Violent Virtual Games and the Consequences for Real War

It's the stuff of adolescent male fantasy. In popular Dos Equis beer commercials, a well-traveled, adventurous gentleman with salt-and-pepper hair and surrounded by younger women explains to television consumers, "I don't drink beer all the time but when I do, I prefer Dos Equis. Stay thirsty my friends." So when I first saw an *America's Army* game player's tag line that read "I don't kill people all the time, but when I do, I kill Czervenians. Stay classy my friends," I imagined a teenager in his basement playing *America's Army* innocently seeking to channel the charismatic charm of that international man of mystery.

Czervenia is a fictional region in the online topography of *America's Army*, a first-person shooter game created by and for the U.S. Army that has been downloaded more than 42 million times, with a worldwide virtual army of more than half a million people. Official game information says this about the country:

From a seemingly insignificant nation of Czervenia, President-General Kazimir Adzic and his army set upon a campaign of murder and annihilation, setting in motion a mysterious plan. The Czervenian Army launches assaults on its citizens and attacks the Republic Democracy of the Ostregals, a chain of islands to the south.

Clearly this region rich in mining deposits with its tyrant leader is a threat to both its own citizens and global peace. The U.S. Army created this narrative of a foreign despot done wrong, so it's no surprise gamers respond with both nationalistic and xenophobic responses that appear online (Susca, 2012). This government-produced violent video game encourages teenagers to play war for free and, once there, fight enemies like Czervenia to save U.S. freedom. It also helps foster feelings about combat situations soldiers are facing in real life. *America's Army* is a case of even greater significance because it targets adolescents and has military recruitment as its primary goal.

When it comes to violent video games, war and conflict, and the creation, maintenance, and cultivation of adolescent entertainment space and war ideologies by military powers, the academic community across disciplines must start taking greater notice. For this piece, I will use *America's Army* as a case study to help outline the need to include more investigation of war video games on the agendas of multiple academic disciplines. It would be too easy and without methodological merit to say that playing violent video games makes people violent or more prone to military service. However, it must be noted that the U.S. Army uses and studies its own game as a way to improve marksmanship and build teamwork as service members prepare for battlefields. I focus here on the growth of the video game industry and explain the U.S. military's use of video games to train soldiers to explain the growing significance of military video games and their links to real war.

Video Game Industry and *America's Army* Growth

More than a decade ago, Doug Lowenstein, the former head of the powerful U.S. video game lobby, described his new-media industry's strength this way: "Anyone who doesn't take the video game industry seriously is an idiot" (as cited in Proffitt & Susca, 2012). Moreover, Leonard (2004) wrote:

In general, there is a marked failure to recognize video games as sophisticated vehicles inhabiting and disseminating

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ideologies of hegemony. But, in a world where video games—more so than schools, religion, or other forms of popular culture—are teaching Americans about race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality identity, such attitudes are myopic and inexcusable. (p. 2)

Video games that are produced by and for governments have the opportunity, therefore, to inhabit and disseminate these ideologies in ways that researchers are just starting to fully understand. For-profit war games created by video game companies often have ties to the U.S. government and mark entry into a new world of mediated government and corporate propaganda (Susca, 2012). The U.S. government used films and television in the 20th century to shape public opinion about Japanese and German enemies and to encourage support for both world wars. In the 21st century, and without a clear state enemy, the violent video game, its fictional regions, and anti-terrorism messages have taken over that role.

Lenoir and Lowood (2003) and Leonard (2004) have suggested that the military-entertainment complex's power is made even stronger by the combination of the increasing importance of the video game industry in American culture and the decades of gaming and simulation tactics that the government has perfected since World War II. Power (2007) said that war video games "Represent a powerful medium to explore the ways in which visual culture can be used to elicit consent for the U.S. military and to enable the expression of militaristic fantasies" (p. 273). The video games are not just used to reflect current foreign affairs or foreign policy, but are instead used to legitimize foreign policy. The game's position as advertising the U.S. Army manages to both commodify the war-as-fantasy mythology just as it normalizes the consumption of war for an unassuming public. The Army is selling violence, hegemony, and sanitized war to a youth audience that is not yet equipped to process the vast and troubling consequences. Trend (2003) explained, "War is the ultimate example of rationalized state violence. To gain public consent for war, its stakes must be raised to the level of myth and history" (p. 303). U.S. military video games have been helping to shape narratives about war and international conflict for more than a decade.

America's Army launched on Independence Day 2002, and within two years, 3.3 million registered players had spent 60 million hours playing it ("U.S. Army to Highlight Weapons Systems," 2004). Holmes (2009) explained that the game's 40 million downloads put it in the Guinness Book of World Records. *America's Army* is one of the most downloaded and respected video games of all time, in part, for what players of the fictional game believe is true authenticity in depictions of battle (Huntemann, 2010). The game is billed as the "Official U.S. Army Game" on the game's website, where the Letter from Leadership explains, "The game has exceeded all expectations by placing Soldiering front and center within popular culture and showcasing the roles training, teamwork, and technology play in the Army" ("Letter from Leadership," 2010, para. 3). The U.S. Marines embraced the FPS video game (and privately-created) *Doom* (Der Derian, 2001), but *America's Army* is the first game solely produced and conceived by the military as a part of its over-arching public relations and recruitment.

A top U.S. Army official conceptualized the game as a way to speak "to teens in their native tongue," and the results have shown it is extremely effective. Colonel Casey Wardynski conceived *America's Army* after dwindling recruitment and Army bases moved out of city centers to remote locations in the Southwest and Southeast. Top military officials saw disconnection between American boys and a desire to join the military. On a trip to the big-box retailer Best Buy, Wardynski explained that his sons had told him many of the most popular video games looked like the military in some way (Huntemann, 2010). Increasing broadband connectivity in homes nationwide, coupled with a reliance on computer gaming for entertainment, provided Wardynski with further evidence of how the Army could reach young men and women. Wardynski told Huntemann (2010),

We can deliver it into pop culture; we can structure it in a way that was designed for teens 13 and above. So now we're not going to get there last, we'll get there about the same time as other ideas for what to do with your life. (p. 179)

Such targeting of adolescents with the game that serves a propagandistic function helps to explain why we *still* fight much in the same way that Frank Capra films during WWII shaped American propaganda and the resulting public reception of war messages then. Viewed this way, the *America's Army* audience then becomes a worker *en masse* in the process to maintain such legitimization and to extend the influence of the military-entertainment complex to

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include adolescents' entertainment products. That influence and effects, then, should be considered as a type of consciousness cultivation envisioned as a relationship of players and web users positioned as members of a larger social structure, one that has the media as a central socializing figure.

Virtual War for Real Training

America's Army is designed as a recruitment tool, but also serves a pedagogical function for the government, attempting to train enlisted soldiers in the areas of marksmanship and desensitization to violent scenes soldiers may encounter on the actual battlefield (Belanich, Orvis & Sibley, 2004; Orvis, Orvis, Belanich & Mullin, 2005). Perhaps even more disquieting is the amount of extensive research conducted by military scholars on how best to improve game features that attempt to extend players' time online, and therefore more greatly affect player experiences with the game and exposure to the *America's Army* brand. The production and research by the leaders in the Army's upper echelons are affecting play and, subsequently, ideologies of some citizens. Belanich, Orvis, and Sibley (2004), two of whom are members of the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, completed research on 21 men to assess key game features to increase players' motivation. The researchers explained that a key component of motivation in video games is fantasy or, as they describe, "the feeling that players are engaging in an activity that is not real" (p.7). However, the researchers also attempted to assess how levels of realism in the game could affect motivation. Nowhere did the researchers suggest that actual realism—death or injury sustained, for example—be made a part of the game. The authors wrote, "Therefore, it is likely that individuals may be more willing to persist in a training game if it endows them with feelings of control" (Belanich, Orvis & Sibley, 2004, p. 17). The Army, in numerous internal research reports, refers to the game not as a first-person shooter, but instead as a *first-person perspective*, further whitewashing the true intent and outcomes the Army's highest-ranking officials want sustained by individuals' game play.

An Army technical report about the use of FPS games to train cadets explained that FPS-learning transfers to real-world situations (Orvis, Orvis, Belanich & Mullin, 2005). Another U.S. Army study (Belanich, Orvis & Sibley, 2004) used *America's Army* to gauge how players who had not yet attended basic training learned combat procedures from the game. Researchers explained that the information participants learned best was "procedural," which included scenes of "virtual marksmanship" and "virtual weapons familiarization" (Belanich, Orvis & Sibley, 2004, p. 2). The Army, too, has sought to better understand (Orvis, Horn & Belanich, 2008) how previous game play translated to on-field expertise and social situations, perhaps further suggesting how the government intends to expand and grow its army of teenage soldiers to create a more seamless transition to real-world fighting abroad.

Creating Soldiers and Enemies

More research on the effects of war video games on players is clearly needed. But what we know should trouble scholars from across disciplines: the U.S. Army already is using virtual violent video games to recruit and train soldiers for real war. Games can help shape narratives about foreign policy, service, recruitment, and nationalism. As mediated storytellers, video games have powerful relationships to adolescent culture. Just look at young people claiming they want to kill Czervenians because the government game directs them to. Another player named PapaBear=VX9= wrote of the fictional country, "Why NOT have a backstory as to why our American soldiers are in this place? Every other game out there has a storyline. And as the US Army, we should have a legitimate reason for being there." When the U.S. Army is the storyteller, any chance to "soldier" is legitimate. And that's not some commercial fantasy.

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