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The Rhetoric of Persuasive Games

Freedom and Discipline in America's Army

This paper suggests an approach to studying the rhetoric of persuasive computer games through comparative analysis. A comparison of the military propaganda game AMERICA'S ARMY to similar shooter games reveals an emphasis on discipline and constraints in all main aspects of the games, demonstrating a preoccupation with ethos more than pathos. Generalizing from this, a model for understanding game rhetoric through balances of freedom and constraints is proposed.

To an ever larger degree, computer games are being used as means for strategic communication: In advertising, education, and political communication. Above all, the use of computer games for plain military propaganda brings urgency to a question which have occupied humanist researchers in game studies for some time: Can computer games be analyzed as works of rhetoric – and if so, how?

Because if Aristotle was right in defining rhetoric as “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle 1991:36), and if computer games can be used effectively as a means for persuasion, then such analysis should not only be possible, but a high priority. The popular US Army recruitment and propaganda game AMERICA'S ARMY (2002) is one of the army's most important strategic communication efforts during the last years, and is judged by the army itself as well as by independent observers as a highly successful project (Halter 2006, Nieborg 2005 and 2006, Callahan 2006, Li 2004).

AMERICA'S ARMY is a prime example of a persuasive game, a game which is published with the explicit purpose to convey a certain message to its players: The desirability of a future as a soldier in

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the US Army, and the validity of that army's worldview and operations. As such, it is an object well suited for rhetorical analysis.

Game Rhetorics

Various attempts have been made to formulate systems of rhetoric for computer games (e.g. Murray 1997 and Bogost 2007). However, these contributions tend to focus on prescriptive and normative accounts, and are therefore problematic to use as foundations for a descriptive analysis, which is what is attempted in this paper. Basing the analysis on tools imported from traditional rhetorical analysis of non-ergodic media forms would also be problematic, for reasons made clear by the so-called ludologist school of writers (Aarseth 1997 and 2004, Juul 2005, Frasca 2001b, Eskelinen/Tronstad 2003).

Formulating a theory for descriptive analysis of computer game rhetoric seems to first require an answer to certain questions frequently asked by humanist game scholars: whether it makes sense to analyze computer games as narratives or even as forms of text at all. Rather than revisiting this debate, this paper will simply assume the following ontological model of computer games, based on the theories of Aarseth (2004 and 2004a) and Juul (2005): Computer games are games played in virtual environments, and consist of three main elements: gameworlds, game structure/rules, and gameplay.

The rules of a game are defining elements of the social activity that constitutes the game, and like Aarseth and Juul, I hesitate to consider this activity narrative or fictional. Both the rules and the game itself are real and not fictional. And since it is hard to imagine that a real activity involving real human beings can take place in a purely fictional space, one must conclude that the digital environments that constitute the worlds of computer games are real as well. However, these digital worlds may be seen to represent, both through their appearance and behavior, something else which may be either real or fictional. The ways in which these representations

relate to reality, but above all to each other, is of great importance to computer game rhetoric.

The third element of the ontological model, that of gameplay, is formed by the interactions of real players with the gameworlds and the game rules, and is therefore out of reach in a study that does not involve empirical player research, such as this one. However a related, but distinctly different aspect of the game is available for analysis: The player's representation within the game, the player *roles*.

These are the objects of analysis; now all we need is a method. In a situation where no established methods seem valid for the object at hand, it seems appropriate to go back to basics, to the simplest analytical method: comparison. Comparing a persuasive game to similar games which have no purpose of persuasion, we may assume that many of the differences we find are due to the game's rhetorical purpose. In particular this is likely to be true in those cases where the feature in question seems likely to reduce the entertainment value of the game. As we shall see, a number of such features can be found in AMERICA'S ARMY, and as a result some interesting questions may be raised about the rhetoric potential of persuasive computer games.



Fig. 1: BATTLEFIELD 2 (gamespot.com)



Fig. 2: COUNTER-STRIKE: SOURCE (gamespot.com)



Fig. 3: AMERICA'S ARMY (gamespot.com)

Comperative Analysis

The following analysis is based on version 2.6.0 of AMERICA'S ARMY, subtitled SPECIAL FORCES (LINK-UP) and released February 9th, 2006. The two games COUNTER-STRIKE: SOURCE (2004) and BATTLEFIELD 2 (2005) are chosen for comparison because they are some of the closest to AMERICA'S ARMY in genre and topic. In fact, according to Nieborg (2005), the original COUNTER-STRIKE (2000) was one of the main inspirations for the designers of AMERICA'S ARMY.

In COUNTER-STRIKE: SOURCE players take the roles of terrorists and counter-terrorist forces and fight it out in small teams in fast-paced battles until one team has either accomplished its objectives (such as setting off a bomb), or killed everyone on the other team. In BATTLEFIELD 2 players fight larger battles in a fictional war on three fronts between China, USA, and "The Middle-Eastern Coalition",

with a massive array of modern weaponry, tanks, and aircraft at their disposal. In AMERICA'S ARMY the players engage in online battles against anonymous enemy forces in objective-based missions where the focus is on (relatively) realistic military tactics.

All three games are designed primarily for network-based multi-player action consisting of "matches" between two opposing teams, where score is accumulated according to the number of enemies killed as well as strategic action towards a predefined goal. All three games are first person shooters with high production values, and all are among the most popular games of the genre worldwide.

What are the differences? Unlike the two other games, AMERICA'S ARMY requires that the player goes through a series of training missions before she is allowed to play online. These training missions take place in environments carefully modeled on real US Army training facilities, and are commanded by figures carefully modeled on real life army instructors. If the player gets tired of being ordered around and tries something radical like shooting the instructor (such as a large amount of players do – see Løvlie 2007:92-93), the player is immediately transferred to a virtual cell in the Fort Leavenworth military prison. This demonstrates the strict "Rules of Engagement" (ROE) that regulate the player's activities in the game: Whenever shots are fired at friendly targets, the player is given a large negative score, and on repeated violations she may be kicked out of the game, forced to re-qualify on special dedicated servers or banned permanently. This so-called "honor score" is also a positive instrument: Players get points for killing enemies and contributing to achieving team goals, and this score is stored and accumulated in the player account between sessions. A certain level of "honor" is needed in order to play in certain roles, with certain weapons and on certain servers – and in order to earn other players' respect.

The gameworld of AMERICA'S ARMY is also unique in some ways. In particular, all kinds of movement are slower and more cum-

bersome than in COUNTER-STRIKE: SOURCE and BATTLEFIELD 2. The player avatars are more vulnerable to damage, and one may easily get killed by a single shot – or the avatar may bleed to death if not treated by a medic. This makes it important to use great care when moving around, and to use strategies of stealth – crawling through ditches or staying hidden in one place when needed, further reducing the tempo of the game.

As for player roles, the player is also allowed less freedom than in the other two games. Through a unique software trick, the designers of AMERICA'S ARMY have prevented players from choosing side in the conflict represented by the online game scenarios. In a given scenario, a player of team A will be presented with a mission description in which she is seen as a US soldier attacking a Taliban camp in Afghanistan. She then sees both herself and her teammates wearing US uniforms and weaponry within the game, whereas she sees the avatars of the opposing team wearing Taliban clothing and equipment. At the same time, the players of team B will be presented with the opposite situation, seeing themselves as US soldiers defending a provisional camp in the Afghan mountains against Taliban attackers, and seeing their own avatars in US uniforms and weaponry and team A's avatars in non-US gear. Thus no player may ever see herself as an enemy fighting against US soldiers. – The following table gives a detailed list of the differences between the three games.

	AMERICA'S ARMY	COUNTER- STRIKE: SOURCE	BATTLEFIELD 2
Punishment for teamkilling	Large + automatic kicking and banning	Medium	Small + semi-automatic kicking
Qualification needed for online play	Yes	No	No
Respawn	No	No	Yes
Health packs/revival	No	No	Yes
Waiting time when killed	Up to 10 min	Up to 5 min	15 seconds
Free choice of role	No	Yes	Yes
Free choice of weapon	No	Yes	Partly
Single player version/bots	No	Yes	Yes
User-made maps, mods	No	Yes	Yes
Command hierarchy	Yes	No	Yes
Permanent ranking system	Yes	No	On ranked servers
Votekicks	Yes	No	Yes
Mutiny	No	N/A	Yes
Visual blood effects	None	Some	None
Close-quarter combat	Half-and-half	Exclusively	Little
Speed of movement	Low	High	Very high
Vehicles	No	No	Yes
Live map view/radar	No	Yes	Yes
Nametags separate friend from enemy	No (only at a very short distance)	No	Yes
Enemies identified by nationality or group	No	Fictive	Yes (partly fictive)

Fig. 4: Table of Differences between the Three Games

How can all these differences be interpreted as instruments of rhetoric? Trying to identify specific rhetoric figures in the game designs, such as “metaphor” or “metonymy”, does not seem productive. Instead I will look at some rhetorical *strategies* that seem to lie behind the design of AMERICA’S ARMY, one for each of the three basic aspects of the game: Authenticity (gameworld), legitimization (rules), and identification (player roles).

Authenticity

The strategy of authenticity is evident above all in the design of the gameworld, and answers one question that might arise from our analysis: Why do players want to play a game that is slower and more cumbersome than its competitors? Is not easy access to fast-paced action one of the key attractions of first-person shooters? The answer from the marketers of AMERICA’S ARMY is clear: This game maybe slower and harder to play, but in return it is: “The Most Authentic Army Game Ever! The Power to succeed. The courage to exceed” (cit. by Nieborg 2006:111). The differences that make AMERICA’S ARMY a slower and more cumbersome game than COUNTER-STRIKE: SOURCE and BATTLEFIELD 2 are exactly those which make it seem closer to reality.

But does this make the game truly authentic? To some extent, this can be measured quantitatively. The table below shows the speed of movement in the three games, revealing that the soldiers of AMERICA’S ARMY can sprint indefinitely at a speed of 4.0 m/s. Taking into account that American soldiers of today are known to wear extremely heavy gear – the combat load of a US marine may exceed 120 pounds (Marine Corps 2003) – this agility is more than impressive. During my own time as a compulsorily enrolled soldier in the Norwegian army, my unit had a goal of holding a general marching speed of 3 km/h (0.8 m/s) – a goal we rarely met. Note that this is slower than the speed at which the avatars of AMERICA’S ARMY can crawl. Moreover, in

AMERICA'S ARMY there is no difference in the speed when running uphill or downhill; on dry asphalt or in snow, sand or knee-deep in water.

	COUNTER- STRIKE: SOURCE	BATTLEFIELD 2	AMERICA'S ARMY
Sprint	-	6.0 m/s (max 11s)	4.0 m/s
Running	4.2 m/s	3.6 m/s	2.7 m/s
Walking	1.7 m/s	-	1.5 m/s
Running crouched	1.4 m/s	1.9 m/s	1.3 m/s
Walking crouched	0.1 m/s	-	0.8 m/s
Crawling	-	0.7 m/s	0.3 m/s (sprint: 0.9 m/s)

Fig. 5: Speed of Movement

The next table shows the sizes of some “maps”, i.e. game arenas, from the three games (the largest and the smallest maps among 6-7 maps measured from each game). It shows that even the largest battles of AMERICA'S ARMY take place within an area smaller than 0.2 square kilometers.

	Size estimate	Time to cross
Counter-Strike: Source		
Smallest: "de_prodigy"	42 x 60 m	10 x 14 s
Largest: "de_dust"	68 x 96 m	16 x 23 s
America's Army		
Smallest: "Urban Assault"	68 x 95 m	25 x 35 s
Largest: "Radio Tower"	300 x 356 m	110 x 131 s
Battlefield 2		
Smallest: "Strike at Karkand" (16p)	310 x 610 m	25 x 48 s
Largest: "Zatar Wetlands" (64p)	1570 x 1660 m	125 x 131 s

Fig. 6: Map Sizes

It is easy enough to come up with a long list of reasons why the gameworld of AMERICA'S ARMY is not at all authentic: Though more vulnerable than in other games, players can still take a bullet in the leg and keep running at their superhuman speed; and there is never a trace of blood or dismemberment even when avatars are killed in grenade explosions. And besides, how often does it happen to the soldiers of the real US Army that they face opponents that are equal to themselves in number, equipment and training – such as is the case in AMERICA'S ARMY?

It is easy to criticize the authenticity of the game, but the interesting thing is that all these arguments seem somehow irrelevant. The point from a fan perspective is not that AMERICA'S ARMY is equal to reality; the point is that it is *closer to reality than the other games*. Realism in a computer game may be understood as a result of how the game relates to other, similar games, not just how the game relates to external reality.

Identification

The strategy of identification in the design of AMERICA'S ARMY is connected with the player's inability to choose freely between roles in the game. Players of AMERICA'S ARMY 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.

This means 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*? Beyond the appearance of avatars, this feature also affects the actual behavior of weapons, with some subtle and potentially confusing gameplay consequences:

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 is not 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).

The game does not attempt to keep this trick a secret – the mutually contradictory mission briefings for either team are posted right next to each other on the mission information screens. The army is not trying to fool anybody about what is going on; what counts is just to prevent anyone from ending up in a role where they will literally see themselves as an opposing force 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, this is solved by a simple time shift, as in the following excerpts from the “Radio Tower” mission briefings. 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).

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

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).

This is not just a set of gameplay instructions camouflaged as military-style mission briefings; it is also a set of 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 views of themselves and the others; a grotesque comedy of errors. This self-contradictory arrangement could potentially be experienced by players as disillusioning or alienating. However, the makers of AMERICA'S ARMY have put a significant effort in both mission design and rhetorical work in order to make it possible for players to effortlessly ignore the contradiction.

Nonetheless, the "two-faced" characteristic of the game's avatars means that the game directors have traded an element of reduced realism in simulation in order to achieve an appearance of the simulated world that fits better with the rhetorical purpose of the game. This goes directly against all the effort that has been made to have AMERICA'S ARMY look and feel realistic. And so it is clear that the directors of the army's game project consider the *enactment* aspect of their game to be crucial.

Legitimization

The third rhetorical strategy is that which is implemented by the game rules, which I have called *legitimization*. By this one term I mean to refer to two subtly different things. First of all, literal legitimization as “enforcement of the law”: Creating a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of violence, done through the game’s rule system (ROE). Secondly, this can also be seen as an act of representation, portraying the army as an institution run by strict rules that prevent violent excesses.

The ROE is a tool for disciplining players. Since the penalty for killing a teammate is much higher than the reward for killing an enemy, excessively trigger-happy players will quickly find themselves in prison, or unable to log onto servers. Punishment for team-killing is not unique to AMERICA’S ARMY – it is prohibited as a default in most team-based shooter games, and is punished in both COUNTERSTRIKE: SOURCE and BATTLEFIELD 2 – but the strict implementation of the rules is. This in effect highlights the surveillance aspect of the game: The game’s software registers the players’ actions during the game, and automatically inflicts punishments for violations. In other words, it acts out the power of *authority* – and though most on-line games have an element of surveillance, AMERICA’S ARMY is a game that asserts this panoptic authority unusually strongly. This is not only a negative exercise, punishing unwanted behavior, but also a positive one which encourages desirable behavior, such as team play.

What further separates the rule system of AMERICA’S ARMY from similar games is that in AMERICA’S ARMY the rules are not just rules, they are also representations of something else: the rules by which the real US Army operates. This representation portrays the army as a strictly law-abiding institution, in which violent excesses and random cruelty is not tolerated. For instance, all the mission de-

scriptions state that the player must take care not to injure any of the civilians present in the combat area – while in most of these missions there are no non-combatant avatars present. Why put forward this claim in contexts where it is clearly not true? Unless the game designers have made a mistake and forgotten to put the civilian avatars in the missions, the only reasonable interpretation is that these are meant to represent standard instructions that US soldiers are always required to follow.

The discipline of the game forms a coherent picture with several other design choices, such as the absence of blood and gore, and the slow pace of the game. These elements all point towards an attitude 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 game violence controversy, and within the *doxa* of US society. It offers the pleasure of being in correspondence with the hegemonic ideology and authority, of being *legitimate*.

There is an interesting corollary, however, to the legitimating function of the ROE, and the double appearance of avatars. Since both teams have to follow the same rules, and both teams see the other team as terrorists, this arrangement implies that US forces and their enemies are equal not just in power, but also in moral: They both follow the same rules. Both sides will take pains to avoid civilian casualties, neither side will torture prisoners or kill hostages, and if terrorist activities are at all portrayed in the game, it is in a manner which is equivalent to legitimate military action. Recall the mission briefings above, where the assault team is told to “disable” the radio antenna: to the defense team this action is not even presented as sabotage, but rather just as the enemies radioing for extra forces. As long as everyone knows that the “terrorists” on the other team are seeing themselves as US forces, it is not possible to portray their actions as terrorist actions without implying that US forces themselves are conducting acts equivalent to terrorism. Instead, the “terrorists” are reduced to a generic opposing force that plays by the rules.

Ethos and the Rhetoric of Discipline

AMERICA'S ARMY is a game that requires a high degree of discipline from its players. In a genre that is famous for its anarchic tendencies and moral controversies, this is quite remarkable. In fact, the rhetorical strategies connected with all three aspects of the game may be seen as strategies that restrict player behavior: The rules restrict players from acting out anarchic violence. The demands of authenticity restrict players from performing the unrealistic stunts they might do in other games. And the identification demand restricts players from choosing which side to be on.

The discipline enforced in AMERICA'S ARMY 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 of authenticity is not so much a result 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. And so the design of the game can be seen as belonging to one side of a spectrum between constraints and affordances:

	Constraints	← ----- →	Affordances
Rules	<i>Legitimization</i>	← ----- →	<i>Opposition</i>
Player roles	<i>Identification</i>	← ----- →	<i>Identity play</i>
Gameworld	<i>Authenticity</i>	← ----- →	<i>Autonomy</i>

Fig. 7: Model for the Rhetoric of Persuasive Games

All of these terms are intended to be value neutral; it should certainly not be taken for granted that the largest possible freedom is desirable in all cases. As made clear by Gonzalo Frasca (2001a), a strictly limiting design may be necessary for dealing with serious themes.

One could exchange the term “discipline” (or “constraints”) 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 conclusion, we should look at these findings in relation to the broader field of rhetoric outside of computer game studies. What kind of rhetoric is this game rhetoric? It is a relatively subtle kind, certainly one that deals with the “minimal gestures” claimed to characterize modern media rhetoric (Johansen 2002), rather than overwhelming impressions or provocative postures. Certainly there are instances of verbal-text rhetoric of the most patriotic and grandiose kind in the game. However, the rhetoric of the game form itself does not rely on such an overtly excessive style. Instead it is a rhetoric of modesty, responsibility, and moral authority; avoiding unrealistic excesses and rebellious play.



Fig. 8: “The Soldier’s Creed” – One of the Loading Screens in AMERICA’S ARMY (Screenshot)

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; an organization which deals strictly with 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:

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?” (Halter 2006:XIX-XX).

Excessive computer game pathos, it seems, is dangerous. Therefore, if a computer game which openly aims to turn teenagers into killers (soldiers) shall succeed, it needs all the ethos it can get. This is why ethos is at the center of the rhetoric of AMERICA'S ARMY. It is also a good reason why AMERICA'S ARMY should be central for research in contemporary military propaganda, and computer game rhetoric.

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