if the worst should happen, we all know that “[d]eath in computer games is always just a minor detail: it can be fixed” (Frasca 2001c: §24). This freedom doesn’t only apply to the consequences of danger; it also extends to the moral consequences of actions. Again in the words of Gonzalo Frasca:

[T]here are no good guys in Liberty City. Not even the walking people on the streets deserve your pity: their total lack of interaction (except for fighting against you) removes any humanity from them. They are just moving targets. (Frasca 2003b: §17)

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<sup>46</sup> ‘Machinima’ commonly refers to a genre of films made through rendering of audiovisual content in a computer game’s 3D graphical engine – e.g. recordings of the audiovisual output from a game session. See the English *Wikipedia* entry for an excellent introduction (“Machinima” 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Gruehagen (2005) gives an example of a computer game enthusiast who, in spite of her habit of playing non-violent platform games, tried one day to play *Grand Theft Auto III* (Rockstar North 2002). Getting into a car and driving towards the place where she would get her first mission, she had to stop for a red light; she was not willing to risk running over random passers-by in order to reach her destination on time. Not surprisingly, after having stopped for several red lights without making much progress towards her destination, she got bored and left the game. Gruehagen observes: “Even though it is possible to exist in *GTA San Andreas* without damaging anything, one would then have to disregard all those elements which make *San Andreas* not just a simulated world, but a game. [...] Since she failed as a model player, the game became more or less unplayable” (Gruehagen 2005: 81). [My translation. Original quote in Norwegian: “Selv om det er mulig å eksistere i *GTA San Anderas* uten å skade noen, vil man da måtte se bort fra alle de elementene som gjør *San Andreas* til ikke kun en simulert verden, men til et spill. [...] Ved at hun feilet som modell-spilleren ble spillet på mange måter uspillbart.”]

I prefer to call this a freedom of transgression, and I think it is an important part of the pleasure players take in many games, computerized and otherwise: The freedom and pleasure of indulging in desires which are impossible in reality, transgressing social norms, laws, taboos, historical and socioeconomic realities, laws of physics etc. But by allowing players the freedom to indulge in antisocial behaviour of various kinds, computer games have become subject to criticism and controversy – and these are two things that don't go well together with the values of a conservative institution such as the U.S. Army. Therefore, when the army decided to use a computer game in order to strengthen its brand identity, there were some obvious challenges. As the game designers describe the premise at the start of the project: “All parties understood that setting the right tone was key to avoiding public-relations disaster” (Davis et al 2003: 269). The nature of this tone, and how it was set, is the topic of the next chapter, in which I will try to analyze *AA* as a work of rhetoric.

As the preceding discussion hopefully has shown, I do not find any analytical tools in the existing body of theory on computer game rhetoric that can be directly applied to this task. But I have at least found some basic perspectives from which I can approach the question; working from a distinction between what a computer game is, on the material level, and what it represents. Building on Juul, Gregersen and Aarseth I have found that computer games consist of gameworlds (with simulation laws), rule structures and gameplay; and that the simulation built into the gameworld can be viewed as a form of representation. I have also introduced the perspective of the player role as a supplementary analytical tool to study the interplay between gameplay and representation. In the next chapter, I hope to show how all of these terms can help revealing the rhetorical strategies that can be found in *AA*.

### 3. *America's Army*: A game-rhetorical analysis

It is time for a closer look at *America's Army*. I will start with providing a brief overview over the historical context for the creation of *AA*, and some other works dealing with the game. I will also give a general description of the genre, and a more detailed description of two genre-defining games closely related to *AA*: *Counter-Strike: Source* and *Battlefield 2*. This will then be used as a basis for a comparative analysis of the three games. Both qualitatively, comparing the main characteristics of the three games; and quantitatively, comparing some properties of the gameworlds which lend themselves to quantitative measurements. The quantitative analysis is also used to evaluate the relationship between these gameworlds and the real world.

*AA* is a work of rhetoric, which utilizes certain effects in its design to promote army values and aid the recruitment and branding efforts of the army. The ways in which the design of *AA* differs from genre conventions and the design of similar games, is important evidence of this. As a result of the comparative analysis of the three games, I will try to identify and describe three rhetorical strategies that seem to have informed the adoption of specific design decisions: Identification, authenticity and legitimization. These strategies are closely connected with three different aspects of the game's design: Player roles, gameworld and rule structure.

#### 3.1 Background

*AA* is the first computer game produced and published by the US military for use by the civilian public; but it is only one instance in a long history of co-operation between the US military and the computer games industry.

Ed Halter has given an account of this history in the book *From Sun Tzu to XBOX: War and Video Games* (2006). He points to the well-documented fact that much of the development of computer technology from World War II onwards has been done through research (partly or entirely) funded by the military to meet military needs. Hence, much of the early development of computer games took place in research institutions tightly connected with the US military system. Already during WWII work started on the first computerized flight simulator, *Whirlwind*,<sup>48</sup> ordered by the US Navy (Halter 2006: 150). In 1980, the US army commissioned a customized version of the popular Atari game *Battlezone* (Atari 1980) to use as a training device (Halter 2006: 129-135). In 1996, two officers of the Marine Corps Modeling and Simulation Management Office created a mod of the popular first person shooter *Doom II* (id Software 1994), called *Marine Doom* (Snyder and Barnett 1996), to be used by the US Marines for simulated combat training. In the following years a number of commercial computer games were modified to work

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<sup>48</sup> Halter doesn't give any reference for this game; presumably it has never been made public.

as simulated training tools for different branches of the US military (Halter 2006: 167-171). In 2002 *AA* was released as the first game officially published and endorsed by the US military, and the first infantry training tool created from scratch by the military. In 2004 the commercial game *Full Spectrum Warrior* (Pandemic 2004) was produced in two versions: one army-commissioned version to be used as a training tool for infantry and commanders, and one public version released under the advertising motto “Based on a training aid developed for the U.S. Army”.

The US Marines is said to be currently working with game developer Destineer to produce a game called *Close Combat: First to Fight*, based on a training aid already used by the Marines (Halter 2006: 262). Several other computer games are reported to currently be in use as training tools by the U.S. military, such as the language-learning game *Tactical Iraqi* (Tactical Language Training LLC 2006) based on *Operation Flashpoint* (Bohemia Interactive Studio 2001); and an army-developed game called *Every Soldier a Sensor* has been introduced as an aid for training soldiers in the use of military digital information networks (US Army press release 2005). And in the summer of 2006, the game *F2C2* (US Army 2006) was released as a demonstration of the army project Future Combat Systems. This is just a short list of examples of the current production, endorsement and use of computer games by the US Army. Even as such activities are flourishing, *AA* still holds a unique position as the most ambitious and most public relations-oriented of all the army’s game projects.<sup>49</sup>

### 3.1.1 Other works about America’s Army

In addition to Halter’s historical account, *AA* has been commented in a number of scholarly works, and other relevant texts.

The Dutch researcher David B. Nieborg (2004, 2005a, b, 2006a, b) has published many articles about *AA*, as well as a thorough analysis in his master’s thesis, where he studies the game from a cultural studies perspective. Although I discovered and read his work only late in the process of writing this thesis, and had already formulated most of my arguments independently of Nieborg, many of his findings have been useful for me. Compared with Nieborg’s impressive research there is not a great amount of new, empirical information in this thesis (although there is certainly some); but instead I hope to provide an in-depth aesthetical analysis of the game itself, which hopefully may provide a useful theoretical and methodological supplement to his cultural studies approach. The article written by van der Graaf together with Nieborg about *AA* as a tool of branding has also been useful (van der Graaf and Nieborg 2003). Van der Graaf and Nieborg show how *AA* connects to a variety of different public relations efforts in the army, in a complex network of modern branding strategies aimed both at increasing traffic for the army’s public

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<sup>49</sup> As this thesis was being finalized, the US Army (2007) released *America’s Army: Special Operations*, a game for cell phones. I have not been able to play it, since it’s not distributed to Norwegian customers, but from the videos on the website it doesn’t seem to have much in common with the PC version – it seems to be an entirely different game.

website, promoting the army and its values, as well as strengthening the ties between the army and civilian society.

Zhan Li provides a thorough analysis of *AA*, and in particular some of the highly dedicated players of the game, in his discussion of the potential of the game as a “civilian-military public sphere” (Li 2004). Li interviewed a number of strongly involved players, as well as officials connected to the game project, in order to evaluate this potential. However, although Li doesn’t offer any overall conclusions, from his analysis it seems to me that such conclusions would have to be largely negative: the potential of *AA* as a public sphere seems very small.

*AA* also features as an important example in Alexander Galloway’s discussion about social realism in gaming (2006). This discussion is directly related to the analysis which follows, since part of my analysis directly contradicts the theoretical perspective taken by Galloway. Therefore I will provide a brief discussion of Galloway’s ideas in paragraph 3.4.3, below.

A group of students at Carnegie Mellon University combined technical data analysis with social network analysis to identify some winning strategies in *AA* (Carley et al 2005). Even though their approach is quite different from mine, their empirical data and analysis of it has been useful in complimenting my own game analysis, and are referenced where relevant.

Lastly, the designers behind the game have provided an account of their work which underlines the strong influence of army values in the specific design decisions that were made, and states strongly the respect with which the designers regard those values (Davis et al 2003). This is also referenced several places in the analysis to follow, along with quotes from the game manual, information from the game’s website and game forums etc, to provide information about the designers’ and the publishing authority’s perspective on *AA*.

### **3.2 Genre: Multiplayer tactical shooter**

*America's Army* belongs to a computer game genre often referred to as 'tactical shooters'. This genre has grown out of the genre of first person shooters, which broke through in the early 1990s with games such as id Software’s *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and *Doom* (1993), and was further developed with popular titles such as *Quake* (id Software 1996) and *Half-Life* (Valve Software 1998) and numberless similar games. Many of these games take place in historical settings (particularly World War II), while many of the other games are science fiction games in which the player fights against space aliens or fantasy monsters. Even so, the games share some basic conventions: They model a 3D-world in which the player controls a human (or humanoid) avatar which can walk, turn, jump, aim and fire a variety of guns, fight with the fists and/or melee weapons, and throw grenades. It is also relatively common to be able to drive vehicles and manipulate equipment of different kinds. The player sees the gameworld through a virtual

camera placed where the avatar's eyes would be, showing a constant "point-of-view" (POV) shot<sup>50</sup> where the player herself is only represented by the avatar's hands, holding a weapon in the lower middle area of the screen. Usually this "first person view" is overlaid by a "heads-up display" (HUD) which shows the status of the avatar, the available weapons and ammunition, crosshairs where the weapon is aiming etc.<sup>51</sup> It is also common that the interface includes a map where the avatar's position (and other known elements of importance) is shown.

As the genre developed, different kinds of multiplayer modes were introduced. One popular variation was the *deathmatch*, where several players could fight each other; either one on one, as teams, or in chaotic everyone-against-everyone shooting frenzies. In these games, if the player was killed, she would usually be able to get back into the game (respawn) after a short time. Some games were produced purely as multiplayer games with no dedicated single player content, such as *Quake III Arena* (id Software 1999) and *Unreal Tournament* (Epic Games 1999).

As the names indicate, these games were still set in unreal science fiction environments; and so *Counter-Strike* (The Counter-Strike Team 2000) became a genre-defining game when it introduced environments, weapons and avatars which were "realistic" in the sense that they were named after and modeled on counterparts from contemporary reality, representing actual counter-terrorist forces such as the US Navy Seals. The game pitched players as either terrorists or anti-terrorist forces tasked with opposing missions in relatively small, enclosed areas. *Counter-Strike* started as an independent mod<sup>52</sup> of *Half-Life* (Valve 1998), but the beta versions released online proved so popular that the team behind the mod was hired by Valve to turn the project into an official game, which has since been the most popular game of the genre online (see appendix A). After the release of *Half-Life 2* (Valve Software 2004), an updated version of the game has been released under the title *Counter-Strike: Source* (2004), and has gained a strong following.

In 2002, the same year that *AA* was first released, *Battlefield: 1942* (Digital Illusions 2002) offered a further development of the genre. Based on a historic setting from World War II, *Battlefield: 1942* allowed players to choose between playing soldiers from the allied forces or the axis forces in various WWII battles, giving them the ability to freely operate and experiment with a large variety of vehicles and aircraft, as well as a variety of stationary guns.<sup>53</sup> *Battlefield 1942* was designed specifically for multiplayer play, providing open battle-scenarios which could be played in an almost endless number of

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<sup>50</sup> For an interesting comparison of this virtual camera with POV techniques in cinema, see Galloway 2006: 39-69.

<sup>51</sup> In the closely related genre "third person shooter" the virtual camera is instead placed at a position slightly behind and above the avatar, creating a view over the shoulder of the avatar (known as "third person perspective" since the avatar is present in the picture); in many games one can choose between the two options. However, neither *AA* nor the games it will be compared to below include the option to choose third person perspective.

<sup>52</sup> A computer game mod is a modification of an existing computer game, usually done by amateurs in a non-commercial context (cf. Nieborg 2005b).

<sup>53</sup> Vehicles had been introduced in earlier games, and were used extensively in *Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis* (Bohemia Interactive Studio 2001); but it was *Battlefield 1942* that took this feature to its most flexible extreme.

variations. Numerous sequels, among them the contemporary-themed *Battlefield 2* (2005), have made *Battlefield* one of the most popular computer game series in the world.<sup>54</sup>

Several other popular first person shooter computer games have been released which take place in realistic war settings – most of which seem to focus on WWII scenarios, such as the games *Medal of Honor* (DreamWorks Interactive 1999), *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2003) and *Brothers in Arms* (Gearbox Interactive Studio 2005) and all their sequels. However, since none of these games are primarily multiplayer games, and since they all are set in a historical past instead of the present, I have chosen to use *Counter-Strike: Source* (from now on: *CSS*) and *Battlefield 2* (from now on: *BF2*) as my main points of comparison to *AA*. *CSS*, *BF2* and *AA* are three games that have some basic characteristics in common: They are all first person shooters focused on multiplayer gameplay, set in a relatively realistic-appearing, present-day combat environment where US/western forces are fighting enemies/terrorists. But there are also significant differences between the three games. In order to examine this in depth, I will first describe the two games *CSS* and *BF2* in detail, before I start the analysis of *AA*.

### 3.2.1 Counter-Strike: Source

*Counter-Strike: Source*, as the preceding *Counter-Strike* versions, is a game built on a 3D-simulated world where the player controls a human figure that can run, walk, jump, crouch, swim, open and close doors and use weapons such as knives, handguns, rifles, shotguns and grenades. Players are organized in two teams, one of which plays the role of counter-terrorist forces, while the players on the other team are terrorists. Players on both teams can choose their avatars individually. The counter-terrorists use avatars modeled on real-life counter-terrorist forces in western countries, whereas the terrorist side take appearances from fictional terrorist groups. The brief description that follows each group is informal and humorous. For instance, the “Guerilla Warfare” group is presented as: “A terrorist faction founded in the Middle East, this group has a reputation for ruthlessness. Their disgust for the American lifestyle was demonstrated in their 1982 bombing of a school bus full of Rock and Roll musicians.” Choosing between different avatar models doesn’t affect gameplay (since stealth is not a significant part of the game, the visual appearance is unimportant) – for instance, the same weapons and equipment are available to either team.

The game is normally played online or on local networks (LANs), with up to 32 players in one game at a time. Players select a scenario (a “map”) from a range of alternatives; the two main types of missions are “bomb defusal” (maps with a 'de\_' suffix) or “hostage rescue” (maps with a 'cs\_' suffix). In the bomb defusal maps, a random member of the terrorist team is equipped with explosive charges which must be

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<sup>54</sup> According to official figures from Entertainment Software Association (ESA), *Battlefield 1942* was the 10<sup>th</sup> most sold computer game (not including console games) of 2003, the year after the initial release – and the expansion pack *Battlefield 1942: Road to Rome* was number 16 on the list (ESA 2004: 5). In 2004, *Battlefield Vietnam* (Digital Illusions 2004) was the 7<sup>th</sup> most sold computer game (ESA 2005: 5), and in 2005 *Battlefield 2* was number 6 (ESA 2006: 5).

set off at one of two alternative locations within a pre-set time limit (default is 5 minutes). If this succeeds, or if all the members of the counter-terrorist team are killed, the terrorist team wins; if not, the counter-terrorists win. In the hostage rescue maps, the counter-terrorists must locate a group of hostages held by the terrorist team, and escort them safely to a “hostage rescue point” within the time limit. When a player’s avatar is killed (something which usually takes several gunshots to achieve), the player is “dead” and out of the play for the rest of the mission. During gameplay, text chat and menu-selected “radio messages”, as well as voice communication may be used to give messages and co-ordinate team play. As noted by Jesper Juul (2005: 88-91), the design of *Counter-Strike* puts large emphasis on team play and team co-ordination, compared with other multiplayer games such as *Quake III Arena*; that is just as true for CSS. The maps are generally relatively small, enclosed areas, within and around buildings, courtyards and small tunnels – however they are also sufficiently open and flexible to make sure that there are always several paths from one place to another. Thus a lot of the fighting tends to occur at a number of “choke points”, as described by Andersen, Güttler and Folmann (2001).<sup>55</sup>

Players receive points, in the form of “cash” prices, for different achievements during the game: killing an enemy, rescuing a hostage, planting the explosives or winning the round. Cash is also deducted as punishment for shooting team members (team killing), injuring a hostage or loosing the round. At the start of each round, cash can be used to buy weapons and other kinds of equipment. If a player is killed, she loses all her extra weapons and equipment and starts the next round with just the basic gear. Various statistics about the players are stored in a table that is accessible to the players during the rounds: A list of all the players on each team with status (dead or alive), score (number of enemies killed), number of deaths and latency. However, neither the cash nor the player’s score is permanently stored; every player starts from scratch each time they log on.

Most of these features are similar or identical to the previous versions of *Counter-Strike*. The main difference is a higher level of graphical detail, and a more advanced physics simulation – certain materials (e.g. wooden doors) can for instance be penetrated by bullets. *Counter-Strike: Source* also includes ‘bots’, i.e. computer-controlled characters, so the game can in fact be played by a single human player. However, there is no such thing as a single player campaign.

### **3.2.2 Battlefield 2**

Originated in a mod of the WWII game *Battlefield 1942*, the scenarios in *Battlefield 2* are battles in an imaginary war between the United States Marine Corps (USMC) and either the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) or the forces of something called “the Middle Eastern Coalition” (MEC).<sup>56</sup> The battles take place on maps that come in different sizes, designed for maximum 16, 32 or 64 players. A number of “control points” are spread around the map; these consist of a flagpole, usually surrounded by

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<sup>55</sup> This report actually analyzed maps from the original version of *Counter-Strike*, but the point is equally valid for CSS.



some defense structures, buildings and a partial fence. Placing at least one soldier close to the flagpole for a little while (around 20 seconds) will cause that team's flag to be raised, and the control point to be captured. The process is reversible, so the different control points can be captured and re-captured repeatedly by the two teams. Whenever a player's avatar is killed, she can respawn after 15 seconds (default), at any of the control points held by her team. At the start of a battle, each team has a certain number of "tickets" for respawning, and so battles can be won in three ways: Either by reducing the other team's tickets to zero, or by having the largest number of tickets when the time limit for the battle is out (typically around 30 minutes, if there is a time limit), or by capturing all the control points and killing all the remaining enemies, so they have nowhere to respawn (this is only possible on some maps). Also, holding a certain number of control points causes the other team's tickets to be reduced over time, so the tactics involved in capturing and defending control points are very important for the game.

The maps are relatively large and open. The few buildings, tunnels and other structures that can be entered are mostly just small barracks or huts with one or two rooms, which in practice function as temporary hiding places for soldiers on foot; or large and open structures that have room for heavy vehicles and tanks, such as large garages. The urban maps have a larger variety of buildings, but these buildings also have open windows, doors and balconies that can be fired through both ways, and control points are almost always outside buildings. This open layout contributes to the important role of vehicles and heavy weaponry in *BF2*.

Like in *CSS*, the main part of the game takes place in 3D landscapes simulating modern combat zones, seen through the eyes of a human soldier (first person view). The avatars have all the basic abilities to move that *CSS* avatars have: They can walk, run, jump, crouch, swim and climb ladders. In addition they can go prone, and due to the openness of the landscape and the variety of heavy weapons and vehicles available, it is important for players on foot to use this opportunity, as well as other strategies, to exploit their biggest advantage over vehicles: That they are smaller and harder to spot. As in *CSS*, a large variety of weapons is available to foot soldiers, modeled from authentic weapon models in real life. However, players can not buy weapons or equipment as they wish; instead they must choose between seven different roles, each with their standard set of weapons and gear: "Engineer", "Medic", "Sniper", "Anti-tank", "Support", "Special Forces" and "Assault". The gear of each role varies a little according to which army the player is a part of, but is essentially equivalent. Thus the game prioritizes the concerns of gameplay over realism: For instance the power of weapons is not realistically modeled – it is rare, even when shot by sniper rifles or by shotguns at short distances, that avatars will be killed by one shot. And, perhaps even more unrealistic considering the nature of contemporary wars, the weapons and equipment of the eastern and the western forces are overall equally powerful.

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<sup>56</sup> In the booster pack *Euro Forces* some scenarios are added where EU forces fight against either MEC or PLA.

The big difference between *BF2* and most other first person shooters, however, is the wide range of vehicles, boats and aircraft that are available for the players on strategic locations in the gameworld. Covering a distance that may take many minutes for an avatar on foot may be a matter of seconds for a fast vehicle or aircraft (see paragraph 3.4.1, below). However, the faster the vehicles can go, the harder they are to control; and the greater the firepower of the vehicle, the more attention it will attract from the enemy; and for a vehicle it is harder to find cover than for a foot-soldier. There is a careful balance between the advantages and disadvantages of different vehicles and different player roles, which means that there is no single resource or combat role which is undoubtedly better than all the others. Still, it seems pretty clear that controlling and using effectively at least a fair share of the most powerful weapons in the game is essential for success.

In addition to the basic infantry roles the players take on, they can also be organized in squads of up to 6 players, one of which is squad leader; and one of the players on each team is selected as commander of the team, according to overall rank and experience. The commander has access to a special interface where she can control radar and UAV resources to locate enemy forces, set targets for artillery attacks, provide supply drops and issue orders to the squad leaders. The squad leaders can either accept the commander's orders, which are then distributed to the rest of the squad, or they can issue their own orders – all of which the individual squad members can choose to either follow or ignore. This army-like hierarchy is entirely voluntary – if a player is not happy with her squad she can leave it and join a different one, form her own squad or play as “lone wolf”. And if the players are not satisfied with their commander they can initiate a “mutiny”, which is decided by a vote among all the team members – if a sufficient number votes for the mutiny, a new commander is selected. There is also a democratic voting option in place for kicking players out of the server, typically if they attack team members or engage in other kinds of (perceived) antisocial behavior. A player which is killed by a team member can also choose whether to “punish” or “forgive” the killer; if a player gets punished by a given number of teammates, she will be kicked out of the server. However, avoiding teamkilling is much easier in *BF2* than in *CSS* or *AA*, because of a colored nametag that appears on top of other avatars and vehicles as soon as they are identified – blue for teammates, green for squad mates, and red for enemies. Also, the commander can put up UAV radar drones which will pinpoint the location of every enemy in a certain area, as a red dot on the navigational map in the player's interface.

The score of individual players is divided into kill points and team points (for such things as capturing bases, healing wounded teammates, resupplying ammunition, repairing vehicles etc) and number of deaths, and is displayed in a table accessible to everyone. Moreover, when playing on ranked servers, the score from each round is stored and accumulated in the player's account. With a certain score the player gains a promotion, from the initial rank of private all the way to general. With each promotion the player gets to “unlock” one new weapon, which can then be used in the game. This function, in combination with the team point awards, has been praised by many reviewers of the game (Kosak 2005, Ocampo 2005,

Adams 2005) because it makes it more attractive to play supporting roles, further enhancing the importance of team play.

The teams are given uniforms and flags corresponding to their respective armies, and music is used to create a sense of the cultural/geographical setting. Furthermore, orders and menu-selected radio messages will be read out loud in the language of the team chosen; if one is playing USA, the voice will be in American English, in the Chinese and MEC armies something which I presume to be Chinese and Arabic.<sup>57</sup>

### 3.3 America's Army

My first, brief experience with *America's Army* played out like this: I had installed the game, fiddled around a little with the interface and scanned some of the instructions, and realized that I needed to go through some training missions before I could play online. So I loaded the "Marksmanship" mission from the "Basic Training" menu.



Figure 2: The loading screens in AA, which are shown while the player is waiting for a mission to be loaded, display texts and images which enforce the rhetorical strategies of the game. This is "The Soldier's Creed" (unofficial in-game screenshot taken by me).

<sup>57</sup> Curiously enough, the EU variant (which presumably is meant to represent a multinational army comprised of soldiers from different European countries) is all English in a variety of European accents (British, German, and French).

When the mission had loaded, I found myself at a firing range, being instructed by a drill sergeant – incidentally, a familiar enough situation from my own real-life experience<sup>58</sup>, as well as from Hollywood movies and computer games. But unlike the many start-of-the-game tutorial sequences I had gone through before, the instructions were elaborate and delivered without humor – and moreover, I had to stand still until the sergeant was finished talking! Finally, after my impatient gaming persona had stood still and listened for seconds on end, I was instructed to approach a table where I could get my weapon and ammunition.



Figure 3: Drill instructor from the "Marksmanship" basic training mission. (Official AA screenshot taken from gamespot.com.)

Then I was ordered to take position at the firing range. When I took my time, looking around at the set-up, I was suddenly met by a yell from the officer who told me not to waste his time, a black-out, and suddenly I found myself in the position where the officer wanted me. (Hey, that never even happened in real life!) There I was instructed to fire forty rounds at a handful of red silhouette-shaped panels, "for familiarization". I started firing a few single shots, and then some bursts. Already I was getting bored, and still not willing to let go of my regular gamer attitude – basically: In

games anything goes, except boredom – I turned around and placed a few rounds in the officer's face. The officer's voice shouted "Cease fire!" while his body was already falling to the ground, my screen went black, and a new loading screen told me that a new mission was being loaded: "Forth Leavenworth".

I found myself in a small prison cell with a bed, a toilet, a bookshelf and a door, and some blues harmonica playing in the background. Surprised, I started looking around for a key, or some clue as to how the door could be opened; scanning my mind for computer game experiences from *Doom*-style first person shooters to adventure games, I reasoned to myself that the first thing to do must obviously be to find that hidden key. However, there was nothing to be found, just some dull, non-interactive prison cell inventory. Perhaps this was going to be one of those cutscenes where I remained in control of the avatar's movements, as in *Half-Life*? I waited a while for some computer-controlled character to come and give me a clue about what was happening, until I finally understood that it wasn't going to happen. My avatar was simply in jail for shooting an officer, and that was it; the only key out would be outside the gameworld, at interface level. Hitting 'Esc' on the keyboard brought up a menu telling me "Welcome to Fort

<sup>58</sup> I spent one year in a recon unit of the Norwegian army ("Grensekompaniet", at the Russian border) with emphasis on training similar to that which is simulated in the "Special forces" training missions in AA. In the discussions of realism in

Leavenworth, the U.S. Army's central military prison", telling a little about this old and historical institution, and then explaining the function of the game's "Rules of Engagement":

The Army operates under Rules of Engagement (ROE). Attacking a teammate, superior officer or noncombatant civilian is a violation of ROE. If you injure a teammate while playing online you will incur negative ROE points. Most servers have a limit to the amount of ROE that is allowed. If you exceed that limit you will be removed from the server and set to Leavenworth. You will also be sent to Leavenworth for injuring or killing an instructor during training.

Feeling most of all like a school boy caught while placing needles on the teacher's chair, I exited to the main menu to start over – this time to put a greater effort into my make-believe identity as a soldier, so that I wouldn't get thrown out again.

The point of the Leavenworth "mission" is quite obvious: In a game, the most effective form of punishment is not retaliation, as in the *GTA* series, where the police will fire back at the player and chase her if she attacks them – setting the scene for marvelous car chases and shoot-outs that are an important part of the fun of the game. In games, the only effective disciplinary punishment is boredom. Throwing the player out, quarantining her, forcing her to go looking for new servers, suffer the wait of new load screens, re-starting almost completed missions from scratch: *That* is annoying – and disciplining. *AA* presents itself as a game that is more serious, and demands greater discipline from its players, in return for an experience that is presented as authentic and realistic.

According to David B. Nieborg, *Counter-Strike* was one of the main inspirations for *AA*. Referring to the developer's own account of how *AA* was developed, he explains how in the early stages of the project, "a mission statement was formulated where the main goal was to develop a game as attractive as *Counter-Strike* but with the emphasis on a more authentic combat experience, the inclusion of the U.S. Army values and a significant role of training" (Nieborg 2005a: 33). Looking at the current version of *AA*, this description seems quite fitting. Like *CSS*, *AA* is a round-based multiplayer online tactical shooter, in which two teams with opposing objectives face each other in a relatively confined environment. And just like *CSS*, the game is based on relatively short rounds in which each player has only one life – there are no magic health packets to revive a wounded player, and once a player is killed, she is out for the remainder of the round. However, there are significant differences in all aspects of the games.

First of all, game structure. Rounds last about twice as long in *AA* as in *CSS* (default time limit for *AA* is 10 minutes). This means that not just novices, but even expert players will from time to time be stuck for minutes watching the last players finishing off each other. The missions in *AA* also vary more, and have more complex objectives than in *CSS*. The scoring system in *AA* is also more complicated than in both the other two games. Players receive a positive score of 10 points for each enemy they have killed, a varying

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*AA*, I have relied in part on this experience for some basic observations about the nature of real-life training and combat, as opposed to its simulated counterparts.

number of “goal points” (usually between 5 and 50) for contributing to completing an objective (as well as for other actions benefiting the team, such as treating the wounds of fellow team members when playing as a medic), and leadership points if playing as the leader of a squad or fireteam. Players also receive negative points for violating the Rules Of Engagement (ROE) – e.g. for shooting at team members, or for dying, as well as negative leadership score if failing an objective or dying while being in a leader role. The number of points lost for killing a team member is determined according to a complicated system and depends on time, frequency and amount of damage; the punishment is minimum 40 points, but often it can be several hundred points (cf. Tran 2004: 58).<sup>59</sup> If the player scores 500 negative ROE points, she is kicked from the server and sent to jail. These statistics are all displayed in a score board, where the team members that are still alive are highlighted. The score for each player is stored permanently with her player account and contributes towards the “honor score”, which can be between 0 and 100 and indicates the individual level of each player. Players start with an initial honor score of 10, which is the minimum required to play on most official servers. However, many servers require a higher honor score to let players in, and on any “SF” map one must have a minimum honor score of 15 to play one of the SF classes. The honor score is displayed next to the player name in the lists of team members, so that it also works as a public indication of the player’s level of skill and experience.<sup>60</sup> But most importantly, the combination of the large amount of negative ROE points incurred by killing team members, and the permanent storing of these points in the honor score, means that the player’s actions in the game can have permanent consequences for her possibilities in the game in the future. Consequences may even occur outside the game, as information of the player’s conduct in the game may be assessed by army recruiters if the player wishes to join the army in real life.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> By comparison: If one kills a team member in *BF2*, one gets minus 4 points, which is the double of the score gained by killing an enemy or winning a round, which both gives 2 points. In *CSS*, teamkilling is punished by a much larger score deduction: Minus 3300\$, which is 11 times the score gained by killing an enemy, but only 50\$ more than the bonus for winning a round. In *AA* the punishment is around 5-25 times the score one gets for killing an enemy (10 points), and 1-5 times the score one gets for winning a round (around 50 points). Moreover, in *CSS* there is no punishment for injuring a team mate unless the avatar is killed, while in *AA* there is a complex system calculating the punishment in relation to the damage inflicted.

<sup>60</sup> Zhan Li claims that there are indications that the honor score doesn’t work quite as intended, referring to in-game conversations where a high honor score is seen as “evidence that the high Honor player possibly spends too much time playing the game, and consequently ‘has no life’” (Li 2003: 107). However, this is much less significant in my discussion of the game as a work of rhetoric, than in Li’s discussion of the game as public sphere. Whether or not a high honor score makes other players view the high honor player with increased respect as a person or not, will of course depend on the different players and their individual values. And either way it will still function as an indicator of experienced players, who will generally be strong assets for a team.

Some of Li’s interviewees also dismiss the sanctions involved with ROE violations as trivial, since even in the case of the most severe punishment – permanent deletion of a player’s account – the player can just register a new account and start from scratch. However, Li’s informants are all highly devoted players and clan leaders, many of them with real-life military records, so these statements may be an expression of these players’ disappointment that the player community at large don’t adhere to the same strict standards of military discipline they subscribe to themselves. This doesn’t change the fact that the game of *AA* implements a system which is closer to military discipline than in other, similar games.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. the following excerpt from the game’s FAQ: “Players who request information AND reveal their nom-de-guerre to Recruiters may have their gaming records matched to their real-world identities for the purpose of facilitating career placement within the Army. Data collected within the game such as which roles and missions players spent the most time playing could be used to highlight Army career fields that map into these interest areas so as to provide the best possible

Although it is mainly a multiplayer game, *AA* starts with a series of single player training missions. As mentioned above, some of these must be completed in order to be allowed to play online at all. Others must be completed in order to unlock certain missions, such as the Airborne Rangers missions; or certain kinds of player roles, such as Medic; or both, as with the Special Forces. These training missions cannot be saved until they are completed, and have to be repeated in their full length if they are not successfully completed. These missions are relatively demanding; personally I was a relatively experienced first person shooter player when I first started playing *AA*, but I had to run through several of the missions many times before I passed the test. The fact that I took quite a while to learn to separate enemies from teammates in a glance also contributed significantly to these failures. Of course, that particular ability is very important when coming online, and is the main point of the MOUT exercise, the hardest of the basic training missions. Like in *BF2*, the HUD display does bring up a “nametag” whenever the player’s gun is pointed at friendly soldiers, but only when the physical distance is relatively small, and after a short delay – and since there is no corresponding differently-colored nametag popping up for the enemies, these nametags can’t be relied on to discern teammates from enemies.<sup>62</sup> Also, unlike in *CSS*, the friends and the enemies in general look quite similar; the safest indicator for deciding which is which is the headwear.

These individual training requirements are an answer to one common design problem with online multiplayer games; how to make sure new players entering the game for the first time will be able to survive for more than a short while faced with more experienced counterparts (see for instance Bartle 1996 or Castronova 2001). Instead of the alternative option of giving extra protection to the first-timers, *AA* puts tough requirements on the players to make sure all who enter online servers hold a certain level of basic skills. But in addition to this, these training missions are a primary spot for messages to be communicated directly to the players in a classic edugame-format. The different kinds of training take place in environments that are modeled on corresponding real-life training facilities of the US army. The history and current function of these army camps are presented in relatively long texts along with the mission description, whereas the missions themselves focus on familiarizing the player with the weapons, equipment and tactics to be used.

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match between the attributes and interests of potential Soldiers and the attributes of career fields and training opportunities” (“Windows FAQs: Parents Info” 2007: “Will the Army know whether or not I’m a good player?”).

<sup>62</sup> In the game manual quoted in this thesis, it is actually claimed that there is a corresponding nametag for enemies, which displays the name in red if it’s an enemy, green if it’s a teammate and yellow if the distance is too far to decide. However, this information only comes up when the target is within a distance of “a few feet” (Tran 2004: 24) – and at that point, one normally either knows the target is friendly, or one of the avatars is already dead.



*Figure 4: To be able to play as 'medic' in online missions, the player must attend a classroom lecture on first aid, and pass a multiple-choice test. The lecture has no practical relevance to the game. (Official screenshot, taken from Gamespot.com.)*

However, a couple of the missions actually take the form of classroom lectures, after which the player must pass a multiple choice test based on the information given in the lecture. While officials behind the AA game claim that the first aid lesson given in one of these missions gave one player the skills he needed to save his brother's life after a real-life accident (Powell 2005), these "lecture" missions don't contain any information with relevance to the game itself. Instead they follow the old and infamous edugame format of requiring the player to sit through some educational sequence in order to receive a gameplay reward afterwards (in this

case, the opportunity to play as a medic).

Probably the most well-known and debated design choice of the game, is connected with the organization of player roles: In AA, both teams see themselves as playing US soldiers, and the other team as enemies. Each team is given contradictory descriptions of the mission, exactly opposite to each other, in which their team is assumed to play the role of the US forces, while the other team plays as "Opposing Forces" (OPFOR), a generic enemy force not identified with any real-world nationality or organization.<sup>63</sup> And during the mission, the player's own avatar and all her teammates will be seen as US soldiers wearing US uniforms and using US weapons.<sup>64</sup> All the members of the opposing team will be seen as "enemies" wearing generic clothing with different colors and camouflage patterns, and using non-western weapons such as Russian Kalashnikov rifles and RPG grenade launchers. In other words, each and every player is playing two roles at once: To herself and her teammates, she is playing as a US soldier, but to the players on the opposing team, she is playing as an enemy soldier.<sup>65</sup> The implications of this arrangement will be analyzed further a little later.

<sup>63</sup> Exception: The "Insurgent Camp" mission, where the enemy is identified as Taliban.

<sup>64</sup> In the "Special Forces" missions, some players may also play as so-called "Indigenous forces" which are presented as local, non-specified forces supporting the US forces.

<sup>65</sup> The one exception to this rule is the "MILES" missions, when played on "MILES only" servers – see below.





Figure 5: OPFOR and US teammates. The figure to the left, and in the background to the right, are avatars controlled by players on the other team, and therefore appear as OPFOR; whereas the figure in the foreground to the right (and in the background to the left) are on the same team as the player whose perspective the picture is showing – and therefore appear as US soldiers in standard uniform. For the players on the opposite team, this situation would look exactly opposite. Situations such as this, with numerous players from both teams present in one, small room, are quite unusual, and the picture above seems to be an arranged “photo-session”. It was submitted as “Picture of the Day” on the America’s Army Files website by WW3sniper January 14<sup>th</sup> 2007, under the title “Caught looking in the toilets!” (see <http://americasarmy.filefront.com/potd/68902>, last retrieved February 16<sup>th</sup> 2007 at 15:00 CET).

The gameworld of AA also distinguishes itself clearly from most other games. In particular, it has a number of qualities that places it closer to the challenges of real life than the world of CSS. This applies most of all to the player’s avatar, which has a much larger variety of possible movements: Not only walking, running, jumping, crouching and climbing ladders, but also going prone and doing various special moves like rolling over and leaning to see around corners. And in fact, AA players need to take advantage of all these opportunities to a much larger degree than in *BF2* or *CSS*, due to the simple fact that the avatars in AA are much more vulnerable than in any of the two other games – it usually only takes one or two rifle hits to kill someone.

The functioning of the body is also much more accurately modeled in AA than in any of the other games: When an avatar is wounded, it starts to “bleed”, something which is indicated by a red drop of blood displayed in the player’s interface; and if nothing is done to stop the bleeding, the avatar may bleed to death. A player who is a medic can stop the bleeding, but can not bring back any of the health points that the wounded avatar has lost. And the injury affects the avatar – not in ways which are depicted

graphically, such as blood spots or limping movements, but in ways which affect the player's effectiveness: A wounded avatar moves more slowly and aims less accurately than a healthy one. The posture of an avatar is also important for its accuracy while shooting, as well as the (simulated) breathing. In fact, even the avatar's (simulated) psyche may influence the "Combat Effectiveness Meter", displayed in the player interface: During intense combat the meter goes up, simulating stress, and if it comes too high up the avatar's weapon is lowered and the player can't move or fire until the avatar's "nerves" have calmed. However, compared to *BF2*, there is one aspect in which the simulation of the body seems less realistic: Unlike in *BF2*, the avatar is able to sprint at the same pace indefinitely. The pace is also not affected by running in steep slopes (but neither is it in the other two games).

Like *CSS* and *BF2*, the *AA* avatars can use a variety of hand-held weapons, from pistols and a large variety of rifles to rocket-propelled grenades. However there is much less freedom in the choice of weapons and equipment than in both the other games. Like in *BF2* there is a certain range of different soldier classes available to the players, each with their distinctive set of weapons and equipment (and many of them with specific training missions required to qualify for play) – but the number of different classes is less than in *BF2*, as is the variety of weapons available. Unlike in *BF2*, there is a definite set-up of combat roles for each mission, which limits the players' choices. In the popular "Pipeline" mission, for instance, when all 13 positions are filled, each team will have 8 "riflemen" (armed with standard automatic rifles), 2 "grenadiers" (with small grenade launchers) and 3 "automatic riflemen" (with machine guns). These roles are chosen at the start of a match, and the players with the highest honor score (see below) get to choose their roles first. Hence, inexperienced players will only get to play with particular weapon types (such as machine guns, grenade launchers or sniper rifles) when there are no experienced players who take them first. And unlike in *CSS* there is no option to buy weapons; the only modifications that can be made to the standard gear is a choice of five different rifle customizations which can be used when playing as a Special Forces soldier. This becomes possible only after successfully completing the Special Forces training missions and reaching an honor score of 15.

The maps of *AA* are generally much larger and more open than those of *CSS*; even when there are maps in *AA* that consist partially or entirely of narrow corridors and tunnels, these structures are generally larger and more complex than in *CSS*, with several vertical levels. Combined with the slower speed of running, the higher vulnerability of avatars and other elements of the game structure, all of this makes *AA* a much slower, and more complex game than *CSS*. Where the gameworld of *CSS* is too small and dense to make stealth tactics and elaborate strategies effective,<sup>66</sup> such tactics and strategies play a major role in *AA*. At the same time maps of *AA* are much smaller and more enclosed than those of *BF2*; this is a natural consequence of the absence in *AA* of vehicles and weapons which can be used over long distances.

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<sup>66</sup> This is also evident in the gamer culture, as manifested in the player's exchanges in the in-game chat, where 'camping' (staying hidden in one place) is strongly derided.

Playing *AA* on maps like those of *BF2* might imply playing hide and seek with the other team for hours, rather than engaging in intense combat simulation.

As I will be discussing further on, the realism of the gameworld is of great importance for understanding one of the main rhetoric strategies underlying *AA*, that of authenticity; and so I have made detailed measurements to support the claim. These are presented in the next subchapter.

In the table below I have summarized some of the qualitative differences between *AA*, *CSS* and *BF2*:

*Table 1: Overview over differences between America's Army, Counter-Strike: Source and Battlefield 2.*<sup>67</sup>

	<i>America's Army</i>	<i>Counter-Strike: Source</i>	<i>Battlefield 2</i>
<b>Nametags separate friend from enemy</b>	No <sup>68</sup>	No	Yes
<b>Vehicles</b>	No	No	Yes
<b>Visual blood effects</b>	None	Some	None
<b>Respawn</b>	No	No	Yes
<b>Waiting time when killed</b>	Up to 10 min	Up to 5 min	15 seconds
<b>Health packs/revival</b>	No	No	Yes
<b>Speed of movement</b>	Low	High	Very high
<b>Live map view/radar</b>	No <sup>69</sup>	Yes	Yes
<b>Training qualification before online play</b>	Yes	No	No
<b>Close-quarter combat</b>	Half-and-half	Exclusively	Partly
<b>Hierarchical command structure</b>	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Punishment for teamkilling</b>	Negative points (large amount) and automatic kicking	Negative points (medium amount)	Negative points (small amount), semi-automatic kicking
<b>Votekicks</b>	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Mutiny</b>	No	N/A	Yes
<b>Points scored are saved in permanent ranking system</b>	Yes <sup>70</sup>	No	On ranked servers
<b>Free choice of role</b>	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Free choice of weapon</b>	No	Yes	Partly <sup>71</sup>
<b>Enemies are identified by nationality or group</b>	No	Fictive	Yes (semi-fictive)
<b>Single player version/bots</b>	No	Yes	Yes
<b>User-made maps, modding community</b>	No <sup>72</sup>	Yes	Yes

<sup>67</sup> In some cases, the values in this table refer to server default settings which can be modified on private servers.

<sup>68</sup> Or rather, only when the enemy is already too close – see above.

<sup>69</sup> *AA* from version 2.7 and onwards features a radar in the interface. Prior to this version, there is only a static map of the battle arena, without any dynamic information (such as player positions or achieved objectives).

<sup>70</sup> Official servers, which save the honor points after a round, are the norm in *AA*. Unofficial servers also exist, but they are not as common as for *BF2*.

<sup>71</sup> In *BF2* one must use the weapons of the soldier class one has chosen; but as one is promoted in the ranking system, the player can unlock an alternative weapon for each different class (two in the “Special Forces” expansion pack).

<sup>72</sup> A level editor was made available with the *AA* version 2.8.0 “Coalition”, which was released December 21<sup>st</sup> 2006, as this thesis was being finalized. Players are invited to submit their homemade maps for evaluation by the army's experts, to be included among the maps played on official “honor” servers.

### 3.4 Gameworld measurements

Some characteristics of the gameworlds of the games I am comparing lend themselves to quantitative measurements. Playing the three games, it is easy enough to observe that *AA* takes place in a quite different tempo and rhythm than *CSS* or *BF2*: Where the two last games are characterized by intense, fast-paced action and fearless (or reckless) player behavior, players of *AA* are forced to move slowly and carefully, since their avatars are slower and more vulnerable. If the gameworld itself and the simulation laws governing it can be evaluated and understood as a kind of statements, as parts of the game's overall rhetoric, then these qualities must be investigated thoroughly. With this aim I have attempted to measure the speed of movement in the three games, as well as the sizes of some of the popular maps (i.e. gameworlds) in each of the three games. Below follows a brief summary of my measurements; a more detailed description of how they were made is available in appendix C. (Since the length of distances in meters had to be measured by estimation, the speeds and the sizes of maps are given as estimates.) Using these findings I will try to evaluate the realism of the games; in doing so, I hope also to clarify the important distinction between realism and reality.

#### 3.4.1 Speed measurements

In *CSS*, the avatars have two basic postures – upright or crouched – and two speeds of movement in either posture, fast or slow. The slower movement has the advantage of being less noisy. There is no “sprint” option and the gun can be used at all times, more or less with the same accuracy; thus running is the normal speed of movement in *CSS*.

**Table 2: Speed of movement in Counter-Strike: Source.**

	Estimated speed	Relative to running speed
Running	4.2 m/s	1.0
Walking	1.7 m/s	0.40
Running crouched	1.4 m/s	0.34
Walking crouched	0.087 m/s	0.021

In *BF2*, the avatar has one additional posture, that of going prone (as well as swimming in water). When standing up the avatar can also sprint for a short time; in the other two postures there is only one speed of movement. While sprinting, the gun is lowered and can not be used. However, the avatar can also move around in a large number of vehicles. I have measured the speed of some of those, and included them in the table.

**Table 3: Speed of movement in Battlefield 2.**

	Estimated speed	Relative to running speed
<b>Speed on foot:</b>		
Sprint (max 11 seconds)	6.0 m/s	1.7
Running	3.6 m/s	1.0
Running crouched	1.9 m/s	0.53
Crawling	0.71 m/s	0.19
Swimming (not sprint)	1.5 m/s	0.43
Running in a slope (medium steep)	3.4 m/s	0.93
<b>Vehicle speed:</b>		
Tank	9.4 m/s = 34 km/h	2.6
APC <sup>73</sup>	13 m/s = 47 km/h	3.5
Jeep	18 m/s = 65 km/h	5.1
Helicopter <sup>74</sup>		Ca. 10
Fighter jet		Ca. 13-15

In AA, the avatar can move at two speeds in all of the three postures: standing, crouched and prone. The slower speed makes less noise and allows the player to fire the gun with higher accuracy. In the upright position there is a third speed available: sprint. This is even faster than running, but while sprinting (or crawling fast) the gun is lowered and can not be fired until the player has slowed down. It is also worth noting that although it is possible to fire the gun while the avatar is running, the aim is extremely inaccurate; hence slow modes of movement are much more important in AA than in the other games.

**Table 4: Speed of movement in America's Army.**

	Estimated speed	Relative to running speed
Sprint	4.0 m/s	1.5
Run	2.7 m/s	1.0
Walk	1.5 m/s	0.55
Run crouching	1.3 m/s	0.46
Walk crouching	0.76 m/s	0.28
Crawl fast	0.87 m/s	0.33
Crawl slowly	0.32 m/s	0.12

### 3.4.2 Size of maps

The sizes of the maps were measured in this way: For each map, I chose a reference distance on the map and measured the time to cover it while running (default speed). Then I compared the length of the reference distance on the map with the size of the entire map in the two directions north-south and east-west. In this way, I could get a quite accurate measure of how long it would take to run from north to south and east to west on the map (if it could be done in a straight line, with no obstacles in the way). This

<sup>73</sup> Armored Personnel Carrier, an armored vehicle which is lighter than a tank and can carry passengers.

<sup>74</sup> The speeds measured for the two aircraft are very inaccurate, due to the complexity of handling the aircraft and at the same time measuring the speed relative to the ground with a stopwatch.

figure shows the size of a map in relation to the speed of movement for avatars in the gameworld, and thus it is a better measure than the length in meters; the time it would take to cross the entire map tells us something about how fast developments and changes in the game can take place, for instance if a mission requires a player to reach a specific point on the map. Since the normal mode of transportation over large distances in *BF2* is to use a vehicle, I have also included the time taken to cross the map in a medium-fast vehicle (an APC).

As can be seen from the following tables, there is significant variation in the size of the different maps – and the largest variation is between the different maps in *AA*.<sup>75</sup> It is also worth noticing that even though the smallest *AA* map is approximately the same size as the largest *CSS* map, it takes almost 50 per cent longer time to cross it, because of the much slower running speed in *AA*. Likewise, although the smallest *BF2* map (the 16 player version of “Strike at Karkand”) is much larger (with almost twice the surface area) than the largest *AA* map (“Radio Tower”), the time to cross it is almost the same due to the faster running speed in *BF2*.

**Table 5: Size of maps in Counter-Strike: Source.**

Name of map	Time to run across	Size estimate
”de_prodigy”	10 x 14 s	42 x 60 m
”de_chateau”	13 x 16 s	54 x 69 m
”de_dust2”	15 x 17 s	63 x 73 m
”de_train”	14 x 18 s	58 x 75 m
”de_aztec”	13 x 24 s	53 x 102 m
”de_piranesi”	15 x 24 s	61 x 102 m
”de_dust”	16 x 23 s	68 x 96 m

**Table 6: Size of maps in America’s Army.**

Name of map	Time to run across	Size estimate
”Urban Assault”	25 x 35 s	68 x 95 m
”Pipeline”	27 x 38 s	73 x 103 m
”SF Hospital”	31 x 51 s	85 x 138 m
”Border”	80 x 88 s	217 x 238 m
”River Basin”	96 x 132 s	261 x 360 m
”Radio Tower”	110 x 131 s	300 x 356 m

**Table 7: Size of maps in Battlefield 2.**

Name of map	Time to run across	Time in an APC	Size estimate
Strike at Karkand (64)	190 x 180 s	54 x 52 s	690 x 650 m
32 player version	200 x 130 s	56 x 38 s	710 x 480 m
16 player version	170 x 86 s	48 x 25 s	610 x 310 m
Dragon Valley (64)	470 x 310 s	134 x 88 s	1700 x 1100 m
32 player version	310 x 220 s	88 x 62 s	1100 x 780 m
16 player version	200 x 210 s	56 x 59 s	710 x 740 m
Fu She Pass (64)	360 x 430 s	102 x 123 s	1300 x 1550 m
Daqing Oilfields (64)	430 x 390 s	122 x 112 s	1500 x 1400 m
Dalian Plant (64)	381 x 464 s	109 x 132 s	1370 x 1670 m
Zatar Wetlands (64)	461 x 437 s	131 x 125 s	1660 x 1570 m

<sup>75</sup> In particular if we look away from the smaller versions of each *BF2* map.



Figure 6: This image shows the size of the smallest map measured from each of the three games, in relation to each other: The 16-player version of “Strike at Karkand” from BF2 (main – the shaded areas are outside the game arena/battle zone), “Urban Assault” from AA (inset, lower right corner) and “de\_dust” from CSS (smallest, lower right corner).



Figure 7: In this image, the scale has been altered so that it doesn't represent the distance in meters, but the time taken to cross the map while running in a straight line. Measured in this way, the AA map is significantly larger, and the CSS map smaller.

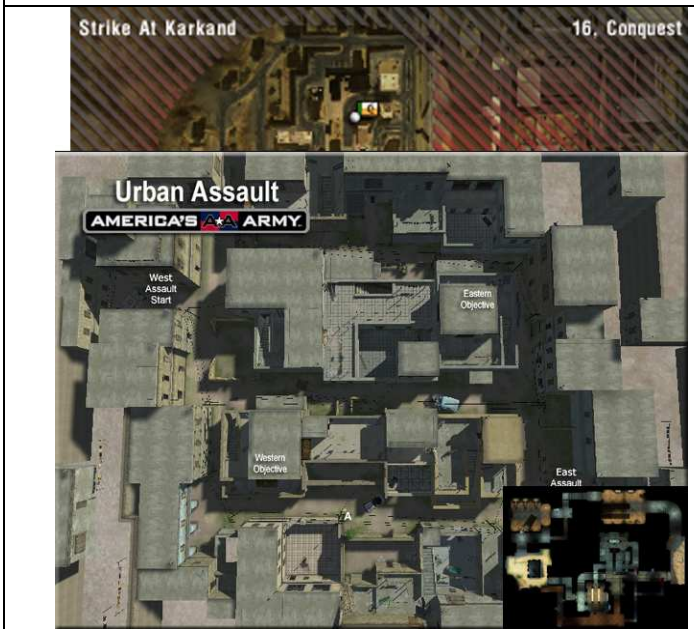


Figure 8: In this image, the AA and CSS maps are unaltered, but the scale for the BF2 map has been altered to represent the time it would take to cross it in a straight line driving in a medium fast vehicle (an APC). Measured in this way, the AA map is significantly larger than the BF2 map (and still much larger than the CSS map).



Figure 9: This shows the largest maps measured in each game, in the same altered scale as in the figure to the left: The 64-player version of “Zatar Wetlands” from BF2, “Radio Tower” from AA and “de\_dust” from CSS. The AA map doesn't show the entire accessible area, but is still clearly the largest (in this manipulated scale).

### 3.4.3 Gameworld realism

What do my measurements say about the tempo of the three different games? Sprint speed in *BF2* is around 50% faster than sprinting in *AA*. Running in *CSS* is as fast as sprinting in *AA*, and around 50% faster than running in *AA*; running in *BF2* is around 30 % faster than running in *AA*. Crawling at normal speed in *BF2* is about twice as fast as in *AA*. The measurements clearly show that movement is faster in both the other games than in *AA*. The much larger maps of *AA* compared to *CSS* enforce this tendency: On the largest maps, getting from one side of the map to the other will take more than 5 times longer in *AA* than in *CSS*. The gameworld of *BF2* is larger than that in *AA*, but in *BF2* it is also possible to access a large number of vehicles, which will transport the player at speeds which are many times faster than on foot; by jeep, for instance, the time to cross even the largest maps (at ca. 5 times running speed) is much shorter than by running in *AA*; with aircraft, the time is furthermore divided by a factor of 2-3.

So, according to the measured data, *AA* is a game in which movement is slower and more cumbersome than in the other two games. But are the games realistic?

For *BF2*, the speed measurements clearly show how, in this game, issues of game balance gain priority over issues of realism. The simulation of bodily movement may be considered more realistic in *BF2* than in *CSS*, since *BF2* gives a larger variation of postures and movements, and even incorporates a notion of fatigue after sprinting;<sup>76</sup> but still, the running speeds are probably a little too fast for being realistic. Granted, the fastest sprint runners in the world are able to hold a speed of around 10 m/s over short distances,<sup>77</sup> whereas for a male applicant to pass the running part of the admission tests for officer training in the Norwegian army, it is good enough to be able to run 3000 meters in less than 14 minutes, which corresponds to an average speed of 3,6 m/s.<sup>78</sup> This is exactly the normal running speed for an avatar in *BF2*, but there is an important difference: The 3000 meter speed mentioned above is measured without any equipment. The American soldiers in *BF2* are supposed to represent US Marines, whose combat load in real operations can be over 120 pounds.<sup>79</sup> When carrying that kind of weight, sprinting is not really an option; even running for more than a few moments is absolutely exhausting, and whoever imagines he or she can fire a gun with any accuracy while running like that, should probably consider applying for the Olympics. My army unit, when carrying similar loads, had a goal of holding 3 km/h (0.8 m/s) marching speed over long distances, a goal which was rarely met. It may well be that the average US Marine is

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<sup>76</sup> In *CSS*, the player crouches only for as long as a designated button is being pressed; releasing the button makes the avatar stand up, thus crouching is usually a temporary position – in fact, remaining crouched for a long time would probably be considered “camping” by most players, an activity which is strongly derided by most of the player community. Hence, movement in *CSS* is mainly a variation between running and walking.

<sup>77</sup> See, for instance, <http://www.iaaf.org/statistics/records/index.html> (or <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sprinting>).

<sup>78</sup> There is no sprint test. For a top grade, one must run faster than 9:30, which corresponds to 5.3 m/s. Cf. ”Treningsplan før opptaket” (2006).

<sup>79</sup> See for instance the USMC’s “Combat Load Report” (2003), or Stern 2003: 10.



stronger and faster than most of us were, but even so I think there is little doubt that the foot soldier speeds measured in all three of the games are too high – even if *AA* is closest to real life.

Curiously enough, when looking at the vehicle speeds in *BF2*, the opposite discrepancy is found: they seem far too slow. My subjective impression as a player of the game, before I did these measurements, was that some vehicles, such as the US “Desert Patrol Vehicle”, were driving incredibly fast – probably unrealistically fast. The measurements indicate that the opposite is true. In the game, the speed of the Desert Patrol Vehicle is measured to be 65 km/h,<sup>80</sup> whereas the speed of this “Fast Attack Vehicle” in real life is probably much higher.<sup>81</sup> Interestingly, it has exactly the same speed in the game as the Chinese counterpart, the NJ-2406, which according to its real-world manufacturer has a top speed of 95 km/h.<sup>82</sup> The APC (a Chinese WZ-551) is measured at 47 km/h, whereas its road speed in real life is said to be 85 km/h.<sup>83</sup> Looking at the speed of the aircraft, the absurdity is clear: The Chinese fighter plane J-10, in real life the newest and most modern fighter plane in the Chinese air force, has a top speed of under 200 km/h when used in *BF2*; whereas in real life, it has a top speed of mach 1.2 at low altitudes: almost 1500 km/h.<sup>84</sup> The reason for these discrepancies is obvious, however, for anyone who has tried to fly one of these fighters in the game: Controlling a fast vehicle, and in particular the aircraft, is hard. When in a fighter plane, even on the large 64-player maps, a moderately experienced player like myself<sup>85</sup> barely has enough time to get the plane straight and look around for a few moments, before one has to turn around again to avoid getting out of the battle area.<sup>86</sup> If the plane was to fly at a realistic speed, not only would it require pilot expertise to control it; it would also require the battlefield to be at least 5 times as wide (potentially making the whole area 25 times as large). This would not only make the game much more expensive to produce, but also much more complicated to play – also for those on the ground, who would have to defend themselves against these supersonic fighters. Thus we are left with a gameworld in which the slowest fighting units – soldiers on foot – move unnaturally fast, while the fastest – fighter jets – move unnaturally slow, in order to give everyone a fair chance. Moreover, battles take place within an area of less than 3 square kilometers; and if a soldier moves outside of that area, he is shot within a few seconds. Imagine a modern battle fought according to these principles! By now the point should be clear: The main design principles for *BF2* are game balance and flexibility, rather than realism.

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<sup>80</sup> The actual top speed will be a little higher than this, since I measured the average speed when traveling down a 210 m long runway from standstill.

<sup>81</sup> The official information at the manufacturer’s web pages (“Desert Patrol Vehicle” 2007a) does not give any information about the vehicle’s speed; various unofficial web pages cite top speed in the range 90-130 km/h. Cf. English *Wikipedia* (“Desert Patrol Vehicle” 2007b), German *Wikipedia* (“Fast Attack Vehicle” 2007), *Military factory* website (“Desert Patrol Vehicle (DPV) Lightweight All-Terrain Vehicle” 2007), *GlobalSecurity.org* website (“Desert Patrol Vehicle” 2007c).

<sup>82</sup> See “Off-road vehicles series 2045 series” (2007).

<sup>83</sup> See “TYPE 92 (WZ551) WHEELED ARMoured VEHICLES” (2005).

<sup>84</sup> According to *Sinodefence.com* (“J-10 Specifications” 2007).

<sup>85</sup> According to the *BF2* statistics I have played over 60 hours on ranked servers. Including the time spent on unranked servers, I estimate that I have a total playtime of a little more than 100 hours in *BF2*.

<sup>86</sup> In *BF2*, if one moves outside the designated battle area on the map, one hears a voice saying “Warning! You are leaving combat area. Deserters will be shot!”, and if one doesn’t return within a few seconds, the avatar is killed.

How are these issues dealt with in *AA*? The possible postures and movements in *AA* are slower and more varied than in either of the two other games, and hence they are probably more realistic – even if still faster and much more simplified than in real life. The area is also much larger than in a *CSS* map; and running around recklessly will get you killed by a sniper in almost no time. However, this does not mean that *AA* is anything like a real battlefield, or that the avatars move like real soldiers. In *AA*, there is no difference in the speed when running uphill or downhill; on dry asphalt or in snow, sand or knee-deep in water; and there is no problem sprinting at full speed for 10 minutes dressed in full combat gear. And, while missions take place within an area which is always smaller than 0.2 square kilometers, there is no possibility of desertion: Somehow every mission area is surrounded by seemingly natural, insurmountable obstacles. It is easy, and banal, to find reasons why *AA* is nothing like real life.<sup>87</sup> Nonetheless, it is claimed by its designers and publishers to be a highly realistic game. What is meant by that?

In his essay about social realism in gaming, Alexander Galloway (2006: 70-84) distinguishes between realism and realisticness:

[R]ealisticness and realism are most certainly not the same thing. If they were the same, realism in gaming would simply be a mathematical process of counting the polygons and tracing the correspondences. Realisticness is a yardstick held up to representation. [...] Realisticness is important, to be sure, but the more realisticness takes hold in gaming, the more removed from gaming it actually becomes, relegated instead to simulation or modeling. (Galloway 2006: 73)

Galloway defines realist games as “those games that reflect critically on the minutia of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama and injustice” (75), and suggests a “congruence requirement” for social realism in games: “[T]here must be some kind of congruence, some type of *fidelity of context* that transliterates itself from the social reality of the gamer, through one’s thumbs, into the game environment and back again” (78). Galloway compares *AA* with the Syrian game *Under Ash* (Dar al-Fikr 2001), which puts the player in the role of a Palestinian boy fighting against Israeli oppression, and concludes that *Under Ash* can be seen as an instance of social realism in gaming, but *AA* can not. Both because *AA* represents the ideological hegemony, rather than any restricted code (in Fredric Jameson’s terms); and because there is no “fidelity of context” between the game and the everyday life of (most) players.

However, although I agree with the observation that *AA* doesn’t “reflect critically on the minutia of everyday life”, and that for this reason it wouldn’t make much sense to regard *AA* as social realism, I disagree with Galloway’s requirement of a “fidelity of context”. In my opinion, this demand ultimately reduces social realism in gaming to an experience of play, as opposed to a mode of expression. This “fidelity” criterion seems to describe social realist *play* rather than social realist *games* as such, and hence

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<sup>87</sup> For a discussion between civilian and military gamers on this topic, see the discussion on the official *AA* forums “So how would the real Army handle the bridge crossing map?” (2007).

relegates social realism to exist inside certain defined spheres of context, unable to communicate with those outside of it. If the goal of social realism is to represent a restricted code, shouldn't one try to imagine ways to do so which could be comprehended also outside the game's immediate context? If social realism is a viable direction for art in general, and for the global media of computer games in special, shouldn't one try to formulate concepts of social realism which would make it possible for games to function as vehicles of communication across borders of nations, cultures and languages? Couldn't one of the great strengths of social realist computer games be to put the player in someone else's shoes, as in the MTV-sponsored *Darfur is Dying* (Ruiz 2006), which puts players (presumably most of which are from MTV's target audiences in the wealthier parts of the world) in the shoes of desperate Sudanese children threatened by starvation and ruthless warriors. Taken to its extreme, the idea of a 'fidelity of context' seems unreasonably limiting towards computer games' potential as vehicles of communication and understanding between people of different languages and different cultures. Following this logic, a computer game version of de Sica's neorealist movie "The Bicycle Thief" would never be considered social realism, since it would never be possible to play it in de Sica's original context – Italy just after World War II.

I believe 'realism' as an analytical term is less useful in describing the relationship of a game to an external reality, and more useful in describing how a game relates to *other games*. The realism of any computer game may always be criticized when compared to reality itself – except, perhaps, in the case of a totalitarian takeover of the human world by computers, envisaged in countless science fiction fantasies like *The Matrix* (Wachowski 1999). It seems more useful to me to describe a game in terms of how it relates to another, specific game or group of games, in some respect – for instance social criticism.

So how should it be interpreted, when the army tags AA "The Most Authentic Army Game Ever" (Nieborg 2005a: 34n91)? I don't think anyone really believes that the army is claiming that AA is *just like reality*. What is understood by the army's marketing claim is that this game is more realistic than any of the other games like it; that it *distinguishes* itself by realisticness. In other words, realisticness isn't really so much about the relationship between the game and the real world, as it is between the game and *other games*; how the game introduces some small, but significant details that set it apart from other games to make it seem more realistic. Thus, for instance, the fact that a player can stop the bleeding of a wounded teammate in a matter of seconds, possibly without ever having even seen a real wound in all her life, just by standing in the vicinity of the other player's avatar and holding the 'action' key on her keyboard pressed for a moment or two, is hardly realistic. But it is *more realistic* than the corresponding function in *CSS*, where avatars don't bleed at all, and in *BF2*, where a medic can restore mortally wounded avatars back to full health simply by giving them a charge from a set of electric defibrillators. If we consider realism as a convention, rather than a mathematical measure of correspondence with the real world, then we could use a term from theory of film realism and call these examples of functions which are slower

and/or more elaborate in *AA* than in other games, “reality effects” (Armstrong 2005: 8).<sup>88</sup> The measurements I have made have uncovered some of these “reality effects” in *AA*. Now it is time to look at some of the other rhetorical effects of the game.

### 3.5 Rhetorical strategies

To what extent do the similarities and differences in the game design of *AA* as compared to *CSS* and *BF2* (and the genre at large, to the extent that *CSS* and *BF2* are representative for the genre) constitute an *expression*, which can be analyzed in terms of a game rhetoric? This question is not particular to *AA*, or to computer games in general, and could be asked about any kind of design practice. To what extent does the architecture of a given building, all the similarities and the differences it displays compared with other buildings, constitute an expression? It is obvious that architecture is an art concerned with expression, but it is also obvious that it is concerned with a lot of things that can not only be described as expressive – how to make a building sturdy and safe to live in, for instance. Where is the borderline between the expressive side of architecture and all its other concerns – physical, economical, legal etc? It seems that no clear-cut borderline can be drawn, but rather that concerns of expression run alongside with other concerns in all aspects of architecture – from the shaping of curves to choice of materials, scaling, construction techniques etc. This may be a simple analogy, but my point is that game design (as any other form of design) shares this property of expressivity intimately coupled with other, non-expressive concerns, and so every element of the design should in principle be open for rhetorical analysis, not just words and images which are immediately recognizable as expressions of ideas. However, we cannot assume that the terms and figures defined in traditional rhetoric to analyze oratory speeches will be adequate tools for this kind of extended analysis. Instead of trying to identify clearly defined rhetorical figures, I will point to rhetorical *strategies* of the game design: Single or multiple design choices pointing in specific directions, causing specific consequences for the gameplay of the game, and hence affecting the adequacy of the game in its function as a promotion tool for the US Army. I will identify three strategies, one connected with each of the three aspects of the game that I am analyzing: Player roles, gameworld and rules.

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<sup>88</sup> A similar, but more limited argument is made by Barry Atkins, when he tries to explain why virtual dragons or dinosaurs appear more real than virtual humans: “Of course, when we test the representation of the human in the computer game for its ‘accuracy’ or its ‘realism’ we make comparison with the observed real as well as with other acts of representation – when we test the ‘accuracy’ or ‘realism’ of the dinosaurs we test against a tradition of representation. [...] What it refers to is the current ‘state of the art’ and not the state of the real. [...] The sophistication, effectiveness or plausibility of the dinosaurs on screen is judged within its comparison with the sub-sub-genre of the computer-animated dinosaur film, whether it claims to be documentary or entertaining in effect” (2003: 17-18). I believe it is a similar mechanism that allows the U.S. Army to claim the authority of authenticity for its game: Not because it stands comparison with real combat or real army operations, but because it is more realistic than the representation of combat in most other computer games.

### 3.5.1 Player roles: *The strategy of identification*

The first, and most obvious of the rhetorical strategies that can be seen in *AA* is connected with the player's inability to choose freely between roles in the game, and can be described as a strategy of *identification*. As mentioned above, players of *AA* are not allowed to choose if they want to play as US soldiers or terrorists; they will always see themselves and their fellow team members dressed in US Army uniforms and carrying US weapons, whereas the opposing team will be seen as some kind of generic enemy. In fact, according to several writers, in the early versions of the game the enemies were "skinheads and turban-wearing Arab stereotypes" (Nieborg 2005a: 26). However, this has later been altered, and in the newer versions the enemy appearances are impossible to identify with any particular ethnic group or nationality.



*Figure 10: In early versions of AA, the enemies were presented as Arab stereotypes on many maps. Image by TeflonSean submitted as "Picture of the Day" at America's Army Files website October 17<sup>th</sup> 2006, under the title "Peace Talks In Progress" (see <http://americasarmy.filefront.com/potd/2182>, last retrieved February 16<sup>th</sup> 2007 at 15:10 CET).*



Figure 11: Enemy appearance in newer versions of AA. Official screenshot taken from the game's website (see <http://www.americasarmy.com/gallery/index.php?id=30>, last retrieved March 4<sup>th</sup> 2007 at 20:30).

The identity-swapping feature implies that each player is playing two roles at once: As US soldier to her teammates, and enemy to the opposing team. This brings out one of the ambiguities of the word “play”: Is this an issue of ‘playing’ as gameplay, or as *enactment*? On the face of it, this may seem to be purely an issue of appearance, but in fact this arrangement also affects the actual behavior of weapons, with some subtle and potentially confusing gameplay consequences – as explained in the following paragraph from the game manual:

In AA:SF you will go against various weapons. These counterparts of the weapons you use are also accurately simulated. However, what you see as an OPFOR weapon in the hands of its owner, will actually have the same damage capacity and capabilities as the U.S. counterpart. For example, if you see an OPFOR with an AK47, the damage it can do and its firing characteristics are the same as the M16A2. However, if you were to pick up the OPFOR weapon and use it, the game now recognizes the weapon as an AK47. Upon doing so, the game will cause this weapon to do damage and have the firing characteristics consistent [sic] with an AK rather than an M16. (Tran 2004: 152)

So the weapon, when being dropped by an enemy soldier and picked by the player, magically undergoes a transformation from actually functioning as an American M-16 while appearing as a Russian

AK-47 to the player, to actually functioning as an AK-47 (while still appearing as an M-16 to the enemy).

As explained in an article written by the game designers:

If you drop your M-16, the other side sees you drop an AK-47, and if they pick up your weapon, they see it as an AK-47 and you see it as an M-16 that fires like an AK-47. This isn't a bug, but a conundrum proceeding from the premise that though you've captured a weapon with a faster firing rate, all your weapons will look American to you. (Davis 2003: 272)

This may certainly be considered a visual trick: a way of deceiving the eye, or rather the “cyborg vision” which is made up of the conjunction of player and machine, as described by Manovich (2001: 202). But even so, the game doesn't *really* attempt to hide this fact from the players – the mission briefings for either team are posted right next to each other on the mission information screens. Of course, the army is not trying to fool anybody about what is going on; what seems to count is to prevent anyone from ending up in a role where they will see themselves as an opposing force (rebels, terrorists, insurgent forces) fighting against US soldiers. However, this paradoxical arrangement carries another self-contradiction: Orders for each team must be written in such a way that they can be interpreted both as the legitimate actions of US soldiers, and as the counter-strategy of an enemy force. In some missions, like the “Urban Assault” mission, this is solved by a simple symmetry: The two teams are dropped into the mission on either side of a small urban area, and are ordered to assault an enemy that is hiding in this area. In this way the two teams can be instructed with almost identical briefings, just swapping team names and directions (i.e. “assault east” vs. “assault west”). In other missions with more complex objectives, other tricks need to be used. One that seems particularly effective and is used in many missions, is a simple time shift: For instance by pretending that the defense team has just completed the offensive mission presented to the assaulting team, and now has to defend their position against a counter-attack by enemy forces in the area (which from the other perspective will be the offensive mission carried out by the assault team). This is the technique used in the briefings of the “Radio Tower” mission. The assault briefing describes a combined hostage rescue and sabotage mission:

**Situation:** Intelligence reports that a terrorist cell is broadcasting via radio tower at grid WQ038333 and holding two teams of international aid workers as hostage. [...] **Mission:** First squad, rescue the international aid workers in the buildings to the west (WQ018353) and southwest (WQ038333) and disable the antenna on the roof of the southwest building preventing its further use. (Tran 2004: 120)<sup>89</sup>

Whereas the defense briefing, following immediately below on the page, describes the same situation a little later on:

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<sup>89</sup> These briefings can be found a number of places – within the game, on the official web pages of the game and in the game manual – and may vary slightly in the wording. My quote is from the game manual.

**Situation:** Having destroyed a makeshift terrorist radio tower and rescuing [sic] two teams of international aid workers, your unit is awaiting extraction. Enemy counterattack is likely to take place by local reactionary forces.

**Mission:** Until reinforcements arrive; protect the international aid workers in the buildings to the west (WQ018353) and southwest (WQ038333) and do not allow access to the antenna on the roof of the southwest building which would allow the enemy to send for additional forces. (Tran 2004: 120)

The point here is that this is not just a set of short, efficient gameplay instructions camouflaged as military-style mission briefings, it is also a set of elegantly coordinated stage instructions for a contradictory play of make-believe. Judged as theater this might be seen as a surreal modernist play about two groups with mutually incompatible view of themselves and the others; or a grotesque comedy of errors – or perhaps rather a tragicomedy, since most of the players usually end up dead or wounded. In reality neither category seems fitting, since most players presumably login to the game not to act in a theatrical performance, but to play the game.<sup>90</sup> Even so, one might imagine that this conceptually self-contradictory arrangement could be experienced by players as a disillusioning or even alienating effect. As I hope is evident from the observations above, the makers of *AA* have put a significant effort in both level design and rhetorical work in order to prevent this from happening; to make it possible for players on both teams simultaneously to see themselves as US forces and the opposing team as enemies without making the experience less immersive.

Nonetheless, the “two-faced” characteristic of the game’s avatars means that the game directors have traded an element of reduced realism in simulation for a more desirable appearance of the simulated world. This is worth noticing, because it goes directly against all the other effort that has been made in order to make *AA* look and feel realistic and authentic. And therefore, whether or not we should reject the adequacy of the term “fiction” in game analysis, it is certainly clear that the directors of the *AA* game project consider the *enactment* aspect of their game to be very important. Obviously it has been imperative for the army to ensure that players would not find themselves enacting terrorists combating US forces.

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<sup>90</sup> There are some notable exceptions to this. For instance, the visual artist and associate professor at the University of Nevada, Joseph DeLappe, has been engaged in an interventionist art performance located in *America’s Army* since March 2006. His performance consists of logging in to the game as the player “dead-in-iraq”, and without taking part in the game he types in the real-life names, units and dates of US casualties in Iraq. In a statement on his website dated September 14<sup>th</sup> 2006, he says that in the first six months of the project he has managed to input 1383 of a total of 2702 casualties, as a “fleeting, online memorial to those military personnel who have been killed in this ongoing conflict” and “a cautionary gesture” (DeLappe 2006). As can be seen from the other player’s reactions in the screenshots he provides, most of them consider this to be chat spamming and an intrusion into the game sphere. Similar reactions have been reported to be caused by Anne-Marie Schleiner, Joane Leandre and Brody Condon’s “Velvet Strike” project, which consists of a series of pacifist interventions in *Counter-Strike*, ranging from peace-themed graffiti to non-violent sit-down protests (see Schleiner, Leandre and Condon 2002- and Halter 2006: 323-327). Li quotes an email exchange with Schleiner, in which she explains that “while she would have liked to disrupt the America’s Army gamespace as it was, in her eyes, populated by «fascists», she had been too frustrated with the difficulty of passing the Basic Training level which is required for entry into the online games”. As Li quite poignantly remarks: “This perspective has a limited understanding of the range of social activity and political meaning within the gamespace, and also a reluctance to engage with the gamespace on the most basic terms (i.e. learning how to play – which is not a requirement for entering public Counterstrike servers)” (Li 2003: 132). Although the examples of “dead-in-iraq” and “Velvet-Strike” are definitely interesting as examples of



This has an obvious rationale: If one assumes that a game which makes players enact US soldiers has the power to gather support, and recruits, for the US Army, then a game which also allows players to enact terrorists might just as well gather support and recruits for terrorist organizations opposing US interests. This assumption is of course not a necessary one – the promotion and recruitment effect of the game could be caused by other things than the experience of enacting US soldiers. It could for instance be a result of the patriotic messages accompanying the game, or just by the experience of playing a cool game closely associated with the army. However, the army evidently considered the positive effect of having all the players enact US soldiers more important than the potentially disillusioning effect of making it evident for the players that appearance and reality are two separate things in *AA*.

It seems relevant to ask why the army didn't go for a solution which would be both simpler and more realistic: Why not just let the soldiers see both themselves and the opposing team as US soldiers, in different kinds of uniforms (for instance green vs. grey)? This would in all likelihood be more similar to the real-life training of soldiers – certainly, none of the sides in a normal army exercise in Norway would dress up in foreign uniforms. In fact, some missions in *AA* are presented as training missions, where the players are supposed to be playing US soldiers engaging other US soldiers with MILES equipment (a laser-tagging system used in combination with blank cartridges in infantry exercises).<sup>91</sup> However, in my experience these missions are only played in that manner on a small group of specially dedicated, “MILES only” servers.<sup>92</sup> On these servers the OPFOR soldiers are dressed as US soldiers with uniforms of a different color, and when an avatar is shot a beeping sound is heard from the laser sensors; once a fatal wound has been inflicted, the avatar removes its helmet and sits down, instead of falling dead as in the “live fire” missions. However, when the MILES missions are played on “live fire” servers, OPFOR soldiers look just like on other missions, and avatars get wounded and die in the normal way. Available “MILES only” servers are few in number and sparsely populated; at the moment of writing, my *AA* browser lists 25 servers of this category, all of which have zero players. By comparison, the server count for “live fire” servers stops at 1000 servers, of which around a fifth are populated by more than two players. This might not seem particularly surprising, and the explanation might seem obvious: A simulation of a training exercise is a second-order simulation, a simulation of a simulation, which means that it is further removed from reality, and hence (presumably) less immersive. But on closer inspection, shouldn't the “live fire” missions also be considered as second-order simulations? In these missions, all combat takes place between two teams of the same size, made up of soldiers with the same basic training

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political art performances situated in online games, they also demonstrate that players who involuntarily become witnesses to such performances tend to view them as unwanted disturbances of their own gameplaying activity.

<sup>91</sup> There are altogether 6 MILES missions: “McKenna MOUT”, “Headquarters Raid”, “Collapsed Tunnel”, “River Basin”, “FARP Raid” and “Mountain Ambush” (Tran 2004).

<sup>92</sup> In the period after the game was first released, these missions could only be played as MILES missions on official servers. Later it became possible to set up official servers which were leased from the army, and soon virtually all servers had the ‘live fire’ setting on (Cf. Nieborg 2005: 36).

and equipped with the same weapons.<sup>93</sup> This is a situation which is very rarely the case in real combat – and certainly not in current US warfare, in which “asymmetrical warfare” against enemies which are far inferior in training and equipment seems to be the rule – but which is quite common in army exercises, particularly in basic infantry training similar to that which is experienced in AA. It seems hard to explain the much larger popularity of the “live fire” version of AA compared to the “MILES only” version<sup>94</sup> with anything other than *appearance*: The “live fire” versions appear more like the real thing, although the underlying simulation and gameplay is identical.

It is worth noticing, also, that the game has been designed in such a way that the player is given incentives to play relatively strictly according to her role within the team: “[W]eapons are employed logically and strategically; a grenadier who tried to conduct himself like a sniper would suffer decreased combat effectiveness, as would a sniper shooting on the run” (Davis et al 2003: 272). The player must adapt to the role given to her, because otherwise she will not be able to play/fight as efficiently, and will suffer a disadvantage faced with players who adjust their strategy to their role. However, this issue is not only about identification with the player role, it is also closely connected with the rhetorical strategy connected with the gameworld: Authenticity.

But before I go on to discuss this it is worth taking a look at how the double nature of player identities in AA complicates the concept of the gameworld. Briefly speaking, the problem is this: Is it possible to speak about one gameworld in AA, which simply appears differently to the different players, or should we rather speak about two different gameworlds – one in which the players on the assault team represents American soldiers, and one in which the defense team are the Americans? One way of clarifying this issue might be to ask our two hypothetical friends, the “model player” and the “player role”.

**The model player:** *–Well, you know, for me this is very simple: Everything that matters is the same in these two different views of the game. Whether or not my avatar is seen as a US soldier or an OPFOR doesn’t really matter to me. What matters is: How much health do I have, how many bullets have I got left and how can I outmaneuver that enemy sniper? I don’t care what kind of hat he’s wearing, as long as I can put a bullet through it. And for this reason, it seems the most sensible to me to describe this as one gameworld with two different appearances.*

**Player role:** *–I couldn’t disagree more! For my part, these are two exact opposites: One game in which I am playing a bunch of terrorists carrying out a violent, illegitimate attack which threatens security, human rights and all the values our society holds dear; and one in which I am playing their moral opposite trying to stop this atrocity from taking place. (Since I am a hypothetical person and should try to stay politically neutral, I will refrain from pointing out which of these alternatives is represented by*

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<sup>93</sup> It is of course possible to fill up one team with many more players, and more experienced ones, than on the other team. But whenever this happens, players tend to complain and either leave the server or shift teams, to make the teams more balanced; no one is interested in a game where the outcome is given in advance. However, it is worth noticing that the balance of the game is quite different in the 2.7 “Overmatch” version, commented at the end of this chapter (see 3.5.3).

<sup>94</sup> I prefer to refer to these as two different versions of the same mission, not two different missions, since the “non-live” characteristic of the missions, when played on live fire servers, is only postulated in the briefings and doesn’t have any real effect.

*OPFOR, and which is represented by the US forces – that’s all up to our third friend, the empirical player.) For this reason, I consider these as two different gameworlds.*

Of course, none of these two hypothetical characters should be equated with the empirical player, which will probably place herself somewhere in between these two positions.<sup>95</sup> However, there are some further observations to make. First of all, in a material sense it is clear that there is neither one nor two gameworlds in any game of *AA* (or *CSS* or *BF2*, or other similar games), but one copy of the same basic world for each player – plus one more, which runs on the game server and functions as a “referee” whenever there are discrepancies. Which there always is, because none of these copies of the gameworld are identical; due to network lag, there will always be a small time difference between the different copies, which means that while one player may see an avatar in a certain position at one particular moment, that avatar might be several paces further ahead in the server’s version of the gameworld. And furthermore, if one player is cheating, things may look quite different on her computer than on other computers connected to the same game: Walls may be transparent, smoke and darkness may be removed, and the locations of enemy players may be revealed.<sup>96</sup> And all these are obviously things which aren’t very important for the player role – in fact, they might be quite indifferent – but that matter greatly for the model player. So how, then, should we view this?

I think it is clear that to find a good answer to this problem, one must consider the gameworld as a product of the entire system of the software running on all the players’ computers, on the server, and the network connecting them. It is important to notice that this is not the same distinction as that which was made in the previous subchapter, between the gameworld and that which it represents; here we are talking about several presentations which differ in their material organization. On any player’s computer, the avatars of her teammates are given a different “skin” (a compilation of data which determine the avatar’s appearance) than they are on the computers belonging to players on the opposite team; what that skin *is* and what it *represents* is another distinction. There is no definitive solution to this, but for analytical clarity one must at least settle on a terminology. And so I will say that a game of *AA* has one *gameworld*, produced in two main *versions* by the system, one for each team, and with different *instances* running on the individual players’ computers. This is a way of indicating that I consider the differences between the

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<sup>95</sup> As my observations show above, the “live fire” versions of “MILES” missions are much more popular than the “MILES only” versions of the same missions, which differ only on the interpretative level and not on the configurative level. This would indicate that the player role perspective (i.e. the interpretative level of the game) is important for most players; at the same time it is self-evident that the configurative level is important (otherwise no one would care about winning or losing). Another observation which illustrates the tension between these two aspects of the game, is the debate about “spawn nading”, the strategy of throwing grenades at pre-memorized points of the map where one knows that enemies are likely to show up. Nieborg points out that the proliferation of this strategy “shows the attitude of many gamers – valuing the game as an interactive simulation model without an external reality” (2006b: 8); but at the same time, the reactions to this among players (for a sample, see <http://forum.americasarmy.com/search.php?mode=results&r=31194>) are a clear indication that many of them take the opposite view. It seems likely to me that most players employ both perspectives at once, in ways which are surely too complex, and perhaps too idiosyncratic, to be described in any further detail here.

different versions and instances significant enough to be treated analytically, but not significant enough to be considered as different worlds altogether. In this view, each game of *AA* has one, albeit inconsistent, gameworld, in which each player is playing two roles at the same time: As U.S. soldier to herself and her teammates, and as OPFOR/rebel/terrorist to the members of the opposing team.<sup>97</sup> Having settled this issue, it is time to have a look at the rhetorical strategy connected with the gameworld.

### 3.5.2 A “realistic” gameworld – the strategy of authenticity

As I have already pointed out, one of the key selling points of *America’s Army* is the game’s perceived *authenticity*; which can be seen as a product of the realisticness of the gameworld. And according to Anders Johansen (2002) the central characteristic of political speech in the TV age is the use of minimal gestures that indicate authenticity (cf. chapter 2). There is a conceptual leap from oratory speeches to game design, but the design of *AA* displays the same characteristic: An insistence on authenticity and realism in simulation which shows itself in small, but very noticeable details. Much can be (and indeed has been) said about this “realism” – Galloway is for instance entirely correct in highlighting the difference between technical realisticness and social realism. My interest, however, is not so much to talk about the social realism that is absent from the game, but the technical realism which is indeed there. By ‘technical realism’ I mean not just “photorealism” as it is described by Lev Manovich (2001: 200) – and realistic sounds – but also realism in physics simulation (penetrable materials, ragdoll physics) and the level of detail in the simulation of how avatars and interactive objects work (avatar breathing, weapons reloading) – all those things that make nature and technology in the gameworld work, look and feel more like nature and technology in the real world. This realism is of course technical in the sense that it is technically demanding to create the ever more complex simulations needed to approach reality, and so it is limited by technical resources. A game which is designed with a higher polygon count, with textures of higher resolution, more advanced 3D lighting and shading effects, physics simulations etc will generally be seen as more realistic, in a technical sense, than other games. *AA* was certainly such a game in 2002, and probably still is.

However, technical resources are not the most significant limitations on realism in games, and never have been. The most significant limitation has always been the need to make the game desirable to players, or to put it straight: To make it fun. Reality may or may not be fun in general, but that is not the issue here; neither is the question of what is real and what is not. But there are undoubtedly a lot of things in reality which are not experienced as fun, and part of the fun of computer games consists in removing or

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<sup>96</sup> The last two features are important parts of the popular “EvilHack” cheat program for *AA* (cf. Li 2003: 77).

<sup>97</sup> The other option would be to say that any game of *AA* takes place in two gameworlds at the same time, which are symmetrically opposite to each other with regards to the appearance of the avatars and the weapons of the two teams. However, if one were to follow this logic to its end, it is hard to see why one shouldn’t go all the way and say that there are multiple gameworlds, one for each individual player plus the game server. This might have some merit when studying network lag, cheating/hacking and other specific issues of online gameplay, but for the sake of this thesis it would only over-complicate the analysis.

reducing the importance of these elements while emphasizing others, in exactly the right balance between challenges and opportunities. So, for instance, car games take away not just the real-life dangers of driving recklessly at high speeds and the trauma of accidents, they also take away most of the tedious and boring sides to being a race driver – the maintenance and fine-tuning of cars, years of training, test runs, negotiating sponsor deals and a million tedious details in every operation.<sup>98</sup> And in the *GTA* series the entire tedious process of working and earning enough money to get the car that you want, is simplified down to just walking down the street until you see a car you like, and hijacking it. Similarly, first-person shooters such as *CSS*, *BF2* and many others take away not just the trauma and the physical danger of combat, but also all the endless waiting and eventless lurking and watching of real-life combat situations, and the complexity and inconvenience of performing even the simplest of tasks under such conditions (anything from the coordination required to crawl through meter-deep snow while simultaneously making sure one is not spotted by enemies and not getting snow in the barrel of the gun, the patience needed to endure the often hour-long work of establishing a good sniper position, or just the specific bodily movements required to reload any weapon, fix a jam, or pick ammunition and gear from a dead enemy) and leave only brief, condensed explosions of action to be enjoyed by players.<sup>99</sup>

This is of course also the case with *AA*; no part of the game ever comes anywhere near an actual, detailed simulation of the mental concentration and bodily coordination needed to do any or all of the actions described above in a combat environment. However, while above I have accused the game's designers of valorizing appearance above realism at the level of enactment, the makers have certainly given much attention to realistic depiction at the level of movements, weapon operation and certain army procedures. This is most clear in the case of the training missions, where the player for instance is forced to stand motionless and listen while being instructed by officers (although in some cases the instructions may be skipped when replaying), and the officers will intervene if orders are not followed quickly enough. This is an obvious limitation in the player's freedom to explore and play the game at her own pace; while it might be presumed to make the game less fun, it is also a more realistic depiction of real-life army training. Within the normal missions, the difference from other fps games shows itself in details that may seem subtle, but put together they make a game where basic operations are slightly more complicated and requires more attention to detail from the player. For instance, while it is a matter of course in most first person shooters that the avatar will start reloading the gun automatically when the magazine runs out, this is not the case in *AA*. Therefore, if the player is not paying careful attention to the number of shots in the magazine, she will soon have the unpleasant experience of finding herself in a split-second gunfight with

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<sup>98</sup> These activities may certainly also be represented in the game – in fact, many sports games tend to include a large “management” portion to the game – but they will always be radically simplified, and more importantly: To a large degree they tend to be optional, in that they can be ignored or automated in different ways, so that the player can concentrate on the parts which she considers to be fun or interesting.

<sup>99</sup> In the words of Nieborg: “Obvious elements as the logistical factors of war [...], the spoils of war [...], the dullness of war [...], the rules of war [...], the intrusion of war [...], dismemberment [...] and the inevitable death [...] are

an enemy, armed with a gun that says “click”.<sup>100</sup> Or, if the magazine runs empty in the midst of combat, the player must have the extra presence of mind to find the ‘reload’ button while simultaneously evading enemy fire.

The basic weapon operations in the game are prerendered animations, produced from motion capture of real soldiers performing the moves according to standard procedure:

Procedures such as erecting a bipod or pulling and throwing grenades were performed strictly according to doctrine. The resulting sequences are truly tutorial – in fact, they’ve been used as such at West Point. (Davis 2003: 272)

So these procedures are presumably more realistic than in any other game; they are also a little longer and more detailed than in the other games. The reloading animation for the M16 shows the avatar taking out the old magazine, putting in the new one, hitting it on the bottom to make sure it sits properly in the slot, flipping a switch on the left hand side of the gun, and hitting a switch on the right hand side of the gun. This procedure takes around 5 seconds, during which the weapon can not be fired.<sup>101</sup> By comparison the reloading animation of the same weapon in *BF2* takes around 4 seconds, and in *CSS* the reloading of the M4A1 (which is the weapon in *CSS* that resembles the M16 the most) takes around 3 seconds. Unlike the other two games, it is also possible to carry the weapon on one’s back, something which is the case for instance when touching the ground after a parachute drop. (Unlike the parachute drops in *BF2*, the gun can not be used while in a parachute – and when touching the ground, there is also a procedure of a few seconds to get on the feet and free oneself from the parachute.) Bringing the gun to the front in a position where it is ready to be fired requires another animation, which takes roughly 3 seconds. From the outset it is also in single-shot mode; changing to burst mode takes another animation of about a second. And, in case the gun should jam, another procedure must be started by the player (by pressing the ‘j’ key), which takes almost 5 seconds.<sup>102</sup> This tendency to force the player to give attention to detailed procedures doesn’t limit itself to weapons handling; for instance in the HMMWV (‘Humvee’) driving lessons,<sup>103</sup> the player must take care to fasten her seatbelt before driving.

However, as mentioned above, all of these are preprogrammed animations, all of which simply have to be started by pressing a key on the keyboard, and then left to run by itself – whereas in real life they require a set of precise, well-coordinated movements in order to be carried out efficiently under stressful

conveniently absent in FPS games” (2006b: 6). Although my arguments were written independently of Nieborg, they are closely related to his.

<sup>100</sup> This is of course a matter of concern for players of games like *BF2* and *CSS* as well, where it is important to reload when there are just a few shots left in the magazine, so the gun won’t run empty too quickly when engaging an enemy close up. But in these games one will never inadvertently be running around with an empty magazine.

<sup>101</sup> The duration of the animations have been measured with a stopwatch, and are averages of three measurements.

<sup>102</sup> This possibility, however, seems to be more of a gimmick: I can’t remember ever experiencing a jam in an *AA* mission other than the basic training marksmanship mission, where the gun automatically jams once during the first magazine (whereas in my own army experience, my Norwegian AG-3 rifle used to jam at least once a day, and much more frequently when using blanks/MILES).

<sup>103</sup> These were introduced in v. 2.7 “Overmatch”.

conditions. Moreover, the animations, although longer than in other games, don't even run at a realistic speed, as explained by the designers:

Where absolute adherence to reality would bog down the game (e.g., if running or jam-clearing were depicted at true speed), animators relied on cropping and streamlining to reconcile veracity with the need to sustain excitement, stepping frame-by-frame through motion-capture video to identify key postures and weed out intermediate movement, allowing the eye to jump as with a flipbook. Artificial limitations on avatar range of motion were sometimes imposed to keep actions onscreen. [...] the illusion of free and fluid sweep depends on confinement and restraint. (Davis 2003: 272)

The point is not to be absolutely realistic – of course. However, the simulation must *distinguish* itself by its realism – it must be more realistic than other games, while still making sure it isn't too slow or too complicated. A hundred percent realistic game would obviously not be any more appealing than real life (and besides, it probably wouldn't be a game at all); but by just giving a game some properties that make it seem a little more like real life, even on the expense of some of the fast-paced action first person shooters are known for, it can be distinguished as *more realistic* than the other games of the genre.

If we assume that a slower and more complicated game is – at least in a superficial, action-oriented sense – less fun, we can say that the designers of the game have prioritized *realism* above superficial, action-oriented *fun*; in other words, they have prioritized the appearance of *authenticity*. Or in the words of Michael Macedonia, technology officer of PEO STRI – the army's office for Simulation, Training and Instrumentation Command (speaking about military simulations in general): “The reality is, if you really look at some of these things, they would actually be quite boring to your average game-player [...] It's not an amusement ride”. He also underlines the characteristic of a high level of difficulty in such simulations, speaking about the army version of *Full Spectrum Warrior*: “People complain that they get killed in five minutes, and can't figure it out. Well that's because we're trying to get as realistic as possible. It's about training, and so it's about making it hard” (quoted in Halter 2006: 196-197).

Finally, perhaps the most obvious lack of realism in AA is one which is easy to forget in this technical discussion: That AA, regarded as a war, is a remarkably clean and bloodless one, free from all the suffering and pain, bodily dismemberment, civilian casualties, “collateral damage”, torture, chaos, death and irredeemable sorrow which follow real wars. This observation is not particularly original, neither is it unique to AA; it could rather be seen as a logical extension of the way western media have been reporting on war over the last couple of decades, as commented by Matthew Southern:

These videogames based on genuine contemporary conflict, where the point of view is always a military one, can be seen then to add to the manner in which these facts continue to be 'widely unknown': they play a part in the obfuscation of the real conditions. The human cost of international conflict [...] is also therefore missing from the 'media content' of the game. [...]

The verisimilitude of the games is flawed by the fact that its source is propaganda, not realism, and so the game itself helps to convince the player that the images one sees of

war are objective, legitimizing consent for continued aggression. (Southern 2001: §50-55)

From this perspective, the representation of war in *AA* is reminiscent of the notorious videos of laser-guided “smart bombs” hitting their target with pin-point accuracy, played over and over again on television news during the first gulf war; as Southern points out (citing John Pilger), these videos were not representative of the vast majority of bombs dropped over Iraq during that war, and “a quarter of a million Iraqis [...] died unnecessary deaths” (Pilger quoted in Southern 2001: §49).

### **3.5.3 Rules of Engagement – the strategy of legitimization**

Looking at the rules of *AA*, it is possible to discern a third rhetorical strategy, in addition to identification and authenticity: That of *legitimization* – both of the game itself, and of the violence in it. These concerns are easy to read out of the FAQ’s printed on the game’s website,<sup>104</sup> but the most interesting tool for this strategy within the game itself is the Rules of Engagement (ROE). This is of course a tool for disciplining players – since the penalty for killing a teammate is so much higher than the reward for killing an enemy (up to several hundred points minus, and 10 points plus, respectively), trigger-happy players who shoot first and look at the uniform later will quickly find themselves in the prison in Fort Leavenworth, or even unable to log onto servers without going through new sessions of qualifying play. Players may of course complain about this, they may feel that it makes the game too serious or too constrained, while others may be happy that the risk of being killed by friendly fire is reduced - but either of these opinions are beside the point. The main function of the ROE is not to prohibit teamkilling, which is prohibited as a default in most team-based shooter games, and is punished in both *CSS* and *BF2* with a negative score and the possibility of being kicked or banned from the server. The point of the ROE is to legitimize all the other violence taking place in the game, and by extension, the violence exerted by the real army in real-life missions. One of the indications that this is true, is the untruthful claim in most of the mission descriptions that there are civilians present which the players must take care not to injure – when in fact there are no non-combatant avatars present in (most of) these missions. Why put forward this claim in contexts where it is clearly not true – unless it is meant to imply that this is just another element imported directly from reality, in other words that these are the instructions and the rules that US soldiers always are given.<sup>105</sup>

Another function of the ROE, intended or not, is to highlight the fact that *AA* can be seen as a high-tech version of Jeremy Bentham’s “Panopticon”: The prison where every prisoner can be observed at any time

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<sup>104</sup> Available at [http://www.americasarmy.com/support/faq\\_win.php](http://www.americasarmy.com/support/faq_win.php), last retrieved October 19<sup>th</sup> 2006, at 23:45 CET. In particular the first section, “Parents Info”, is concerned with the gaming violence debate. According to Li, these FAQs were written by the Political and Social Science departments at USMA, West Point (2003: 38n29).

<sup>105</sup> The game manual furthermore warns against attacking surrendering soldiers (even though there is no function for surrendering in the game, and therefore no surrendering soldier to attack) and medics, even though there is no way to identify enemy medics, and no punishment is given for attacking them (cf. Tran 2004: 58).



by an invisible guardian, so that every prisoner must always assume her behavior to be observed whether that is the case or not (Foucault 1991 [1975]: 195-230).<sup>106</sup> The AA software registers the players' actions during the game, and automatically inflicts punishments for ROE violations. In other words, it acts out the power of *authority*. As made clear by my first encounter with the game, AA is a game that asserts this panoptic authority strongly. This is not only a negative exercise, punishing unwanted behavior, but also a positive one which encourages "desirable" behavior: For instance, team play is strongly encouraged in the scoring system, which gives large scores for contributing to team success compared to the relatively small score achieved by killing enemies. Juul noted how *Counter-Strike* encouraged team play through some small adjustments in the game design (2005: 89-90); these features are taken further in AA (larger cost of being killed, in terms of waiting time; and larger chance of being killed quickly). In addition, there are provisions for a hierarchical command structure with a squad leader and several fireteam leaders. In my experience these command structures are not much used, but effective team play nonetheless requires a certain degree of organization and discipline. A disciplined, well organized group is usually more efficient in any effort to reach quantifiable, clearly defined and operationalized goals – exactly the kinds of goals computer games tend to offer players. Hence, there is a satisfaction in being part of such a group, like the satisfaction of playing on a good soccer team or, for that matter, playing with a good bridge partner.

Why do players enjoy the game, even though they have to subject themselves to this discipline? Because discipline can be enjoyable: It can give a sense of belonging to a group, a feeling of power by having a group of individuals acting as a coherent unit – and it can help to secure victory in a game, or a battle. As Juul points out, (2005: 18-20) obeying rules can be pleasurable. At the same time, the discipline of the game forms a coherent picture with several other of the design choices, such as the absence of blood and gore (demonstrating respect for the moral expectations of society), and the slow pace of (parts of) the game (demonstrating respect for the truth, through a "realistic" simulation). Notice also the presence of strange elements such as the first aid lecture in the first basic training mission for medics (a lecture about real-life first aid which is entirely irrelevant to the game itself), and the repeated reminders to use the seatbelt in the driving lessons in AA 2.7 *Overmatch*.<sup>107</sup> These elements all point together with the emphasis on tedious realism towards an attitude (or posture) of *modesty* and *responsibility*, in particular in comparison with other violent computer games. Thus the game makes an effort to place itself safely outside of computer game controversy, and within the *doxa* of US society. And hence it can offer the pleasure of being in correspondence with the hegemonic ideology, of being in correspondence with power and authority; of being *legitimate*.

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<sup>106</sup> To some extent this point is valid for every online game which is supervised by server administrators; and it's hard to think of one that is not. But as I hope this thesis is making clear, the Rules of Engagement system is unique to AA, and the military values and other game elements contributes to a stricter discipline in AA than in most other games.

<sup>107</sup> I am sure that using the seatbelt is important for drivers and passengers in real-life army vehicles, but in a game where most of the players tend to be shot within a few minutes of play it seems a bit pointless.

There is an interesting corollary to the legitimating function of the ROE, and the double appearance of avatars. Since both teams have to follow the rules of engagement, and both teams see the other team as terrorists – or at least enemies of the USA – this arrangement in fact implies that US forces and their enemies are equal, not just in power, but also in a moral sense: They both abide by the same rules of engagement. Both sides will take pains to avoid civilian casualties, neither side will inflict torture or other inhumane treatment on prisoners of war, and whenever terrorist activities are portrayed in the game, it is in a manner which is equivalent to legitimate military action. In fact, although the enemy is presented as “terrorists” in a large number of the missions, there are no missions in which terrorist forces engage in activities generally associated with terrorists, such as kidnappings or bombing civilian targets. The closest would be the “Pipeline” missions, in which US forces and terrorists fight over the control of a pump station along an Alaskan oil pipeline – but there is no blowing up of pipelines, or nothing else reminiscent of the “environmental disaster” mentioned in the briefing part of the mission – only a battle of control over the oil pumps. Other places, where explosive charges are actually set off, it is in the manner of military sabotage actions which are perfectly legitimate in times of war. And recall the briefings of the Radio Tower mission quoted above, where the assault team is told to “disable” the radio antenna: to the defense team this action is not even presented as sabotage by the terrorists, but rather just as the terrorists radioing for extra forces. As long as everyone knows that the “terrorists” on the other team themselves are playing out a mission in the role of US forces, it is not possible to let them enact morally unacceptable terrorist actions, without implying that US forces themselves are conducting acts equivalent to terrorism. Instead, the “terrorists” are reduced to resistance fighters operating according to strict rules of engagement – probably even stricter than any real life army practice, if we should judge by the lists of documented human rights violations and violations of the Geneva convention conducted by both western forces and their counterparts in a wide range of modern conflicts from the Vietnam war and up until the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

As mentioned above, the combat situations in AA lack in realism from the fact that the teams are equal in numbers, have equal training and equipment, and obey the same rules of conduct. Perhaps the biggest of all the problems, from the point of view of recruiting soldiers to the real US army, is the logical consequence of this: That each team will suffer heavy losses on each mission, one of the teams usually being eliminated completely. Portraying an image of army operations where a minimum of soldiers remain alive after a few minutes in the field, may not be the best way to get young people to sign up for the army.

In September 2006, version 2.7.0 of AA was released under the name “Overmatch”, as an answer to some of these concerns. With this version AA players for the first time got access to vehicles and high-tech, powerful weapon systems: The HMMWV jeeps, equipped with CROWS mounted machine guns or grenade launchers, and Javelin anti-tank missiles. It also includes three new missions, of which two are of a brand new type in AA: Co-op missions, where human players play together on one team

against an overwhelming amount of computer-controlled and less well-equipped enemies. The main purpose of this new release, according to the Army Game Project's deputy director Chris Chambers, is that "players will be able to experience the 'Overmatch' capabilities of an elite Soldier team whereby they are able to defeat much larger enemy forces" (Callaham 2006: 2). A new feature is also that there are non-combatant computer-controlled avatars present, so that the players must take care to distinguish between enemy forces and non-combatant civilians.

Although the enemy forces outnumber the US forces in these missions, the superiority of the US equipment and the inferiority of the AI avatars confronted with human opponents mean that it is relatively easy to succeed in these missions without suffering many casualties. Hence, the combat simulation may well be closer to the real-life situation – although one still might suspect that a game like *Full Spectrum Warrior* is even closer to full realism: In the latter, the US team is superior to their enemies not just in technology and in training, but also in number; and the challenge is not to win the battles, but to win the battles *without suffering casualties*. That is, of course, except for the enemy soldiers. The fact that, in the "Overmatch" version of *AA*, these are not portrayed by fellow players who see themselves as a legitimate US force but rather by robot-like computer-controlled characters is a quite literal way of dehumanizing of the enemy; and doubtlessly helps reducing the moral ambiguity of the game.

The comparative analysis of *AA*, *CSS* and *BF2* in this chapter has shown that *AA* distinguishes itself from the other two games with a strict demand for identification between the player and the role she is offered; an increased appearance of authenticity; and strict rules separating legitimate and illegitimate actions in the game. I have interpreted this as rhetorical strategies of identification, authenticity and legitimization, and hope I have managed to show that these are fitting descriptions of the expressive language of the game. But is it possible to use these findings to formulate a more general model for rhetoric in persuasive games? This is the topic for the next, and final chapter.

## 4 Freedom and Discipline

I noted in the previous chapter that discipline plays a special role in *America's Army*. In this chapter I will expand on this perspective, and review two important theories about serious games – those of Janet Murray and Gonzalo Frasca – and show how they put a special emphasis on the role of discipline and freedom. I will also try to interpret this in relation to two fundamental qualities of computer games; transgression and reductivity. Finally, I will suggest a framework in which the rhetorical strategies described in the previous chapter can be understood as positions on a scale between discipline and freedom, for different aspects of the game. This framework may serve as a sketch for a more general view on the rhetorical strategies identified in my analysis; and one which hopefully can serve as a starting point for further exploration of the rhetoric of persuasive games.

### 4.1 Kill the instructor

“Empower yourself. Defend freedom” is the dramatic invitation exclaimed in the marketing of *America's Army*. But as my first meeting with the game made clear (see chapter 3.3), freedom in *AA* is not unlimited: Violating the rules will lead to punishment. Considering the way that the army operates in real life, that may not seem like a particularly radical stance; but in the world of computer games (even military-themed ones), strict discipline is not the norm. It is interesting to note how the action of shooting the instructor in basic training figures in several texts about the game:

As every general started with boot camp, so also in *AA* you earn access to online play by paying your dues in basic training [...]. Basic teaches you to think Army-style (forget shooting your drill instructor). (Davis et al 2003: 270)

Important steps during training are, to always listen to the drill instructor and to follow his instructions (i.e. to fire when ordered to do so). When a gamer aims at the drill instructor and fires at him (yes, that was the first thing I did as well), Basic Training is immediately over and one has to start all over. (Nieborg 2005a: 122)

If one were to view *AA* as the authentic simulation of the real US army which the game's promotion claims it to be, it would be quite paradoxical that the option of shooting the drill instructor on the firing range would even be mentioned in the army's own account of the game – as if gunning down annoying instructors is something one might commonly expect new army recruits to try out. However, as the quote from Nieborg shows, I am not the only *AA* player suffering from the impulse to see what happens if we shoot the instructor. In fact, browsing the community forums on the game's official website makes it clear that a large number of players have gone to such lengths.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, several players report

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<sup>108</sup> Posts discussing the Fort Leavenworth mission (and the opportunity to explore the prison by way of certain cheat codes), refer to killing the instructor as a convenient way of getting there. Some examples: “Y are there so many idiots on

humorously on the possibility of using a cheat code to get hold of a weapon in the lecture room in the “Medic” and “Special Forces” training missions (which in part consist of lengthy lectures from computer-controlled characters), so that one can kill the lecturers and the students.<sup>109</sup> This seems to have been tried out by many players as a way to avoid having to listen to the lectures, but unfortunately (?) for the players – and hilariously, for some – the murdered officers keep on lecturing even after they have fallen “dead” to the ground.<sup>110</sup>

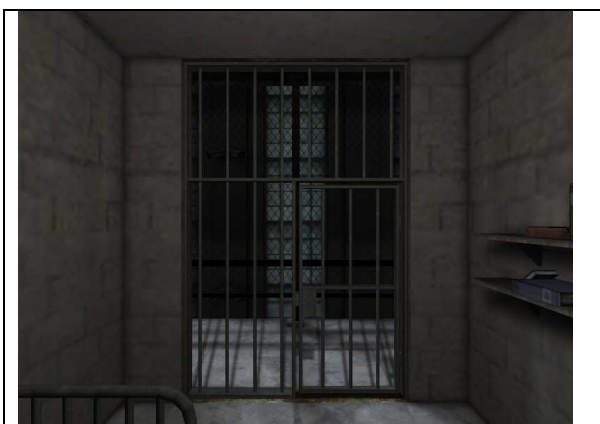


Figure 12: “The Leavenworth mission”. In-game screenshot taken by me.

All in all, it seems that violating AA’s Rules of Engagement is something that comes quite naturally to a large number of players. This can be interpreted in a number of ways; but in the absence of any evidence that gunning down army instructors is an activity that AA players in general would like to act out in real life, I prefer to focus on explanations that are related to the nature of the game, and the pleasures that players may seek in games. Espen Aarseth describes the pleasure of players, as opposed to that of readers, as the “pleasure of influence: ‘Let’s see what happens when I do *this*’”

(Aarseth 1997: 4). Edward Castronova, an economist who has studied the relation between the interests and economies of real life and those of virtual worlds, has suggested that the pleasure of gaming can be described in terms of freedom from the rules and values of the real world (cf. Grimmelmann 2003). In his book on the topic, Castronova compares the attractiveness of virtual worlds to that of the real world, and observes that in the real world,

the underlying rules of Nature, viewed as a game system, are incredibly complex; we have an entire field of endeavour, Science, devoted solely to discovering cause and effect. Internal coherence is also often blocked by the simple fact that we’ve been placed in roles that we do not want, yet can’t escape. Compare this to fantasy game worlds, which provide free role-playing and comparatively simple cause-and-effect rule systems. They may be providing a mental experience that is pleasantly unfractured, and hence more real-seeming rather than less, in comparison to that available on Earth. (Castronova 2005: 74)

I think it is quite questionable to what degree these games may actually seem more *real* than everyday reality on Earth, but I think it is clear that they may seem much *freer*. One of the earliest theorists of play,

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this board? its crazy” (2002), “I died in leaven worth” (2005), “Leavenworth and the yeti” (2005), “The Secrets of Fort Leavenworth” (2006) or “AA Jail” (2006). Some players are curious about the prison, but hesitate to go there because they worry about the possible repercussions of shooting the instructor: See the forum thread “going to jail” (2005).

<sup>109</sup> In these training missions the player is not equipped with a weapon.

<sup>110</sup> See for instance these forum threads: “Dead people talking in medic training” (2003), “How to get past the boring 7 people talking in SF training?” (2003) or “I died in leaven worth” (2005).

Roger Caillois, lends support to this idea: “Simulation [is] in principle and by nature in rebellion against every type of code, rule and organization” (Caillois 2001 [1961]: 157, as quoted in Castronova 2005: 77).

It seems clear that the impulse to shoot the computer-controlled instructors doesn't have to be interpreted as an act of violence, or even opposition to the authority behind the game – but rather as an expression of a player's natural desire to explore the game. Since pretty much the only way that players can act upon their virtual surroundings in AA is by the use of weapons, it is no surprise that players will gun down the instructor rather than trying to reason with him. On the other hand, as some of the posts on the discussion forums show, shooting the instructor may simply be an attempt to skip past instructions or lectures that the player doesn't want to sit through (or has already heard before).<sup>111</sup> Both of these interpretations, however, point in the same general direction: Games are by their nature anarchic, free zones set apart from the moral and legal norms of real life (as well as the laws of nature, of logics, of well-formed narratives etc). A large part of the pleasure of games consists in transgressing these norms and laws in an environment free from any serious consequences of the actions – and by the same logic, free from any serious meaning being attached to them.<sup>112</sup> In short, it seems that freedom is a central aspect of the pleasure that players find in computer games. In the words of Gonzalo Frasca, in his review of *Grand Theft Auto III*:

I conducted a non-scientific poll among my friends asking which word described GTA3 the best. The answer was practically unanimous: "freedom." Freedom is the ultimate promise of so-called new media: virtual reality, the internet and videogames aim to empower their users with freedom (or at least the illusion of freedom). (Frasca 2003b: §5)

It seems to me that the freedom Frasca describes, which involves “freedom to explore but also freedom to experiment” (ibid), contributes to a large degree of the pleasure that players experience when playing games. Hence there is a shared expectation among players of computer games for an extended amount of freedom, compared to the real world – perhaps more in some games than in other, but present to some degree in the anticipation that players meet any new game with. Of course freedom is always limited in a number of ways and for a number of reasons (technical limitations of the simulation, limitations to the amount of content that can be present in a game, needs to conform with a linear/narrative structure etc), but still a significant degree of freedom of exploration and experimentation seems to be an important convention of computer games.

For instance, all first person shooter games involving team play must have some mechanism for dealing with the event that a player fires at one of her team members. These mechanisms vary, both in

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<sup>111</sup> See for instance “How to get past the boring 7 people talking in SF training?” (2003). This may of course also be interpreted as an act of aggression against having to listen to instructions or lectures that one doesn't want to – see for instance: “Leavenworth and the yeti” (2005), “NEW PLAYER DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO IN TRAINING AND NEEDS HEL” (2005), or “going to jail” (2005).

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Salen and Zimmermann (2004: 92-99).

single player and multiplayer games: In the single player versions of *Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault* and *Rainbow Six: Rogue Spear* (a game which the makers of AA have acknowledged as an important inspiration – cf. Nieborg 2005a: 33) teammates can be shot without repercussions for the player, while in *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, *Half-Life 2* and *F.E.A.R.* the player's bullets don't have any effect on friendly avatars,<sup>113</sup> and in *Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood* it simply is not possible to fire the gun at friendly avatars. In other games, like *Call of Duty 2*, the game is immediately lost if a friendly avatar is killed. However, in the multiplayer version of the game the default setting for friendly fire is “off”, meaning that the player's weapons will have no effect on friendly avatars (including her own!), unlike the standard settings in *CSS* and *BF2*, where it is possible to kill friendly avatars, and points are deducted from the player's score if she does.<sup>114</sup> However, none of these games go to the length of actually placing the player in prison. The prison “mission”, along with other design choices radically limiting the freedom of players in AA due to concerns of realism – or rather, as previously argued: the appearance of authenticity – may thus be seen as a violation of important computer game conventions central to the pleasure of games. Why was this done?

The answer to this question of course lies with the designers themselves, but a plausible explanation may be found in the mechanism described above: The freedom from serious consequences of actions undertaken in games implies that there is little or no serious meaning ascribed to the actions.<sup>115</sup> It may seem that for a game to be seen as serious, by its players as well as by a serious-minded authority such as the US Department of Defense, it needs not only to emphasize authenticity, but also (as a logical consequence of the former) to limit player freedom by putting serious consequences on the players' actions.

Janet Murray and Gonzalo Frasca are two theorists who have given important and much-discussed contributions to the debate about how games can be used to express and discuss serious themes and ideas. A reading of some of their most important works on this topic indicates that disciplining players is one of two main strategies to this end.

## 4.2 *Hamlet* revisited: Freedom and discipline on the Holodeck

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray describes three “characteristic pleasures” of “digital narratives”: Immersion, agency and transformation (Murray 1997: 94). Here Murray sees two symmetrical problems: How to create and maintain immersion in a participatory environment, and how to structure agency into compelling narratives. The answers that Murray gives to both questions seem to fall

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<sup>113</sup> In *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, firing at some friendly avatars cause them to act like they are hit for a second or two, but it's impossible to kill them, even with a large number of bullets.

<sup>114</sup> In addition to having the score reduced, killing teammates will normally lead to social stigma and, if done repeatedly, to being kicked from the server or even banned permanently.

<sup>115</sup> In the words of Salen and Zimmermann: “The meaning of an action in a game resides in the relationship between action and outcome” (2004: 34, italics in the original).

into two similar categories, which both can be understood as favouring different balances of freedom and constraints.

In the chapter dealing with the first of these problems, that of immersion, Murray notes: “Participation in an immersive environment has to be carefully structured and constrained” (Murray 1997: 106). In the rest of the chapter she discusses how to achieve this, and she suggests three main solutions. The first solution is “Structuring participation as a visit” (Murray 1997: 106-110). This model takes the amusement park ride as a paradigm, and also includes computer games structured as a maze, adventure games like *Myst*, and a CD-ROM version of the starship *Enterprise* from the *Star Trek* series. Common to all of these environments is that they are environments with severe constraints for the user/visitor. Both in the amusement ride and in a maze the movements of the visitor/player are severely limited, whereas in *Myst* and in the *Enterprise* CD-ROM the possibilities for interaction are drastically constrained: “By contrast, one of the limitations of the graphically immersive world of *Myst* is that it is dramatically static” (108), “the visit to the *Enterprise* loses its immersive hold because nothing is happening there” (109).

The second and third solutions to the problem of structuring participation are by contrast characterized by large degrees of flexibility and freedom: “Structuring participation with a mask” and “Structuring collective participation with roles” (Murray 1997: 112-119). In my view, the two categories are overlapping and near-identical: On the one hand, wearing a mask always implies some sort of role-playing. On the other hand, any kind of role-playing implies that some kind of mask (physical, social or perhaps just mental) is worn.<sup>116</sup> And in the context of online computer games, the massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are games of very large player freedom, in particular since the multitude of human players puts complex variations of social play at the centre of the game. The flexibility that results from the freedom to act out a large variety of human interactions in a role-playing game also makes it possible to develop subtle and emotional human themes into the game.

As Murray goes on to discuss the two other pleasures of digital environments, those of agency and transformation, her examples keep swinging back and forth between these two extremes: Severely constrained models, often tending towards very low levels of participation, such as in hypertext fictions where the player is reduced to a reader; and flexible, “constructivist” environments, in which “there is no limit to what can be called into being within the virtual world” (Murray 1997: 148).<sup>117</sup> There is no room for a full discussion of all of Murray’s examples here, I will only briefly comment on one which seems particularly relevant for the analysis of AA. Noting the success of fighting games in combining agency and immersion, Murray points to what she sees a promise of increased complexity in such games: The *Star Wars*-themed “*Tie Fighter* game casts the player as a member of the Empire forces”, and according to Murray, “the moral impact of enacting an opposing role is a promising sign of the serious dramatic

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<sup>116</sup> Cf. Tronstad’s discussion of theatricality and theatre-for-oneself (2004: 92-125).

<sup>117</sup> Murray defines constructivism as “an aesthetic enjoyment I making things within a fictional world” (Murray 294n12).



potential of the fighting game” (147). The complexity of this moral impact arises from the tension between the values and desires of the player, and the role and the actions afforded to her by the game. This can be seen as a constraint: If a player wants to succeed in the game, she is forced to follow morals that are in opposition to her own, or at least to those expressed in the original story (presented in the *Star Wars* films); she must see the world from the perspective of the bad guys, and act according to their norms and goals. By contrast, a newer role-playing game such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare 2003) gives players the freedom to choose freely what side they want to play on: The dark side of the force, or the side of the light. This is of course a parallel to the different arrangements in *Counter-Strike: Source* and *Battlefield 2*, where the player can choose which side she will play for, and *America's Army*, where she must play as a US soldier. The difference between *AA* and *Tie Fighter*, however, is first of all that being able to choose sides freely is the norm in multiplayer online games, whereas it is not so common in single player games. Secondly, while *Tie Fighter* forces the player to take on the role of the ones which are normally considered the enemy, *AA* forces the player to play only on the side which (from the hegemonic US perspective) represents the good guys. The designers of *AA* went to the length of inventing an innovative technical constraint to *avoid* exactly the kind of moral complexity that Murray praises *Tie Fighter* for incorporating.

All through her argument, Murray changes back and forth between these two general strategies for turning digital entertainment into serious literature: One is to put radical constraints on the player/reader's freedom, either in order to create a tragic feeling of powerlessness, or “eye-opening” alteration of perspective, or just to structure the experience into a meaningful (narrative) pattern. The second is to provide the player/reader with radical freedom, through role-playing and constructivism, to allow the player to explore different roles, environments and strategies. When we turn to one of the most outspoken ludologists, Gonzalo Frasca, we find an even more radical duality.

### **4.3 Gonzalo Frasca's serious games: Radical discipline, radical freedom**

Gonzalo Frasca has written two important texts on the topic of serious games. Both of these take a prescriptive approach; instead of analyzing existing games, they focus on coming up with suggestions for ways in which to design games which deals with serious topics. Below I will sketch out his arguments in both of these works.

#### **4.3.1 Ephemeral games: Seriousness by discipline**

In his much-quoted article “Ephemeral games: Is it barbaric to design videogames after Auschwitz?” Gonzalo Frasca (2001c) first took up the question of games addressing serious, artistic themes. How could one design a computer game in such a way that it was suited to deal with a somber and sensitive topic such as the Holocaust? According to Frasca, “current computer game design conventions have structural characteristics that prevent them to deal with ‘serious’ content” (2001c: §4). There are two main

problems, the first of which is the binary logic of games, which presents players with only two possible outcomes: Winning or losing. A system of rules determine the criteria for winning and losing, and whether a specific action brings the player closer or further from victory; whereas the real human and moral issues connected with a serious topic don't easily fit into such a binary pattern. The second problem is computer game conventions for life and death, which imply that a single player can have as many lives as she wants. The player's actions and choices will always be trivial compared to real life: If something goes wrong, the player can always go back and try again, either from the start or from a previously saved version.

Frasca concludes that if a computer game which simulates the fate of a prisoner in Auschwitz should be able to avoid trivializing the experience, an environment would have to be created in which actions are irreversible. He sketches the basic principles of such an environment, in a model he calls "one-session game of narration" (OSGON). These games would be single player games played as online events which each player could take part in only once. In order to prevent players from multiple logins, the game would have to be scheduled to start at a specific moment, after which players would not be allowed in. This would make actions and choices irreversible, and death of the avatar would be final – no re-entry to the game.

Frasca himself speculates that the format may be too awkward for players to accept it, and that the convention of replayability may be too strong for players to accept a game which can only be played once. It is certainly clear that OSGONs would be games where the freedom of players would be strongly constrained. All of these constraints on player freedom may well be considered as a kind of narrative or thematic discipline, forcing the player to stay true to the topic and the basic intentions of the game. Personally I am not convinced that it is necessary to require such a strict discipline; neither to create a sense of tragic irreversibility, nor to tackle serious issues in general. However, the OSGON model may well be taken as an ideal type, which may be used as a reference point in order to distinguish an actual game as more serious than other games – in fact I believe this is a good way to analyze the design of *AA*. Actions in *AA* are not irreversible, but they do have lasting effects, through the scoring system: A successfully completed mission contributes a little towards a permanent increase in the player's honor score, whereas killing a fellow team member has a strong negative effect. And also in the small details of gameplay, the design of the game increases the consequences of actions: A brief moment of inattention can be enough to get killed, because of the few hit points needed. And getting killed in *AA* is more serious than getting killed in *BF2* or *CSS*, on a scale that is easily quantifiable: When killed one must wait 15 seconds to get back in the game in *BF2*, a few minutes or less in *CSS* and up to ten minutes in *AA*.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Actually, there are hints that in certain cases, actions in *AA* may have serious repercussions, not just in the gameworld itself, but also in the real world: A player mentioning having seen another player with a star next to his player name (signifying that this player is US army personnel) who was intentionally teamkilling other players, was encouraged by

### 4.3.2 Videogames of the Oppressed: *Seriousness by radical freedom*

In his master thesis “Videogames of the oppressed: Videogames as a means for critical thinking and debate”, Frasca (2001a) developed an approach from the opposite end of the freedom-constraint spectrum. Inspired by Augusto Boal’s “Theatre of the oppressed”, Frasca sketched two different ways to give players the opportunity to modify computer games to deal with their own personal experiences. The first, and in a sense the most moderate of the two, “The Sims of the Oppressed”, is

a modified version of The Sims that would allow players to modify, add and discuss the simulation’s model chore rules, particularly the ones that affect character behaviors. Think of it as FT [Boal’s Forum Theater] with games instead of scenes. (Frasca 2001a: 80)

With a special design tool players would be able to create not just skins and clothes, but actual behaviors and personalities. These character models could be downloaded by others, who could play and experiment with them, modify them and distribute their modifications back to the player community. In other words, this would be a “meta-simulation”, in which players would be allowed to actively play with and modify some of the behavior of the simulation itself. Part of the merit of the project would be in increasing the player’s critical awareness of how any simulation is depending on the views and perspectives of the designer:

The fact that several design strategies coexist in the game – and that the player knows that other players designed most of the behaviors – enhances the perception of the simulation as a constructed artifact. [...]  
By being allowed to change Peter’s code, a player is taking a look into the way Peter structures his perception of the world and exercising a critique about it. (86-87)

The other alternative design suggested by Frasca is called “Play My Oppression”, and is a more general system inspired by Boal’s “Image Theater” techniques, intended to let players create simple simulations and games by themselves to represent their personal problems. The simulations would be designed from simple design templates based on classic arcade games, creating highly symbolic representations which would be presented in online forums. There other participants could play with them to experience the protagonist’s problems first-hand, and present their own suggestions for solutions as modifications to the original game. By allowing players to not just modify an existing game, but also create new ones more or less from scratch, this model gives player an even more radical degree of freedom to experiment with the system.

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other players to report the teamkiller, as “He/She is, by wearing the star, a representative of the Army. His/Her conduct should reflect the standards of the Army. Even if it is just a game.” (“Players Begging For ‘.mil’ Emails :-/” 2004).

## 4.4 Reduction and transgression

We have seen that freedom is a strong convention in computer games, and that *America's Army* goes against this convention to a significant degree. And as the reviews of the work by Murray and Frasca show, issues of freedom and discipline are important in their prescriptions for serious computer games. In the analysis of *AA* in the previous chapter another concept was also central: The realism or authenticity of the game. How do this property relate to the balance of freedom and discipline? I think this can best be expressed by two terms that also characterize computer games in general: Computer games are reductive and transgressive.

Computer games are reductive both because they are simulations, and because they are games. Recall Gonzalo Frasca's definition of simulation as the "act of modeling a system *A* by a *less complex* system *B*, which retains some of *A*'s original behaviour" (Frasca 2001b: 3, my italics). Simulation is reductive, since it leaves out some of the complexity of the original system.<sup>119</sup> On the other hand, there is also a reductive quality to the game form itself: The need for quantification. According to Juul's game definition that I cited in chapter 2: "*A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values*" (Juul 2005: 36). As Castronova observed in his comparison between real life and games, the rules (and laws) governing real life are so complex that they are not even fully understood by humanity as a whole (see paragraph 4.1 above, and Castronova 2005: 74). Hence, the full outcomes of actions in real life are not easily quantified in a comprehensible mathematical model, and it is not easy to determine what values should be assigned to any possible action.<sup>120</sup>

Computer games are transgressive in that they let players perform actions which they either couldn't or wouldn't perform in real life. For instance, as described by Frasca:

GTA3 allows you to perform a lot of actions in an immense playground. To mention just a few: you can hit and kill people, carjack and drive an enormous variety of vehicles, use several cool weapons, play vigilante, be a taxi driver, repair and paint you car, listen to several radio stations, have sex with prostitutes and burn people alive. And these are just some of the possibilities. (Frasca 2003b: §6)

In the case of multiplayer tactical shooters such as *AA*, they allow players to engage in armed combat without fearing for their lives, without having to go through months or years of military training, and

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<sup>119</sup> Jack Copeland, in the book *Artificial Intelligence: A Philosophical Introduction* (1993), argues that one should also take into consideration the special case of a simulation which lacks no essential features of that which is simulated: "Call something a *simulation*<sub>2</sub> if it is exactly like whatever is being simulated except that it hasn't been produced in the usual way but by some non standard means" (Copeland 1993: 47). This might be a useful way of viewing some special cases, as the example of game currencies; they are simulations which do not lack any of the essential features of a real currency.

<sup>120</sup> Of course, all these arguments about reductiveness refer to computer games which somehow can be compared to real life, or at least to human experience (or human imagination) of some kind. Not all computer games can easily be described in this way, as the discussion about *Tetris* in paragraph 2.3.6 showed. However, this counter-argument does not seem applicable to *AA* or any of the other games discussed in this thesis.

without having to deal with all the moral and political issues of real war. This is true even if *AA* challenges the extent of these transgressions as compared with other games of the genre; introducing semi-serious consequences to actions, hours of training before online combat, and a modest punishment for (some) violations of the rules of engagement.

While the transgressive quality of computer games seems to be a kind of freedom, the reductive quality can contribute both to freedom and unfreedom. Simplifying a simulation implies to remove elements from it, and hence the opportunity to explore or experiment with those elements of the system is removed. But at the same time, this can simplify access to other elements, and hence increased opportunity to explore and experiment with those elements. For instance, the extreme simplification of basic army training presented in *AA* (lasting hours as opposed to months or years) reduces the opportunity to explore that part of the army – but it also makes it possible to access the combat elements of the game much faster, increasing the opportunity to explore and experiment with the combat elements for those who couldn't or wouldn't spend months in training first.<sup>121</sup> Seen from this perspective, it seems that the “transgressiveness” of a computer game actually depends on the game's reductivity: By reducing “realistic” training requirements a player of *AA* can enjoy freer access to combat, by reducing the consequences of violating the rules of war (minutes or seconds in prison, rather than years) the player can take more chances and experiment freer with strategies than a soldier in real life can. In *GTA San Andreas*, by reducing the consequences of being caught by the police (just losing your weapons and a little cash – but no jail sentence, and no social stigma) the game gives the player freedom to transgress moral and juridical norms of all kinds. In *BF2*, by reducing the complexity of operating modern tanks, helicopters and fighting jets down to the manipulation of a mouse and some keys on the keyboard (and by removing the physical risk) players get the opportunity to engage in high-tech, split-second combat powered by multi-million dollar war machines.

In other words, while it seems that the reductive and transgressive qualities of computer games are major factors of what makes games in general seem unrealistic or unauthentic, the relation between these qualities and the degree of freedom in computer games is not as simple. However, looking at both Frasca's and Murray's examples of designs for games or digital environments with serious topics, it seems that in those cases where they suggest a design with larger degree of freedom, this comes in the form of a less reductive design; whereas whenever they suggest a design with larger constraints on player freedom, this is a design which is less transgressive. Frasca's “The Sims of the Oppressed” is able to accommodate serious human themes because the reductive quality of the original design of “The Sims” is

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<sup>121</sup> According to Nieborg, a role-playing game titled *America's Army: Soldiers*, in which players would guide a character through its army career was actually conceived of and produced alongside the *America's Army* game which this thesis is about. The game was announced on the *AA* website until April 2003, when the announcement was pulled without any official explanation: “Community rumors indicated that the *Soldiers* game was too dull” (Nieborg 2005: 37n100). Nieborg claims that the classroom sessions in the Medic and Special Forces training missions are traces of this unfinished edugame.

challenged, allowing for more complex modifications of character behaviour. Similarly, Murray's constructivist environments allow for more varied and complex incorporation of human and emotional themes into the game, hence reducing its reductiveness, so to speak. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Murray's models of "tragic inevitability" (Murray 1997: 178) constrains player freedom by making it impossible for the player to do anything that will change the outcome of the situation, hence removing the transgressive quality of being able to go back in time over and over again until one gets it right. Through even more radical constraints of player freedom, effectively turning games into real-time happenings, Frasca's ephemeral games (OSGONs) achieves an effect of the same kind.

A relatively simple line of reasoning seems to inform much of these theoretical deliberations (both those of Murray, Frasca and myself): In order for computer games to address serious human themes they must challenge the transgressive freedom of games, that freedom which goes radically beyond the freedom of humans in real life situations; or they must challenge the reductive limitations of computer games which render them unable to incorporate human interaction beyond a small variety of material and easily quantifiable operations. Both these kinds of alterations would tend to move the games closer to human reality.

Recall now the perspective on game realism suggested in the previous chapter, in which the relationship between a particular game and external reality is considered less important than the relationship between that game and other games of the same genre (see paragraph 3.4.3, above). Viewing the discussion about the transgressive and reductive quality of games through this perspective, we can arrive at a model which allows us to describe the way a game deals with serious issues not through some "fidelity of context" or other criterion relating to external reality, but instead through the game's relationship to other games and genre conventions.

## 4.5 The rhetoric of persuasive games

Frasca's three serious game models – "OSGON", "The Sims of the Oppressed" and "Play My Oppression" all seem quite extreme; in fact, they could all be described as border-line cases of Juul's classic game model. With regard to *The Sims* (and by extension, Frasca's modification of it) this is a common observation. In Juul's model, *The Sims* lacks explicit goals and is hence put in the borderline category of "open-ended simulations" (Juul 2005: 35-47); whereas Frasca prefers to speak of it as a game, but a special case which is "not a *ludus*" (Frasca 2001a: 50). And "Play My Oppression" is not a game at all, but rather a design tool for *making* games that deal with personal problems. The OSGON model, on the other hand, describes something which certainly can be regarded as games, but only of a quite special kind: Games with no replayability.<sup>122</sup> So from a theoretical perspective, we can see Frasca's design

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<sup>122</sup> There are many games which share this property to some extent; for instance most kinds of riddles, puzzles and puzzle-based games; it is also worth observing that most quest-based games have low replayability, since the quest

suggestions as extreme cases on either end of a spectrum, or perhaps rather in different corners of a multi-dimensional space, which is defined by different ways of manipulating freedom and limitations – or discipline – in persuasive computer games. But how can we describe this space in further detail?

Going back to the analysis in the preceding chapter, I connected each of the main rhetorical strategies identified in AA with specific aspects of the game: The strategy of authenticity is in particular related to the gameworld and the simulation laws governing it, legitimization is connected with the game rules, and identification is connected with the player roles available within the game. It is possible to see these strategies as different aspects of a general design which works with discipline and limitations in different aspects of the computer game: Legitimization is an effect of strict rules of engagement, identification is a result of the inability to choose which side to play on, and the appearance of authenticity is a result of forcing players to deal with real-world limitations (such as the necessity to treat bleeding wounds, keeping track of where your friends are, taking care to positively identify friend from enemy and reloading your gun when it runs out of bullets). If we imagine the opposite strategies, we then get not one, but three different spectrums which can be used as a tool for analyzing the rhetorical work of a specific computer game design.

Whereas a ruleset which enforces strict discipline in correspondence with the rules of (a part of) the real world may be seen as a way of legitimizing those real-world rules, a ruleset which allows a large degree of freedom and transgression of the rules of the real world may be seen as a way of *opposing* the real-world rules. In the same way, a gameworld which allows players a great degree of freedom or transgression from their real-world existence, may be seen as an *autonomous* gameworld rather than an authentic one. And a set of player roles which gives the player great freedom in the ways she can relate to the game, may be seen as a form of *identity play* rather than a game of identification. This gives us the following, schematic model:

#### The rhetoric of persuasive games

	Discipline	<----->	Freedom
Rules	<i>Legitimization</i>	<----->	<i>Opposition</i> <sup>123</sup>
Player roles	<i>Identification</i>	<----->	<i>Identity play</i>
Gameworld	<i>Authenticity</i>	<----->	<i>Autonomy</i> <sup>124</sup>

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changes status once it has been solved (cf. Tronstad 2001: 3). However, Frasca takes the non-replayability of the model to an extreme by not just making the game *unfit* for repeated play, but simply *inaccessible* once the initial session has started.

<sup>123</sup> 'Transgression' is another way of describing the opposite of legitimization, in the sense 'transgressing rules and norms'. However, since I have used the term in a wider sense in the previous subchapter, to describe the ability of computer games to let the player go beyond all aspects of reality, I prefer to use 'opposition' to describe the function of a rule system which is in opposition to the rules of everyday society.

<sup>124</sup> A variety of alternative terms could be used to describe an autonomous gameworld: Playfulness, infidelity, aestheticism, fiction, fantasy, carnivalism, burlesque...

Once again, I want to stress that all of these descriptors are intended to be value neutral; for instance it should certainly not be taken for granted that the largest possible freedom is desirable in all cases. As Frasca's OSGON example shows, a strictly limiting design may be necessary to deal with very serious themes, and to create a sense of tragedy in games. One could actually exchange the term "discipline" in my model with "anchorage", expanding on Barthes' use of the term: All of the strategies on this side of the spectrum can be viewed as different ways of anchoring the game in reality – or rather, a specific perception of reality. Building a gameworld which adheres strictly to the shapes and laws of the real world, enforcing rules which parallel the rules of the real US Army, and refusing players the option to see a situation from the perspective of the enemy, are all ways of anchoring the game experience in a reality that the US Army wants the players to consider as their own: As potential US Army recruits. In fact, the army even offers players who register with a .mil email address<sup>125</sup> to have a symbol displayed alongside their player name, signaling their belonging to the real US military, thus directly anchoring one element of the player identity in her real-life identity.<sup>126</sup>

Looking at the difference between *AA*, *CSS* and *BF2*, it is clear that *AA* is placed a little further to the left on the spectrum than the other two games, in each of the three dimensions of the model. *CSS* and *BF2* have less strict rules, and may be seen as more transgressive in the way they facilitate player behavior. They also allow players to choose their role in the game with larger freedom, thus allowing for a small degree of play with identity; and their gameworlds appear less authentic and more autonomous. If we were to broaden the scope and look at games from different genres and different topic areas, it should be possible to draw a multi-dimensional map with many interesting variations of rhetorical strategies. I am not suggesting that this should be described or analyzed mathematically, as the game typology in *Cybertext*; that might work for something as concrete as traversal functions through a text, but it seems hard to operationalize rhetorical strategies in a way that would satisfy the needs for such analysis while remaining sensitive to the complexity of the topic. However, this multi-dimensional space could be used to create comparisons and draw distinctions between games and genres in ways that might open the way to unexpected insights.

The validity of this model for analysis of persuasive computer games in general can only be tested by applying it to a variety of relevant games and evaluate its usefulness in describing their rhetorical

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<sup>125</sup> .mil is the internet domain of the US Department of Defense (DOD), and is used by the various branches of the armed forces. The symbols next to the player's name do not give away the player's rank, only what branch of the armed forces he or she belongs to.

<sup>126</sup> Rumours have it that the distinguished status this gives to players by demonstrating their status as soldiers in the real US Army has led to civilian gamers offering money for a .mil email account (see "Players Begging For ' .mil ' Emails :-/" 2004 and Nieborg 2005: 23n56). On the other hand, Li quotes military gamers who claimed "that there were many more military America's Army players than the small number represented with the Army Star designation – the explanation was that many military gamers preferred not to take on the official trappings so they could act more freely (swearing, horseplay etc.) within the gamespace without having to worry about protecting their professional image" (Li 2003: 80-81).



characteristics. This is a challenge for future work. But for now it seems clear that, in addition to explaining some of the rhetorical work taking place in and through AA, this model seems able to contribute something to a number of already existing discussions. For instance, it gives a good way to view the diversity of opinions about the GTA series, as sketched out at the end of chapter two: While Ian Bogost sees *GTA: San Andreas* as a procedural representation of a conservative metaphor of crime, due to its lack of a “historico-social” context for the player’s actions (Bogost 2005a), Gonzalo Frasca points to the *autonomy* of the gameworld in *GTA 3* as a reason for disregarding the moral unease of killing random passers-by (see Frasca 2003b, and paragraph 2.4 above) – and Jesper Juul, on the other hand, describes the player’s experience of *GTA 3* as a kind of *identity play*:

It could be a good idea to see the game as a kind of *free-form play*: The game is not a fictive world which one is merely observing, and not a role which one takes on and endorses, but a play with identity, where one at one moment does something which one finds morally acceptable, and the next moment something else which one finds morally repulsive. [...] *GTA3* is exactly a sandbox or a playground, where the players can experiment with doing things which they otherwise wouldn’t do. (Juul 2004: 194)<sup>127</sup>

For my own part I will add that, unlike many other violent computer games, the games in the GTA series don’t try to *legitimize* the violence in the game in any way – or at least not in any way connected to the real world: If the violence in GTA is legitimate and acceptable to the player, it is only because the world in which the game takes place is a cynical, amoral and corrupt world where the rules and laws of everyday society don’t seem to apply at all.

A quite different game, the anti-violence game modification *Adam Killer* made by the American artist Brody Condon (2000), manipulates these parameters in a slightly different way, in order to create a kind of anti-violence shock effect. Working in a *Half-Life* mod environment, Condon placed a large number of avatars modeled on his real-life friend Adam in a game space consisting of a single, white quadratic space. The player is launched into this space armed with a machine pistol and the simple instruction: “Kill Adam!” However, unlike in *Half-Life* and most other first person shooters, the multiple copies of Adam placed in the game space are entirely passive – they don’t make any attempts to either attack the player, or run away from her. Shooting one of the Adams simply results in the figure falling dead in a splash of blood and gore. Through this radical anchoring of the game in the real world, coupled with the absence of any legitimizing function for the violence, the player is forced to either take on the role of a violent sadist, indulging in unprovoked, repeated violence against the same defenseless character, or simply refuse to interact with the game.

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<sup>127</sup> My translation. Original quote in danish: ”Det kan dermed være en god ide at se spillet som en form for *leg*: Spillet er altså ikke en fiktiv verden, som man er tilskuer til, og ikke en rolle, som man påtager sig og står inde for, men en leg med identitet, hvor man det ene øjeblik gør noget, man mener er moralsk forsvarligt, det andet øjeblik foretager sig noget, som man mener er moralsk forkasteligt. [...] *GTA3* er netop en sandkasse eller en legeplads, hvor spillerne kan eksperimentere med at gøre ting, som de ellers ikke ville gøre.”

A similar effect is used, perhaps more subtly, in Gonzalo Frasca's *September 12<sup>th</sup>* (2001), where the player's only means of fighting the terrorist threat (i.e. by inaccurate rocket attacks on busy urban streets) just contributes to the growth of terrorism. Thus the game forces the player to either accept killing a large number of innocent civilians without getting any closer to eliminating the terrorists, or just passively watching the simulation, refusing to take on the role offered to her by the simulation.

One comparison, which might show both some of the potential and some of the challenges of this model, would be between *AA* and the single-player strategy game *A Force More Powerful* (Breakaway Games 2006). This game has been made in order to teach political opposition groups in non-democratic countries about non-violent means of affecting political change, based on the experience from revolutions which have been won without the use of violence (such as the "velvet revolution" in Ukraine and the ousting of the nationalist Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic). The game, which resembles so-called "god" games in the strategy genre like *Sid Meier's Civilization* (Meier 1991) and *SimCity* (Maxis, 1989), is very complicated and requires much attention from the player; and here I can only base my analysis on some quite simple observations, rather than a thorough study. But it is interesting to notice how the three rhetorical strategies identified in *AA* all seem quite relevant also for an analysis of *A Force More Powerful*. Although the game takes place in a gameworld which represents a fictional country, there is a strong emphasis on how the conflicts in the game reflect the way such conflicts are played out in real life, as documented in the documentary films that formed the basis for the game's creation. In other words, the game's claim to authenticity is quite strong. Legitimization is also an important part of the game, not just by means of the game's overtly pro-democracy stance, but through the need for the player to build support for her cause among the population of the fictive country in the gameworld. Where *A Force More Powerful* differs the most from *AA*, as seen through the goggles of my schematic model, is in the aspect of player role: The game doesn't give the player any active role within the gameworld itself, she acts by proxy through different "supporters" of her cause. And in the work of building a critical mass of supporters she must study and negotiate the interests and complex positions of a wide variety of social groups, thereby constantly questioning her goals and priorities through comparison and negotiation with the priorities of her followers.

Apart from the fact that this game is primarily motivated by an overtly political and educational purpose, *A Force More Powerful* seems as different from *AA* as one would think it was possible to be. But in my three-partite model, the game is revealed to use similar rhetorical strategies in two of the three aspects of the game that the model incorporates. Does this indicate that authenticity and legitimization are strategies that are crucial to all persuasive games, whereas how the games deal with strategies of identification must vary according to the games' political perspective? Or is it rather an indication that the model is too crude and must be refined in order to incorporate the fine complexity of how different games may be designed to promote different values?

This is not the place for an answer to these questions; for now, the purpose has been only to try and draw some lines connecting the rhetorical analysis of *America's Army* with the wider field of persuasive games. It is my hope that some of the insights and perspectives indicated in this thesis may be used as helpful starting points for a further exploration of this field, both by myself and other researchers. Whether this hope will be fulfilled, probably depends more than anything on the clarity and the rigor of the thesis in which it is expressed; and that is a question which is up to the reader to evaluate.

## 5. Conclusion

“But how do you kill someone who has *no life*?”  
(*World of Warcraft* administrator, in *South Park* episode 1008; Parker and Stone 2006.)

This thesis has focused on one question which is central not only for the theoretical study of computer games, but also for the study of such diverse fields as advertising, political science, cultural studies and education: How should we understand the rhetorical devices that have made *America's Army* one of the most successful, recent innovations in military propaganda?

A review of some existing theories on the rhetoric of other modern media forms, as well as Ian Bogost's work on persuasive games and rhetoric, failed to provide me with any theoretical framework directly applicable to the analysis of *America's Army*. Instead of looking for specific rhetorical figures such as metaphors or metonymies, or whatever their equivalent would be in the structure of a computer game, I have used insights gleaned from computer game theory to look for more general rhetorical strategies, which are noticeable in the design of different aspects of the game: The gameworld, the rule system and the player roles. A central force at work in these strategies is the tendency to enforce a basic discipline or control through constraints on player behavior. However, it has also been a fundamental part of the perspective in this analysis that the relationship between the game and external reality matters not as much as the relationship between the game and other games. And so the discipline enforced is noticeable not so much by its correspondence with Army discipline in real life, as by the difference between the discipline in *America's Army* and the more anarchic tendencies in similar games. Similarly, the impression or illusion of authenticity in *America's Army* is not so much a product of the correspondence between the gameworld and the real world, as a result of certain “reality effects” which emphasize a distinction between *America's Army* and other military-themed games. This distinction could perhaps best be viewed as an *attitude* or a *posture* of realism, rather than an objective quality of the gameworld. As my quantitative and qualitative analysis has shown, neither of the three games have much in common with the external reality of modern, real-life combat.

What kind of rhetoric is this? It may seem like a relatively subtle kind of rhetoric, certainly one that deals with ‘minimal gestures’ rather than overwhelming impressions or provocative postures. *America's Army* is propaganda, and there are certainly instances of verbal-text rhetoric of the most patriotic and grandiose kind in the game – see, for instance, “The Soldier's Creed” in figure 2 in chapter 3.3 above. However, the rhetoric of the game form itself, which is the one I have been trying to analyze, doesn't seem to rely on such an overtly excessive language. In stead it is a rhetoric of modesty, responsibility and moral authority; making sure no-one may come to see themselves as terrorists killing US soldiers, avoiding unrealistic excesses and undisciplined play.

Going back to the Aristotelian rhetoric referred to at the start of the thesis (see chapter 2.2.1 above), it seems clear that of the three means of persuasion – ethos, logos and pathos – described by Aristotle, *ethos* (moral character) is the main focus of the *America's Army* rhetoric. The game portrays the US Army as a deeply moral organization, in which soldiers must take great care that no teammates or non-combatants are hurt (even when none are present) while trigger happy villains are put promptly in jail; an organization which always deals with the authentic reality, and in which every participant has a clearly defined, morally unambiguous role. Perhaps the Rules Of Engagement system could also be seen as an implicit argument of the *logos* type (reasoning) about how the soldiers in the real army conduct their missions in real life. And certainly there is a great potential for *pathos* (emotional affect) involved in the experience of playing an exciting, adrenaline-filled game where one enacts a soldier in the real US Army – but viewed from this perspective there is also a considerable risk involved for the army. Ed Halter describes it nicely, talking about early reactions to the game:

Because of the Bush administration's timing, *America's Army* was working to sell the concept of signing up one's life to be a part of a very real, and very deadly war, one that the American public increasingly perceived as rife with moral and political complications, and initiated on questionable presumptions. So surely there were some pangs of concern in reaction to all the nifty news coverage *America's Army* was getting – a bit of panic on the part of parents, perhaps. Weren't video games, well, bad for you? Didn't the news tell us, only months earlier, that the 9/11 terrorists used *Microsoft Flight Simulator*, a popular off-the-shelf PC game, to train for their deadly deeds? Wasn't the D.C. sniper a big fan of "one shot, one kill" video games like *Counter-Strike*? Didn't the kids who perpetrated the Columbine massacre practice countless times earlier by slaughtering enemies in *Doom*? (Halter 2006: xix-xx)

Excessive computer game pathos, it seems, is dangerous; even if you are critical of the idea that a computer game can turn your son or daughter into a killer all by itself, there may always be the feeling – or even common-sensical assumption – that computer game violence must be affecting our children *somehow*. Therefore, if a computer game which aims to *actually* turn your children into killers (albeit of a kind that society deems legitimate) shall succeed, it needs all the ethos it can get, without taking away the emotional engagement with the game. This is why ethos is at the centre of the rhetoric of *America's Army*.

In the final chapter I have proposed a model in which the rhetorical strategies found to be at work in *AA* are understood as positions on one end of a spectrum stretching between positions of discipline and freedom. The two forces at work could also be termed 'constraints' and 'flexibility', in order to emphasize the value-neutrality of this analytical tool. These terms can also be related to Roland Barthes' terms of 'anchorage' and 'relay'; however, they are not exactly the same, since the terms I am suggesting refer beyond the textual qualities of the game to the very basics of player activity: those elements of the game which must be viewed from a perspective of process and participation, rather than just as forms of textual expression.

The game of *America's Army* fits perfectly into this theoretical model; it places itself far out on the 'discipline' end on each of the three spectra. This is hardly surprising, however, since the model has been designed from an analysis of this particular game. But from the brief observations that I have been able to make at the end of this thesis, about the relationship of other games with persuasive agendas to this model, it also seems as a promising starting point for an exploration of the rhetorical strategies at work in a broad variety of persuasive games. At the very least, it seems clear from the prescriptions made by Gonzalo Frasca and Janet Murray that different strategies of manipulating constraints and freedoms on player behavior are central in the design of serious computer games. Looking at how these strategies are implemented through different aspects of the games, is then likely to produce a clarified picture of the rhetorical work carried out by a particular computer game.

In order to verify all of this, the model must of course be tested in theoretical scrutiny and analytical practice, to see if and how it needs to be modified to work as analytical tool for a wider variety of persuasive computer games. I have pointed to some examples which seem relevant; but much work should be done to flesh out the further details of these categories, and how they can best be used in the analysis of different games. The ways in which computer games can and do play with identity, authenticity and legitimization in a large variety of ways, for a large variety of purposes, needs further study to be fully understood. Unfortunately, this undertaking lies beyond the scope of this thesis; but I hope I will be able to return to the task in my future work.

In particular, the further development of *America's Army* should also be followed closely by scholars both in the field of computer game theory, as well as other academic fields dealing with advertising and propaganda. The position of the game as one of the world's most popular in its genre seems quite stable, and the game is constantly evolving in ever new releases. According to David Nieborg (2005a: 111-146), the integration between the public version of the game and real-life applications of it, as a training tool for soldiers and a testing tool for the U.S. Army, are planned to intensify and evolve further in the years to come. At a time when ever more soldiers are demanded in an attempt to create peace and stability in trouble spots like Iraq and Afghanistan, and commentators fear that these military conflicts may spiral out of control into a regional war involving ever larger parts of the Middle East, *America's Army* can not aptly be described as "only a game"; it is a very serious game indeed.

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## Appendix A: Sample play statistics

I have not made any efforts to collect comprehensive statistics about the popularity of the games studied in this thesis, but during the year that I have been working on this thesis I have visited the statistics pages of *America's Army*, *Steam* and *GameSpy* on several occasions, often enough to say that the popularity of *America's Army* has been quite stable.

For instance, on August 21<sup>st</sup> 2006, at 19:33 GMT, I have copied the following statistic from the *America's Army* web pages: 122 047 hours of play per day on average for the last 30 days. Around 7.5 million registered players, almost 4 million of which have completed basic training. At the same time, I collected the following statistics from the *Steam* network:

Game	Players online	Player minutes last month	Player hours per day, last month <sup>128</sup>
<i>Counter-Strike</i>	118 894	5215 million	2,8 million
<i>Counter-Strike Source</i>	59 850	1704 million	916 000
<i>Half-Life 2 Deathmatch</i>	2008	67.5 million	36 300

(Source: [http://www.steampowered.com/status/game\\_stats.html](http://www.steampowered.com/status/game_stats.html))

On February, February 16<sup>th</sup> 2007, at 17: 03 CET, I collected another sample statistic from the *Steam* network, this time including all the ten most popular games:

Game:	Current players:	Current servers:	Player Minutes/Month:
<i>Counter-Strike</i>	193,834	88,471	6.365 billion
<i>Counter-Strike: Source</i>	64,755	41,476	1.876 billion
<i>Counter-Strike Condition Zero</i>	28,958	20,625	857.016 million
<i>Day of Defeat</i>	5,742	1,635	212.626 million
<i>Day of Defeat: Source</i>	4,705	2,491	150.100 million
<i>Half-Life 2: Deathmatch</i>	1,971	1,412	58.493 million
<i>Half-Life DeathMatch</i>	1,640	980	47.530 million
<i>Earth's Special Forces</i>	738	517	21.544 million
<i>Garry's Mod</i>	587	404	24.466 million
<i>TeamFortress Classic</i>	477	518	23.288 million

Table 8: Player statistics from the Steam network, Feb. 16<sup>th</sup> 2007. (Source:

<sup>128</sup> Since the previous month had 31 days, I have considered 1 month = 31 days.

<http://www.steampowered.com/v/index.php?area=stats&cc=NO>).

At the same time, I checked the *America's Army* website and found that the number of player hours on average the last 30 days was about the same as half a year ago: 115 973, corresponding to ca. **209 million minutes** of play over the last 30 days. In other words, the popularity of both *America's Army* and *Counter-Strike: Source*, as well as *Counter-Strike*, remained relatively stable in these 6 months – with a small drop for AA and a moderate increase for the two *Counter-Strike* versions.

At the same time, *America's Army* was number 9 on the list of the top ten games on the *GameSpy* network:

**GameSpy statistics February 16<sup>th</sup> 2007, at 17: 15 CET:**

1. <i>Half Life</i> (including <i>Counter-Strike</i> )	39344 servers, 112006 players
2. <i>Half Life 2</i> (including <i>Counter-Strike: Source</i> )	27733 servers, 78811 players
3. <i>Battlefield 2</i>	5282 servers, 20012 players
4. <i>Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory</i>	3699 servers, 13947 players
5. <i>Battlefield 2142</i>	2757 servers, 13762 players
6. <i>Call of Duty 2</i>	7302 servers, 7243 players
7. <i>Call of Duty</i>	3352 servers, 6383 players
8. <i>Unreal Tournament 2004</i>	2389 servers, 6085 players
9. <b><i>Americas Army: Special Forces</i></b>	2233 servers, 5080 players
10. <i>Quake 3: Arena</i>	1901 servers, 2977 players
11. <i>Soldier of Fortune 2</i>	1040 servers, 2544 players
12. <i>Medal of Honor Allied Assault</i>	1755 servers, 2461 players
13. <i>Neverwinter Nights</i>	833 servers, 2224 players
14. <i>Unreal Tournament</i>	2108 servers, 2025 players
15. <i>Medal of Honor: Allied Assault Spearhead</i>	1141 servers, 1806 players
16. <i>Battlefield 1942</i>	803 servers, 1751 players
17. <i>Halo: Combat Evolved</i>	783 servers, 1574 players
18. <i>Battlefield Modern Combat (PS2)</i>	127 servers, 1474 players
19. <i>Star Wars Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy</i>	690 servers, 1332 players
20. <i>Red Orchestra Ostfront</i>	244 servers, 1231 players

(Source: <http://archive.gamespy.com/stats/>)

## Appendix B: Mission descriptions

Below I have included transcripts from the mission descriptions for each of the four training missions in the “Basic Training” part of the game.

### Basic Training 1: “Marksmanship”

*The following text introduces the first Basic Training mission, in the game’s menu interface:*

#### “HISTORY OF FORT BENNING

Basic Training prepares soldiers to face a variety of unpredictable battlefield situations. Soldiers must be prepared to make split-second friend or foe decisions – particularly in urban settings where enemies can hide among civilians and other noncombatants. Soldiers must adapt and develop critical thinking skills – the lives of your fellow comrades depend on it.

Before departing BCT for Advanced Individual Training in your chosen MOS you must successfully pass one final challenge: The Shoot House. This is a dynamic, live-fire combat environment where you will be directed to rapidly proceed through a multi-room structure engaging enemy pop-up targets in each room. However, be alert for friendly as well as civilian pop-up targets – and other potential surprises.

Range Cadre will provide your equipment and briefing. This is a timed exercise, you will receive a comprehensive After-Action Report upon completion of the Shoot house, afterwards your scores will be sent to your Personnel Jacket.

#### BASIC COMBAT TRAINING

Basic combat training is the first step toward a very challenging, yet rewarding experience in service to our country. Its purpose is to transform young American volunteers into disciplined, motivated, physically fit Soldiers who believe in teamwork and espouse the Army’s seven core values: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless-Service, Honor, Integrity and Personal Courage. This is accomplished



through extensive training and successful testing to meet Army standards in rifle marksmanship, physical fitness and basic soldier skills. Soldiers also learn about values, principles and spirit that makes Soldiers proud to wear the uniform of this country. Having chosen infantry as military occupational specialty (MOS) you will undergo all of your training at Fort Benning, Georgia ...'The Home of Infantry.'

In red phase, weeks 1-3, recruits begin the process of becoming a Soldier. They learn the Army values, and work on their physical fitness. They learn about communications, basic first aid, map reading, and the military justice system. They also practice drill and ceremony and negotiate the Obstacle and Confidence courses. Before moving to the next phase, soldiers must successfully complete a knowledge and skills test.

During weeks 4-6, the white phase, soldiers continue Army values and physical fitness. Much of this phase is spent learning, practicing and qualifying on the M16A2 rifle. They will also learn about other U.S. military weapons, chemical warfare and bayonet training. Soldiers will participate in the obstacle course, gas chamber (soldiers enter a tear gas filled chamber in protective clothing and mask to instill confidence that the protective gear works) and bayonet assault course and pass another knowledge and skills test.

The blue phase, weeks 7-9, in addition to Army values and physical fitness this phase includes individual Tactical Training, foot marches, confidence course, and obstacle course. The culmination of basic training is a 3-day field training exercise combining all previously taught basic combat skills. Soldiers march ten kilometres to their designated training site on day 1, occupy the position and establish a defense perimeter. On days 2 and 3 soldiers complete a teamwork reaction course, tactical exercise lanes and a night tactical exercise. The last night includes the night infiltration course, a return march to the unit and a ceremony recognizing the successful completion of this challenging exercise.

## BASIC RIFLE MARKSMANSHIP

Congratulations, soldier! You have made it to week five, the end of the White phase of Basic Combat Training.

You've spent the last two weeks in basic rifle marksmanship training, learning how to maintain a tight grouping (employing the basic skill of marksmanship to ensure all rounds hit in a small target

area – tight shoot group) in both simulation and live fire training. You’ve zeroed and certified your weapon, and now it’s time to prove your skills on the firing range and earn your rifle qualification badge.

Successfully qualifying with the M16A2 rifle will make you the most feared combat system on the planet: a U.S. Army Infantryman. Qualifying ‘Expert’ will allow you the opportunity to attend Sniper School. Failure will give you the coveted opportunity to enjoy weeks three and four of Basic Combat Training one more time.

Task: Qualify with the M16A2 rifle.

Conditions: Qualification occurs under combat conditions with unlimited visibility. Forty pop-up silhouette targets will be presented randomly at ranges from 50m to 300m, and you will have forty rounds of ammunition. You will engage these targets from both a fighting position and from the prone position. You will be given the opportunity to practice in both of these positions before qualification begins.

Standards: In a combat condition, while being presented with 40 targets, engage and hit 36 targets to qualify for Expert Marksman, 30 for Sharpshooter, or a minimum of 23 to qualify as Marksman.”

## **Basic training 2: “Obstacle course”**

*Note: The first two thirds of the description of this mission is identical to the text under the two first headings of the “Marksmanship” mission. Only the text under the third heading differs, and so only that part of the text is included here:*

### **“OBSTACLE COURSE**

Obstacle courses are used in physical fitness training to teach physical skills, to improve conditioning, and to instill a spirit of daring and confidence. The challenge that obstacles offer helps to develop and test basic skills. Success in combat may depend on soldiers’ ability to perform these skills.

There are two types of obstacle courses: the conditioning obstacle course and the confidence obstacle course.

The confidence obstacle course consists of higher, more difficult obstacles than those of the conditioning course. The confidence course gives soldiers confidence in their mental and physical ability and cultivates their spirit of daring.

The conditioning obstacle course features low obstacles and is run against time. Several fast runnings of this course provide a vigorous workout; therefore, conditioning occurs. You will learn the obstacles and how to overcome them rapidly. You will first negotiate the course at a controlled pace so you understand how to properly negotiate each obstacle. Your second time through the course will be in competition with your fellow soldiers.

As you negotiate the various obstacles found on the conditioning obstacle course, maintain a positive attitude and prepare yourself to overcome your own limiting physical abilities with the goal of completing the obstacle course within standards, fulfilling the value of personal courage. Show respect to fellow soldiers by avoiding mention of another soldier's physical attributes. Encourage others to complete the physical training exercise to the best of their abilities, demonstrating your own selfless service. Encourage your fellow soldiers to push themselves during physical training exercise to the best of their abilities, demonstrating your own selfless service. Encourage your fellow soldiers to push themselves during physical training with the goal of meeting course standards and improving your score at each attempt, also fulfilling the obligations of selfless service. Upon completion of the obstacle course, you will have demonstrated the value of personal courage by mentally overcoming the rigors of physical training, keeping the goals of improved conditioning and increased confidence foremost in your mind.

### **Basic Training 3: “US Weapons Training”**

*Like the previous mission, this mission shares the first two thirds of the description with the “Marksmanship” mission. The last third of the text reads:*

“US WEAPONS TRAINING

All soldiers must, in addition to their individual weapon, be able to employ other weapons effectively. During this block of instruction, you will be familiarized on how to properly employ the M249 machine gun, the M203 and the Fragmentary and Smoke Grenades. Undergo each station and thoroughly familiarize yourself with each weapon.

A soldier fulfills his obligations of duty by being able to employ various weapons. The Army Core Value of duty is fulfilled when a soldier correctly loads, unloads, and fires both the M249 machine gun and the M203 grenade launcher. In addition, it is a soldier's duty to prepare for firing and engaging targets with the M67 Fragmentary Grenade. A soldier exhibits personal courage when a malfunction is corrected on the M249 machine gun in the face of fear, danger or physical adversity."

#### **Basic Training 4: "MOUT (Shoot House)"**

*The mission description for this mission is identical to the first two thirds of the other mission descriptions, but it doesn't have any text corresponding to the last third of the other texts. It only has a different headline: "THE FINAL BCT CHALLENGE", after which the same text follows as under the first two headlines in the other mission descriptions in Basic Training.*

## Appendix C: Quantitative measurements

### Speed measurements

I measured the speeds of movement in *America's Army*, *Counter-Strike: Source* and *Battlefield 2* in the following way: I selected a distance of reference on one of the maps in the game, and measured the time it took to cross it in different ways: By walking, running, walking while crouching, etc. Comparing the different times gives me a direct way to calculate the speeds of the different modes of movement relative to each other, within each game.

In order to be able to compare the speeds between the games, I would have to measure the distance in a scale which is comparable between the games. Of course the distances can't be directly measured in meters, since length is a physical property, whereas the distances in question are virtual distances in a virtual landscape, without normal physical properties. However, if we assume that the avatars in all the three games are men of approximately the same height (let's say ca. 1.8 m – the exact figure is not important, as long as it is the same for all the games), we get a common scale by which to make estimates of the distances, and hence compare the speeds in the different games to each other. Even so, the distances can't be measured in any direct way, but would have to be estimated. Hence, the speeds measured in the three different games can only be compared by approximation.<sup>129</sup>

In all three games, the measurements were carried out in multiplayer setups on a local server without other participants, in order to avoid disturbances from other players or computer-controlled avatars. All times (with a few exceptions, which will be noted individually) were calculated as the average of three measurements.

### **Speed in America's Army**

In AA, the avatar can take three basic postures: Standing up, crouched, or prone. For each of these positions, there are two basic speeds of movement: Running or walking. Walking is slower, of course, but makes less noise and allows the player to fire the gun with higher accuracy. In the upright position it is also possible to sprint. This is even faster than running, but while sprinting the gun is lowered and can only be fired after the player has stopped sprinting and the gun has returned to the ready position. This is also the case when the player is crawling fast.

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<sup>129</sup> If I had access to a level editor for the different games, I could probably have measured the distances more directly and accurately; in that case I could also have calculated the metrical speeds with higher accuracy. Unfortunately, since the map editor was released with version 2.8, long after I had made my measurements, I haven't had this opportunity.

I measured the speeds on the map “Urban Assault”. Distance of reference: The full length of the alley running north-south past the spawn point for the “Assault East” team, from the corner in the north in a straight line all the way to the facing wall in the south. By breaking the distance into smaller portions and estimating the length of each portion at a time, I estimated this distance to a length of 40-50 meters. This is of course a very rough estimate,<sup>130</sup> but it seems to correspond well with the amount of small buildings placed along the alley. For simplicity I have used the middle point of this estimate, 45 meters – however the reader should consider this figure as an estimate with a margin of uncertainty of more than ten per cent.

I also tested the speed taken to go uphill and downhill, two places: Up and down a staircase on the “Urban Assault” map, and up and down a hill on the “Radio Tower” map. In both cases, going up and down took exactly the same amount of time, indicating that slope doesn’t affect the speed of movement.

### **Speed in Counter-Strike: Source**

In CSS, the avatars only have two basic postures, upright or crouched. Like in AA they have two speeds of movement, fast or slow, and the slower movement has the advantage of being less noisy. However there is no “sprint” option and the gun can be used at all times – making running the default speed of movement CSS.

The speeds were measured on the map called “de\_dust”, available with the standard retail version of the game. The distance I measured was by the bomb site ‘B’, from the pile of bricks in a straight line over to the wall of the large building with two domes. By dividing the distance into smaller portions and estimating each of them, like in AA, I arrived at the same result: 40-50 meters. However, in CSS I also discovered a potentially more accurate (and slightly more fun) way of measuring the distance: I took one of the many oil barrels placed by the bomb site, and by firing my gun at it I managed to roll it along the entire distance, counting the number of revolutions by looking at the top lid. I counted 30 revolutions, and estimating the diameter of the barrel to be ca. 50 centimeters<sup>131</sup>, this would give a distance of 45 meters. However, this is still an estimate with a significant uncertainty.

The speeds were all measured with a terrorist avatar of the “Guerrilla Warfare” type. However, I did test the speed of three other avatars (“SEAL”, “GIGN” and “Phoenix Connexion”) running the same distance, and got the same speed for all avatars. I also tested the time to run uphill and downhill in a number of slopes, and got identical results (within the margin of accuracy). Neither running in water or on an uneven surface seems to affect the speed.

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<sup>130</sup> Although the technique used is actually a common distance estimation technique taught to infantry soldiers, at least in the Norwegian army.

<sup>131</sup> Which would correspond with a height of around 0.9 m to give a volume of 159 liters, the volume of a standard barrel of oil.

## **Speeds in Battlefield 2**

In BF2, the avatar can be both standing up, crouching and prone. When standing up the avatar can either run or sprint, in the other two postures only one speed is possible. Sprinting is limited to a short time, after which the avatar slows down to normal running speed and can be heard breathing heavily. Only if it stops running for a short while will the “sprint meter” fill back up, so the avatar can sprint again. While sprinting, the gun is lowered and can not be used. However, unlike the two other games, the avatar can also move around in a large number of vehicles. I have measured the speed of some of those, and included them in the table below.<sup>132</sup>

I measured most of the speeds on the airfield at the “Refinery” control point on the “Dragon Valley” map. For movement on foot, I chose the small distance across the fighter hangar (from one side wall to the other). By looking at the pattern of beams on the back wall, estimating the lowest horizontal beam to be around 2.5 meters above the ground (relative to an avatar height of around 1.8 meters), I found the distance between the vertical beams to be ca. 5 meters and the entire distance to be ca. 25 meters.

This gave me the data I needed to calculate the speeds of movement on foot. However, to compare this with the speeds of vehicles, I also measured the time to cover the length of the entire runway on foot (running), in order to compare it with the same distance covered in some vehicles.

All speeds on foot were measured with an avatar of the “Special Forces” type from the Chinese team, however I did bring up an US avatar of the same type and test if it gave the same result at default speed (running) – which it did. I also tested the fastest US jeep (the “DPV”), and it gave exactly the same time as the fastest Chinese jeep.

In the hill above the “River Village” control point I tested the speed of running and driving in a slope – from the gate of the village and up the road to the large rocks where the road bends sharply to the north. Interestingly, I found that running in a slope goes at exactly the same speed up and down – both ca 0.9 relative to running on a flat surface<sup>133</sup> – whereas when driving a jeep or an APC, driving uphill is much slower, and driving downhill is significantly faster.

The speeds of swimming and driving in a boat were measured on the “Fu She Pass” map, covering the distance from the boat house at the “Chinese Airfield” control point to the first bridge downriver, and comparing to the speed of running on the same map. The speed of the fighter jet was measured by crossing the entire 64 player map of “Zatar Wetlands”, from the “Chinese Airfield” to the US aircraft carrier, and comparing to the default speed on the same map. A measurement was also made for the speed of a helicopter crossing the runway on the same map. However, the speeds measured for both of the two

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<sup>132</sup> Except for the jeeps, these measurements are all made for Chinese vehicles. For the jeeps, both a Chinese one (NJ 2046) and an American one (DPV) was tested, and gave exactly identical results.

aircraft are somewhat inaccurate, due to the complexity of handling the aircraft and at the same time measuring the speed relative to the ground with a stopwatch.

## Map size measurements

The size of the maps were measured as follows: By choosing a reference distance on the map and measuring the time to cover it at default speed<sup>134</sup> and then comparing the length of this distance on the map with the size of the entire map in the two directions north-south and east-west (measured along the two axis, from the northernmost point to the southernmost point of the map, and from the easternmost to the westernmost). In this way, I could get a measure of how long it would take to run from north to south and east to west on the map if it could be done in a straight line, with no obstacles in the way. Using the estimated speed from the speed measurements in appendix A, I could also use this figure to calculate a size of the map in meters. Of course, since the original length estimate used to calculate the estimated speed has a significant uncertainty, the size in meters is also a very uncertain figure. But since the same speed estimate is used as basis for calculating the sizes in meters of all the maps, this does not affect comparisons between the maps within the same game. However, in comparisons between the games one must bear in mind the uncertainty of the figures.

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<sup>133</sup> This is of course calculated as horizontal speed, whereas the direction of movement is at an angle with the horizontal plane. Hence the real distance traveled is larger than that measured on the map, and the speed along the ground is probably the same as it is on a flat surface.

<sup>134</sup> In all three games, the default speed (that which the avatar is set to use as the game begins) is the fastest speed at which the gun can still be fired; i.e. the 'running' speed, for all three games.