America’s Army: “Playful Hatred” in the Social Studies Classroom

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ABSTRACT

America’s Army is a first-person “shooter” online video game produced by the U.S. Army and freely available on the Internet. Ostensibly a recruitment tool, the game constitutes a “mimetic” experience that encompasses real-life Army codes, regulations, and behaviors, approximating an authentic military experience, including realistic missions that involve violence. This article considers the educational role of such mimetic games, practical impediments to its inclusion in classrooms, and the conceptual demands the use of such games may place on teachers and students. Additionally, this article considers the ideological barriers and arguments against the educational use of games like America’s Army. Finally, this article connects the experience of America’s Army to Douglas’ (2008) concept of “playful hatred,” calling for a reconceptualization of the term towards a more competitive and pedagogically useful approach.

Keywords: America’s Army, Epistemic, Gaming, Mimetic Games, Playful Hatred, Social Studies

INTRODUCTION

It is generally an article of faith among educators that technology will play a more immersive role in our future students’ lives, in and out of the classroom. The difficulty, of course, lies in predicting its path. Much as twentieth-century urban planners had to adapt to the presence of automobiles and horse-drawn carriages in American cities, twenty-first century educators must envision the use and efficacy of technology in a public school system still, in many ways, designed for students from a hundred years before.

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that represents the next great frontier in teaching. The chief difficulty lies in dealing with the challenges we have already seen in the use of gaming in a classroom setting, as well as predicting those that might arise.

*America’s Army* is a creation of the U.S. Department of Defense and is, at present, unique in the gaming universe—while technologically similar to many popular military-themed games, *America’s Army* is explicitly a recruitment tool, either downloadable at the host website or available through DVDs provided by the Army at recruitment offices or events. The goal of the game’s creator was fairly blunt—“to recreate the US Army for the benefit of young civilians” (Zyda et al., 2003). In gameplay, *America’s Army* is not so different from other “shooters,” including the best-selling video game of 2010. *Call of Duty: Black Ops* is a “shooter,” as are all the *Call of Duty* titles. The series is one of the most popular game experiences in the world—*Black Ops* sold over 20 million copies, a number that the newest version of *Call of Duty, Modern Warfare 3*, is expected to surpass (Brightman, 2011). *Call of Duty* began in 2003 and has been presented in a variety of technological platforms, most of them set in detailed and accurate portrayals of real wars (primarily World War II). “Shooter” games require players to interact with other characters, both computer-operated and computer-controlled, in wartime theaters where the overriding goal is to gun down others, relentlessly and realistically.

These games have been criticized regularly for their violence, and castigated for their presumed connection to real-life violent acts. In 2005, the state of California attempted to ban the sale or rental of such games to minors, a law that was recently struck down by the Supreme Court (Egelko, 2011, p.1). Critics and advocates alike cite mountains of often-contradictory evidence regarding the impact of these games, mostly regarding the impact of violent and graphic imagery on children (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley 2007). But most of these arguments revolve around whether or not such impact is discernibly negative, and little attention is devoted to the prospect that there might be educative value in such experiences.

There has been a great deal of recent educational research into the value of videogames, particularly their ability to engage students (Malone, 1981; Cox, 2001; Zyda, Mayberry, McCree, & Davis, 2005), as well as their utility in the classroom (Shaffer & Gee, 2005; Durga & Squire, 2009, Alexander, Eaton, & Egan, 2010). Given its nature, and its explicitly recruitment-oriented presentation, it might be considered unlikely for a game such as *America’s Army* to be incorporated into a public school. Yet given such games’ popularity, and given their common use of standard social studies knowledge, a consideration of the utility of such game should be considered. This article examines the issues that might present themselves through the implementation of *America’s Army*, or similar games, into the social studies classroom.

The very question, “should games like *America’s Army* be used in a social studies classroom?” may cause queasiness among many educators. After all, it is, at minimum, a recruitment tool; and it would probably be construed, by any number of critics, as an exploitation of a democratic classroom, a long-standing fear of many educators made particularly acute by the pressures of the new digital age—as Heverly (2008) notes of today’s students, “digital media may not only be used by them, but in fact, may use them” (p. 199). All this criticism may have merit, but before dismissing the use of such games for ideological reasons, we should first consider whether or not such gaming experiences could be used at all.

This article considers the nature of *America’s Army* as a gaming platform, and then addresses considerations which may impact its potential value as a social studies experience—practical, pedagogical, and ideological. I then turn to an evaluation of more heated criticism of the game as thinly veiled militaristic propaganda. The article then discusses a new variant in the *America’s Army* game, a more complex portrayal of the ethical dilemmas facing modern soldiers, and finally considers the role competitive ventures may play for today’s
Making Games for Environmental Design Education: Revealing Landscape Architecture
www.igi-global.com/article/making-games-environmental-design-education/67552?camid=4v1a

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