

## Are video games changing the way a new generation thinks about war?

Yes, just when you thought American political culture could not get any more bizarre, Ed Halter drops the bomb. This superb book is more than just a weird riff on the limp machismo, hero worship, and couch potato patriotism of combat-themed game culture. . . . You must read this book."

—Christian Parenti, author of *The Freedom: Shadows and Hallucinations in Occupied Iraq*

A definitive account of the military entertainment complex. . . . Essential for anyone interested in the future of games, computers, media, culture, war—and peace."

—McKenzie Wark, author of *A Hacker Manifesto*

Filled with high-tech weapons, gung-ho desert soldiers, and terrorist scenarios ripped from the headlines, today's ultra-realistic video games have moved to the forefront of the militarization of popular culture. How did this once innocent pastime—now rivaling Hollywood in popularity—become so deeply enmeshed in America's entry into global warfare?

Here is a definitive history of the longstanding relationship between games and military culture, from wargaming's roots in ancient civilizations, to the Cold War development of computing for battle, to a recent crop of U.S. military-funded shoot-'em-ups, big-budget commercial titles and homemade hacks.



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## INTRODUCTION

### AMERICA'S ARMY GOES TO WAR

IN THE MIDDLE of May 2003, American troops invaded Los Angeles. Major media largely overlooked this particular action, though it was part of a wider campaign that had achieved a persistent presence in the news. Chopping through a clear blue California sky, a cluster of Black Hawk helicopters swept over downtown, then hovered above the glass-curtained main complex of the Los Angeles Convention Center as pedestrians glanced upward in surprise. U.S. Special Forces, clad in green camouflage and clutching machine guns, descended from the copters onto a building's roof, rappelled down its wall to the ground, then stormed the Center's entrance. Traffic halted on Pico Boulevard

as some civilians rubbernecked in disbelief, while others cautiously fled—no doubt wondering whether the troops were here to tackle an anthrax scare, dirty bomb, sleeper cell, or some other impending threat to Western culture by Those Who Hate Us. A mere two weeks after President Bush had declared the end of major combat operations in Iraq, had the war on terror found its new front, right in the heart of the global entertainment industry?

Well, yes and no.

After all, this was Los Angeles, so surely a few of the of the more steadfast lunchtime crowd were media-savvy enough to notice that seemingly unworried camera crews accompanied the soldiers, tracking their advance into the Convention Center. Or that one helicopter had chosen to position itself directly above a building that sported a large-scale fabric advertising banner, emblazoned with a photograph of a soldier's face, the Army's logo, and the slogan "Empower Yourself. Defend Freedom." Looking past the banner's left, passersby would have noted that some more gargantuan signage likewise draped the Convention Center's entrance, with a different, but no less familiar logo: the classic tripartite-swish icon of Atari.

The Army wasn't here for reasons of homeland security—at least, not directly. These Special Forces had been ordered to invade the Electronic Entertainment Expo, or E3, the burgeoning video game industry's major annual showcase and convention. Their mission was to promote the latest version of *America's Army*, a cutting-edge computer game created by U.S. military

itself as a recruitment aid, which had so far met with remarkable success from players, critics, and game industry professionals. A cunningly designed first-person tactical shooter (the same genre as the globally popular online antiterrorist fantasy game *Counter-Strike*) *America's Army* had been launched about a year earlier, made available to download for free from GoArmy.com, the branch's official recruiting Web site, on July 4, 2002. Those interested in playing could also visit their local Army recruiting center, and pick up a smartly packaged game disk, or find one in a number of different gaming magazines.

Downloaded over 2.5 million times in its first two months, *America's Army* quickly became a phenomenon in gaming circles, where carpal-tunneled true-believers chattered avidly about it for weeks, causing precipitous zigzags to descend down the message forums of innumerable Internet gamer haunts. No fewer than eight gaming publications bestowed best-of-show awards upon *America's Army* following its prerelease unveiling at E3 2002. One, the popular and snarky game-culture cartoon site Penny Arcade, declared it the "Best Misappropriation of Taxpayer Dollars Ever." "More than one million gamers have the Army to thank for a killer free video game," raved nerdcasters TechTV. By 2005, the number of registered users for *America's Army* exceeded five million. Suddenly, the Army was wicked cool. And indeed, the Army spent over \$7 million developing the game—so good a thing it was at the very least getting some decent PR out of it.

Like the traditional Army swag of T-shirts and bumper stickers—but much, much hipper—the game functioned as an innovative means of extending brand awareness, delivered in a highly detailed, highly addictive package. “What this means,” Major Chris Chambers, Deputy Director of the Army Games Project, explained to a reporter for *The Mac Observer*, “is that we make connections with Americans who might not have had a connection with the Army. We use the video game to make that connection. We know we’ve got a great game but the game is also great in terms of the story it tells about the soldiers that are in the Army and why they do things the way they do.” These connections included involvement in “grassroots” *America’s Army* tournaments held at gaming cafés, loft LAN parties (where gamers rig their computers together to create a small local network), conventions, and other locales, where the Army might send a recruiter to hang with the gamers, complete with an Army-logoed Hummer full of recruitment-related brochures and freebies in tow.

Traditional publicity stunts at E3 involve costumed characters, celebrity-geek lectures, giveaways, and “booth babes,” those female actress-models hired to staff displays for a typically estrogen-challenged crowd. In order to highlight the upcoming release of *America’s Army: Operations*, then the latest update to their already famous image product, the Army staged a maneuver called a “Battlefield Casualty Evacuation” on the convention floor of E3 2003. Around a theatrical mock-up of a

Middle Eastern urban setting, a team of soldiers rappelled from the ceiling onto the convention floor, picked up a uniformed mannequin from one part of the floor, and escorted it into the entrance of the fake building. The building displayed the red, white, and blue *America’s Army* logo at its top; an artful smattering of blood-colored paint on its left leg represented the dummy’s injury, along with some rips in its olive jumpsuit. Soldiers barked orders to one another in the course of the maneuver. “More bad guys, let’s roll it!” exhorted one as a team of six men carried the dummy off to imaginary safety, surround by the sounds of fake firefighting.

*Bad guys.* Today, the term has become standard soldierly slang for enemy combatants. It’s no doubt linguistically useful to have one short Anglo-Saxon name to encompass the confusing range of possible antagonists in a situation as complicated as the insurgency in Iraq, the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, and the greater war on terror. *Bad guys* could be Al Qaeda terrorists, Iraqi insurgents, urban looters, Taliban warlords, or the resisting elements of wherever else U.S. troops get dropped. Hearing it uttered in the context of E3, one can’t help but speculate whether this flexible appellation’s etymology springs from video games. For a generation of soldiers who came of age slaying a monstrous array of “bad guys” in *Doom*, *Tomb Raider*, *Resident Evil*, or *Halo*, such a transposition of terms from aliens to Iraqis would be natural, even subliminally comforting, in its simplicity, and puts a new spin on the concept

of “demonizing” the enemy. Depending on your point of view, it’s a use of language that’s either part of the horrors of war, or just a means to get the job done.

*America’s Army* itself employs the more official military lingo OPFOR (Opposing Forces) to designate enemies in the game. “OPFOR” works in much the same way as “bad guys,” quickly dehumanizing human targets with a bureaucratic-scientism, though without the boyish conceit. When networked teams fight one another inside *America’s Army*, an interesting thing occurs. Your opponents’ team appears as OPFOR to you (slightly swarthier than U.S. troops, and sometimes mustached), but your team in turn appears to be OPFORs from your opponents’ perspective. Thus players can only fight as members of the U.S. Army, or in later versions of the game, as non-American “indigenous forces.” In *America’s Army*, you always play on the right side.

Indeed, thanks to its Internet presence, many of those who joined up in *America’s Army* weren’t Americans. On one of the Frequently Asked Questions lists on the *America’s Army* Web site, a hypothetical reader inquires, “I am not in the United States, can I still play the game?” The provided answer: “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.”

### Keeping It Real

Of course, at E3 that day, there were no bad guys at all. Temporarily

blurring the lines between real and imaginary, live and virtual, was what *America’s Army*’s E3 stunt was all about. The Army created a fake battlefield with actual soldiers, who saved a mannequin by performing authentic maneuvers, all staged for cameras and journalists. The PR message was to convey the theme of *America’s Army*’s “realism”—a concept that had become a buzzword in post-2000 game design, as much for the Army as for Microsoft, Rockstar, Electronic Arts, or any other commercial game designer or publisher. Like the most successful selling points, “realism” was a slippery term. It could refer to the increasingly cinematic qualities showcased in games for next-gen console systems like the PlayStation 2 and Xbox, whose images boasted better graphics and more fluid movement than ever before available to a consumer product. It could be about how savvy and responsive the game’s AI was—meaning the intelligence-simulating programming that controls a player’s computerized opponents. Or it might concern all the myriad of artistic details that appeared to correlate to the sensorial clutter of nondigital existence: the background hum of traffic, garbage in the streets, or the muttered comments of AI-controlled supporting players.

For war games especially, it could refer to the veracity of any number of real-life elements: geographical environments based on real locations, accurate depictions of weapons that could only fire a certain amount of rounds before reloading, or ballistics that caused missiles to travel in arcs that replicated real-world physics. *America’s Army* offered all these components,

with an added hook lifted from the war in Afghanistan. At a time when images of this conflict were rare, *America's Army* offered privileged glimpses from the front lines, in the manner of old-time newsreels. Some of the backgrounds in the game were lifted from video footage of Afghan landscapes. Early in the game's history, its official site included a "Stories of Afghanistan" blog by an actual American soldier who, as the site stated after its launch in 2002, "is also capturing ideas, facts, and footage that may be used in future iterations of the *America's Army* game." All this at a time when news footage and images from Afghanistan were notably scarce in mainstream media; minds hungry for information about the war could be satisfied by virtual re-creations of reality, albeit reshaped according to the Army's PR objectives into an anonymous, vaguely central Asian theater of operations.

Stressing *America's Army's* connection to the real soldiers of the U.S. Army remained an important facet of the game. In later versions, *America's Army* offered a special online perk to real soldiers who played. If they entered in a valid military e-mail address, the players could have their online avatars wear the Army's yellow star logo, thus announcing to other players that they were actual U.S. soldiers. By early 2005, according to an Army Public Affairs Office press release, more than six thousand soldiers bore the star inside the *America's Army* world, where they could "provide actual Soldier stories to other gamers through an integrated player-chat tool."

In promotional trailers screened at E3 and distributed online, the designers of *America's Army* stressed how closely they worked with the real America's Army. Video montages showed how training grounds in the game had been closely modeled from real Army training grounds; in some shots, it is difficult to see the difference between the two. An important feature of the game is that players need to follow the Army's official Rules of Engagement. Shoot a fellow soldier, for example, and your character ends up in a tiny jail cell for a ten-minute stretch, unable to continue the game, as a woeful, mocking harmonica plays the blues in the background.

So, whether by grand intention or not, the Army was indeed fighting a strategic element of President Bush's War on Terror: the PR front, looking to win the hearts and minds of Americans. Though *America's Army* had essentially been concocted in-house by the military—graduate students and researchers at the Modeling, Virtual Environments, and Simulation (MOVES) Institute at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, had created it from the Unreal Engine, the basic programming guts inside many major commercial game franchises, from *Tom Clancy* to *Harry Potter*—its implementation was overseen by global advertising giant Leo Burnett Worldwide of Chicago, who also creates campaigns for such well-known brands as Nintendo, Philip Morris, Kellogg's, Heinz, Disney, and McDonald's. Leo Burnett had introduced the "Army of One" campaign in 2000, and beefed up the branch's Internet presence through an enhanced

recruitment Web site, online ads, and a reality-TV-style Web-based series about the one recruit's journey through boot camp. "If you're ready to stop playing games," read one of Leo Burnett's Web ads for the Army, atop an animated video game character, "we're ready for you." By 2005, the Army contracted Burnett for over \$200 million a year—the largest advertising contract for any American government agency.

*America's Army* became part of a number of national recruitment outreach efforts, including the Army College Tour, the GameRiot gaming tent at summer music festival Lollapalooza, and the Army's Takin' It To The Streets campaign, or "TTTS." According to the Pentagon's Defense Contracting Command site, TTTS was "designed to educate and inform African-American high school, college and workforce prospects about the U.S. Army and its many career opportunities" by touring a tricked-out Hummer to schools, malls, and events. Potential African-American recruits could sample *America's Army* in the TTTS "interactive arena," or shoot hoops with an actual basketball net soldered to the back of the customized military vehicle.

### The Target Shoots First

The rationale behind *America's Army* preceded 9/11, however. In 1999, the Army's recruitment figures were at a three-decade low. In response, the Pentagon increased recruitment budgets to an unprecedented \$2.2 billion a year, and Congress called for "aggressive, innovative experiments" to increase enrollment.

That same year, Lieutenant Colonel E. Casey Wardynski, an economics professor at West Point, suggested to the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel and its Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Military Manpower that a video game could be an effective means to reach the new Gen-Y pool of potential soldiers. Wardynski became the head of the Army Games Project, which led to the creation of *America's Army*.

If recruitment seemed important during the economic boom time of the Clinton years, when the Army had to compete with a healthy job market, it became an even more pressing issue after the 9/11 attacks. In 2003, when the Army rolled out its latest video game to the welcoming crowds at E3, the Bush administration and political analysts still predicted a worldwide conflict with no clear end in sight, and American forces were already occupying two far-flung nations. Never before had the U.S. fought a modern conflict of this scale without a draft. But somebody had to fight the global war on terror, and connecting the Army's image to something high-tech, fun, and hip could only help. Too messageless to be called propaganda, *America's Army* was simply any client's dream of a successful marketing campaign. It succeeded with one of the primary purposes of brand marketing: get the brand name out there. With millions of players registered worldwide, *America's Army* was certainly getting its eponymous underwriter's identity to the gaming world.

Before 2002, only a minority of gamers would have much paid attention to the goings-on of the real U.S. Army—at best, they

might maneuver their camo-clad fantasy counterparts through the latest computer-based spy thriller. But now, with the success of *America's Army*, the real America's Army had, for a moment, become video-game industry rock stars, at a time when that industry itself had taken a quantum leap into the mainstream consciousness and entertainment business credibility.

In 2002, video and computer games raked in a record-breaking \$28 billion in global sales, according to the Interactive Digital Software Association. As frequently noted in the subsequent slew of news items on the rise of the gaming industry, the Hollywood global box office earned less than \$21 billion that same year. The comparison may be slightly specious—any *Entertainment Weekly* reader knows that twenty-first-century movie studios make the bulk of their income on ancillaries like television, DVDs, and merchandise, not at ticket booths of attendance-dwindling theaters—but the potent symbolism of those figures proved more compelling than the cogency of their number-crunching. Video games had leaped up a level from juvenile, nerdy subculture to cool, happenin' mass culture, thanks to new generation of console games, the continued spread of PC titles, and a growing population of both younger and older gamers. As the kids who played Atari and Nintendo during the Reagan days grew up, they kept playing the newer games; their Gen-Y younger cousins were raised with the Internet and taught with software in elementary school, so they took to games even more easily.

Playing the media was nothing new for the American military, of course. For nearly a century, the Army and other U.S. service branches had worked with the major film, television, and radio corporations on projects to help boost the military image. The first Hollywood film to win Best Picture, a sky romance called *Wings*, was made with the cooperation of the Army's Air Corps. *Top Gun*, the 1986 Tom Cruise aerial vehicle-produced with the assistance of the Navy—reportedly increased enrollment by a ridiculous 400 percent; the Navy even set up recruiter tables at movie theaters once they realized what was happening. But *America's Army* was something different: this game had been almost completely developed and produced within the military itself, not by a corporate partner. It was as if, in 1920, the Army had marched into the small but booming town of Hollywood, set up its own studio, and produced one of the top-grossing motion pictures of the year. (And by fall of 2005, *America's Army* ultimately became a commercial product itself, when French game developers Ubisoft released a for-sale console version for Playstation 2 and Xbox.)

But this online blockbuster wasn't produced to sell tickets or DVDs. 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 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*? For decades, parents and congressmen had wrung their hands over the ideas that video games were teaching our kids to kill. Now, the government appeared to promote that same fact in the cause of national security.

A "Parents' Info" section of the *America's Army* site offers an attempt to assuage such concerns. "With the passage of time," it calmly explains, "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." Long after the days of World War II and universal service, the military experience was no longer a shared cultural experience for Americans, and the generations raised post-Vietnam could just as well have parents who rejected military culture wholesale, or at best ignored its existence. *America's Army* was a means to reinvade American popular

culture, using a form of media that was likely to bypass parents altogether.

### Special Forces at Work

*America's Army* came at a time when the real Army, and all the branches of the U.S. armed forces, were undergoing Transformation. "Transformation" was the buzzword for a full-scale rethinking of the entire American military: an extreme technological upgrade for the twenty-first century. Key concepts were "jointness," or the cooperation across different branches of the military, and "networking," which referred to the need to connect all forces by advanced communications and information systems. Military leaders wanted America's armed forces to become more mobile, lightweight, and flexible, able to be deployed at a moment's notice anywhere on the globe.

As a philosophical vision, transformation coincided with a new geopolitical reality. Gone was the old dyadic Cold War clash of the superpowers, in which the American military trained to anticipate such conventional hypothetical scenarios as Soviet tanks rolling into California or MiGs blitzing Boston. In an imminent future of rogue states and terrorist operatives, "asymmetrical warfare" between forces with widely different capabilities would become the norm. For this new global scenario, the military needed quick-thinking, adaptable war fighters. These wars would be fought block by block in city streets; for the most part, there would be no front lines, and

electronic networks could provide the cohesive chain of command with more scattered groups of soldiers.

Quick-thinking individuals who effortlessly operated inside high-tech communications systems? Sounds like your average video game player might be a match.

After 9/11, as American culture shifted into new arrangements of patriotism, paranoia, and anxiety, the country's military and political power became central topics of debate and consternation in ways they had not been before. From live embedded reporting, to digital photography at Abu Ghraib, to Web sites displaying the caskets of American casualties, the question of how new media fit into the new world order became an important and contested element of how this war would be seen Stateside.

An October 2002 feature on *America's Army* by Salon.com columnist Wagner James Au is illustrative of this debate. Lauding *America's Army* as an important and necessary means to battle terrorism, he compares the game to Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series of government films produced during World War II. For the war on terror—"which," Au writes, "if we parse out the diplomatic niceties, really means a war on Islamist militants, and the nations who back them (beginning with Saddam's Iraq)"—*America's Army* is "*Why We Fight* for the digital generation." Inspired by hawkish thinkers like Christopher Hitchens, Au waxes poetic on the potentials that *America's Army* embodies—how the future of American policy can merge an aggressive global military stance with the needs of homeland

security, all predicated on the country's redoubtable technological prowess. You can see them in the field, in subsequent years," Au writes, "dedicated young men and women, their weapons merged into an information network that enables them to cut out with surgical precision the cancer that threatens us all—heat-packing humanitarians who leave the innocent unscathed, and full of renewed hope. In their wake, democracy, literacy and an Arab world restored to full flower, as it deserves to be, an equal in a burgeoning global culture, defended on all fronts by the best of the digital generation."

This paradoxical vision of "heat-packing humanitarians" is shared by *America's Army's* marketing. In 2003, the Department of Defense wanted to increase the number of Special Forces soldiers. Subsequently, *America's Army: Special Forces* was released to help with this recruiting mission. A promotional video for *America's Army: Special Forces*, made available on its Web site and distributed to online gaming publications, verges on being in itself a recruitment ad. Mixing real-life video footage of Special Forces soldiers with images from the new edition of *America's Army*, the spot displays a series of titles that concatenate into a patriotic hymn of adverb-poetry, set to a booming orchestral score. Like much marketing copy, whether designed to sell a soft drink, an election, or a war, it is filled with emotional, empty language, what Sinclair Lewis called "noble but slippery abstractions." Each line holds at least two meanings: does it refer to the real world, the game world, or maybe both?

*As long as there are forces that threaten the promise of freedom  
 America's Army stands ready  
 And in the vanguard you will find  
 Special Forces  
 The Army's quiet professionals  
 Qualified for independent action  
 Experts in unconventional warfare  
 Help liberate the oppressed  
 Become one of America's Green Berets  
 And subdue the enemies of freedom  
 America's Army  
 Special Forces  
 Empower Yourself  
 Defend Freedom*

### Understanding the Game

*America's Army* is an utterly contemporary phenomenon: a cutting-edge technological artifact, resonant with the sociopolitical debates surrounding the War on Terror, in a form of pop culture that has just hit its tipping point. It is part of a larger process of how American military culture has been merging with entertainment, even as the geopolitical events subsequent to September 11 have reintroduced the question of American military power back into everyday conversation. And it's not alone in portraying contemporary war through a game: in the last five years, games based on real wars have become bigger than ever before.

MIT's Henry Jenkins, who had studied the effects of video

games for over a decade, has observed that video games have taken on a peculiarly resonant role in how we are thinking about war now. "The political importance of games has been demonstrated again and again as groups struggle over how—and whether—the Iraq War should be represented through games," he writes. "The military uses games to recruit and train soldiers; the antiwar movement uses games to express the futility of the current conflict; the pro-war movement uses games to express its anger against the terrorists; the news media use games to explain military strategy; and the commercial games industry wants to test the waters to see if we are going to play war games the same way other generations watched war movies."

What does it mean to see war as a video game? Like other forms of art and entertainment, video games engage us by providing fantasies about the world. In a time of real war, games based on military themes begin to take on a more serious aura. For many, creating or even playing a game that promises a realistic experience of war verges on an inconsiderate lack of respect at best, or a manipulative attempt at propaganda at worst. Indeed, the very notion that war might be played as a game can offend, regardless of political import. "The severe discrepancy in the scale of consequence makes the comparison of war and gaming nearly obscene," Elaine Scarry observes in *The Body in Pain*, "the analogy either trivializing the one or, conversely, attributing to the other a weight of motive and consequence it cannot bear." Indeed, as *America's Army* gave way to a crowd of

commercial video games based on real conflicts, journalistic and academic essays on what it all meant became familiar features in newspapers, journals, and online publications.

But this twenty-first-century phenomenon connects to a deeper history of how games and war have been linked since the dawn of recorded time. For Scarry also notes that “even in a relatively confined war the events are happening on a scale far beyond visual or sensory experience and thus routinely necessitate the invocation of models, maps, and analogues,” and furthermore attests to “the existence of the descriptive convention, richly elaborated by strategists, historians, political philosophers, and perhaps all who have occasion to speak about war, of conceiving of two national armed forces as two colossal single combatants.” Despite any squeamishness moderns may feel at the connections between war and games, links between the two concepts and practices run far back into the oldest records of civilization.

Long before video games existed, there were ancient games that simulated war, with fantasies and legends surrounding them of how these games might be used to wage real battle. In the dawn of the modern age, these fantasies became true, as a new emphasis on the logic of strategy transformed the waging of wars. In turn, the merger of technological developments with strategic and tactical needs inspired the birth of the computer. Videogames arose within the new hacker cultures surrounding the computer, when they were still heavily subsidized by military funds. Once video games became an industry of their own,

they in turn fed innovations back into the world of defense. Lately, this sporadic, even accidental interplay between video games and war has been encouraged and fostered in a deliberate manner, by a new generation of visionary thinkers from the worlds of technology, entertainment, and the military.

At the same time, since 9/11, commercial game designers are churning out a new generation of realistic games based on historical wars. Now gamers can go to their local store, pick up a virtual reenactment of the Vietnam War, World War II, the Gulf War, or even something that approximates the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unsatisfied with the versions of history that these commercial games invoke, artists, hobbyists, and activists are building their own games in response, creating a new means of cultural critique via gaming.

This book is an attempt to tell this story: to show how the development of video games has at many points in its history intersected with the American military needs, including a chunk of history that is being written right now. Consider this book a history of warfare told through video games, or a history of video games told through war. In many ways it is a history of ideas and fantasies, but dreams that became real through play. It is about how video games are accidental products of war, but have in turn become ways to think about war. In many ways it is a story unique to our time, but as history shows, we have played this game before.