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### *America's Army*: The Virtual US Army

Violent video games have long been suspected of increasing our predeliction toward murderous violations of flesh. This remains to be convincingly proved. In fact, in most "First Person Shooter" video games the violence is mythically codified (*Quake*), conducted against historical evil—recurring Nazi themeatics in *Wolfenstein* and many imitators—or ambiguous. The violence is called into question and operates primarily as a cathartic act of fantasy in an ethically ambigous imaginary. The FPS *Counterstrike* allows *the choice of playing as counter-terrorist or terrorist*, thereby playing the violence inherent to both sides. The game derives from *Half-Life*, which features the starring role as a rogue scientist who faces the entire US Army and Special Ops Divisions after a supernatural, time-warping experiment goes awry. There is no moral high ground; *Half-Life* interrogates the righteousness of the US Government as its forces attempt to kill you as the last surviving witness. Today, questionable and questioning ethics in video games have become hi-jacked by the real US military. In the post-911 world, the virtual realm of violence is to be forcibly fed the "With US or Against US," newly minted logistical-ethics. The latest FPS, *America's Army*, is timely born from the real harbinger of world destruction, the US Army. There are some slight changes from the traditional FPS. For one, *no one can play terrorist*. You always play the "good guy." A player on Team A will always fight as a US Army soldier and fight players on Team B depicted as terrorists. But that opposing Team B "terrorist" will see themselves as Army and Team A as terrorists. All firefights are at once battles of doppelgangers, where the only difference between *real* friend and foe is "perspective." Indeed, this is exactly what US Army spokesperson Paul Boyce said: "As far as you're concerned, when you see the enemy approaching you, they are the enemy. It's all a matter of perspective." In the real, a question of perspective is both required and denounced. For a certain, narrow perspective is enforced through not only the separation of US-defined Good and Evil but the justification and cause of either; on the other hand, a broader perspective is denounced by all sides when one begins to question *all sides* and their "perspectives."

On the virtual battlefield of *America's Army*, one can do no wrong and everyone is Right. The virtual acts as the violent training ground for the real by completely destabilising ethics into a comfortable suspension of not only disbelief, but trans-dimensional judgement. The virtual and the real are dimensions of contradictory control, where appearances in either realm become the real—the other players look like terrorists, despite the fact that they believe they are Army; the dark-skinned man at the end of your gun is an Afghan terrorist, despite his US or Canadian citizenship. Both *appear* as terrorists despite contrary claims. *The only way to end the quandry and to squash ambiguity is to shoot*. Shooting the "enemy" without question is now a state sanctioned and approved act. The US has decided to move beyond disregarding the the Geneva Convention and has

approved execution without trial. The *appearance* of the virtual is the real, and all threats to the contrary must be eliminated. The virtual prepares for the actualised violence of the real by completely reversing, and thereby undermining, present moral quandries. In the virtual, we cannot question if the "enemy" is friendly or not: they are simply "the enemy." It is, no doubt, the Army's goal to bleed the virtual *uber*-ethics (which is actually a lack of *ethics*) into the real, thereby carefully training an entire generation of young videogamers to unquestionably follow the violent, "morally" based edicts of the US military government. Dissent to this strategy will not be tolerated. In the virtual, "Operations punishes the player by kicking them out of the game if they shoot a teammate or break the rules of engagement. If the player returns, they are confined to a tiny cell at Fort Leavenworth, complete with a harmonica playing 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.'" Comments over the Afro-American signifiers of the prison-song aside, *how does one not shoot a teammate in this "game"*?

And how does one manage to shoot a friendly in the real? With the world's best technologies determining precision kills of correctness, allowing us to avoid moral ambiguity? Flip it over, change the barrel: how can one *not* do so with the advent of *appearance ethics* that grants me a *leave of responsibility* by commanding me to shoot in order to stifle question? And perhaps this explains the "friendly" casualties in Afghanistan? Afterall, everyone has the appearance of a terrorist in *America's Army*. Let me repeat that: *in America's Army, everyone appears as a terrorist*. We are seeing the *apparent* rise of logistic simulacra. If we dare to pose the question "*How does one tell which side is good or evil?*," we are *appearing as a terrorist*. And only terrorists ask questions. Questions are the *new friendly-fire*: you are hurting your own if you question. *American dissenters are terrorists*. For what is shooting one's "teammates" in the virtual but the only possible *questioning of the real and of appearances*? Dissent will also no longer be tolerated in the real. The new Department of Homeland Defence ensures a pure ethical opinion in regards to dissent—a question is a friendly shot, it must be dealt with as insubordination—through the fear and paranoia of an unprecedented US network of snitches, whose purpose is to report questions and those who pose them.

In the virtual of *America's Army*, bullets make no sound, and only leave red dots on the victim, very much unlike the gore of recent First Person Shooters. In fact, the regression of violence in the virtual arena is reminiscent of killing "Injuns" in '50s Westerns. And that is where we are returning, is it not? The virtual opens historical simulacra with a polished ethical veneer of black and white. The Cold War is now the War on Terrorism, every bit as ubiquitous and uncontrollable, and yet just as deadly; the Department of Homeland Defence is the new McCarthy Communist hearings; and *America's Army* does one up on falsified news and patriotic *Red Fever* films—for it teaches us how to make violence a virtual game, one sanctioned by the government, and displayed in cartoon-like glory where everyone can be the cowboy with the white hat.

But this is no game. It is all horribly, horribly real.

**A Call to Action**
HACKERS, now is the time to search and destroy. Servers await your skills.

*Until the End, Compadres.*