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## Weapons of mass distraction

A new breed of computer games is teaching today's teenagers how to wage, and win, the war against terror.

By **Wagner James Au**



Oct. 4, 2002 | You can never be the enemy, in America's Army. In this popular new game of multiplayer combat, you can log on as a U.S. soldier who must, say, invade a terrorist camp -- but if someone logs onto the opposing side, to fight you, he also plays as a U.S. soldier. It's just that from his point of view, he's *defending* a U.S. camp from terrorist invasion. You will always see yourself and your squad in U.S. Army uniforms, wielding U.S. weapons. Everyone who signs up to fight, then, fights as an American.

The game has become so popular with U.S. troops and Pentagon brass, says Lt. Colonel Wardynski, director of the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis and the man who initially conceived it, that there's even talk of shipping computers to Afghanistan, so soldiers can play it from there.

"I had high hopes that it would be something pretty hot," says Capt. Jason Amerine, an Army officer who recently served in Afghanistan. A longtime gamer who counts Command & Conquer and Rainbow Six among his favorites, Amerine was not disappointed. America's Army was so realistic that for the first time, he says, "I was actually looking at it more as a soldier than even a gamer -- but it happened to be good in both ways."

But America's Army's real purpose is to be a recruiting tool, which is why the game has been made freely [available](#) since July, with new units and missions added on a regular basis. (It'll be out on CD in recruitment offices soon.) And while its impact on recruitment won't be evident until December, when July enlistees arrive for basic training, early signs, say Army spokesmen, are promising: 28 percent of Americasarmy.com visitors click through to [goarmy.com](#), the government's official recruitment site.

The Army claims that 470,000 people have the game or are playing it now. But there is some skepticism as to whether such success will translate into more recruits. "I don't believe it is any more likely to do this than a good book or a good movie," says Henry Jenkins, director of MIT's Comparative Media Studies Program. But in terms of cost effectiveness, that might be enough. Compared to investment in traditional recruiting ads in other media, says Mike Zyda, director of the [MOVES Institute](#), the Navy's Monterey, Calif., virtual-reality think tank that developed the project with Wardynski, the game is much cheaper.

America's Army is the first game to make recruitment an explicit goal, but it snugly fits into a subgenre of games already in vogue: the "tactical shooter," a first-person shooter that emphasizes realistic, squad-based combat. The realism factor means these games are often modeled on recent events. Next month comes NovaLogic's Delta Force: Black Hawk Down, adapted from journalist Mark Bowden's 1999 [book](#) and from Ridley Scott's [film](#) of the same name, which reenact the brutal firefight between U.S. soldiers and Somalia's bin Laden-funded militants in 1993. Before that, gamers will get to replay an earlier battle: SCI/Gotham Games' [Conflict Desert Storm](#) is loosely based on covert operations against the Iraqi defense infrastructure conducted by American Delta Force and British SAS commandos, in the days leading up to the Gulf War.

Given the warlike tenor of current events, it's not surprising that America's Army has taken fire from its left flank. An [article](#) on the liberal-left Web site Tompaine.com called it "propaganda," part of "America's escalating militarization -- designed by the Bush administration," while the Nation's Web site recently [fretted](#) over the "political implications" of its gameplay: "nonstop Army cheerleading, with frequent terrorist and Arab bashing ... What better way to reinforce [the war on terrorism's] legitimacy?"

But the squeamishness some lefty critics are expressing over America's Army only demonstrates how many people are still too incurious or too craven to acknowledge the brutal reality the terrorist threat currently poses. Even now, antiwar advocates prattle on about the "root causes of

terrorism" -- when the only meaningful cause spurring on al-Qaida and their like is, in [Christopher Hitchens'](#) clumsily apt coinage, Islamofascism: a well-organized assault on Western democracy and values (and a [close nephew](#) to the original German variation).

Meanwhile, the spiritual sons of [Sayyid Qutb](#), the Egyptian intellectual who turned his hatred for American secularism, Jews and sexually liberated women into a galvanizing cry for totalitarian theocracy, are still active and influential, even now sending out [calls](#) for world domination.

During World War II, as the country girded for battle, director Frank Capra created a series of films to instruct the Army's soldiers. A classic of righteous propaganda, "[Why We Fight](#)" laid out for the greatest generation who the enemy was, and why they must be defeated. If the presentation was simplistic, its message was irrefutable, and comprehensible to the least literate recruit.

A contemporary version of "Why We Fight" seems unlikely to emerge from Hollywood, outside of a rush of thrillers with stock terrorist villains. But the need for one now is just as urgent, even as al-Qaida is whittled away by gun battles in Karachi or raids on a Buffalo suburb. The war on terror -- which, 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](#)) -- must be fought, and over a campaign of many years, decisively won.

In that regard, America's Army and Delta Force: Black Hawk Down are the "Why We Fight" for the digital generation. Though not explicitly doctrinaire in an ideological sense, by showing the very young *how* we fight, applying the moral application of lethal force on behalf of liberal values, these games create the wartime culture that is so desperately needed now. One hopes they'll inspire the best gamers to consider a career of military service, while preparing them for the battles to come. There are even indications that playing these games provide useful experience for when they do go into real-world combat. All to the good: it will aid them in the war to conclude what is truly the unfinished business of 1945.

The first-person shooter was invented roughly a year after the Gulf War. In 1992's Wolfenstein 3D, you mowed your way through a Nazi stronghold, gunning down poorly animated waves of blobby fascists. (They yelped, "Mein leiben!" when you shot them.) After that game and Doom, its follow-up, the archetypal antagonist for the FPS was pretty much set: Nazis, aliens or some variation of either. And why not? The Cold War was over -- who was left to fight in the real world?

That there was a larger geopolitical context to 1993's firefight in Mogadishu would remain obscure, even after Bowden's 1999 book -- even after a grandiose fanatic began taking credit for arming the militants who drove the Americans from Somalia. For the rest of the decade, it seemed as if there would be no other real-world enemies worth depicting -- certainly not for killing over and over. Subsequent shooters like Unreal and the Quake series made their aliens bigger, and their weapons more absurdly elephantine. In a decade of peace and excess, this looked like grotesque overcompensation to many, including [myself](#): all that firepower directed at enemies who didn't exist, by bloodthirsty adolescents who'd never see genuine violence in their entire lives.

Half-Life (1998) also featured aliens, but emphasized realistic, contemporary weapons; many gamers counted as their favorite opponents not the spookey invaders from another dimension, but the artificial-intelligence-driven commandos who fought you with coordinated precision at the beginning of the game. Counterstrike, a fan-made, custom modification (or [mod](#)) of Half-Life, ran with the human element, to create the most popular multiplayer game of all time. Millions still gather on thousands of servers worldwide, taking on the role of terrorist, or a special forces operative out to stop them.

Rainbow Six and other Tom Clancy-derived franchises sold well, as did NovaLogic's Delta Force series, but it was probably the growing popularity of Counterstrike that fostered the current audience for tactical shooters. And while African bodies were removed from the rubble of the double strike on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1999, and lifeless sailors were lifted from the thrashed hull of the USS Cole in 2000, Counterstrike went from free mod to retail game, and kept right on drawing fans. But it was the gameplay, not hatred of terrorism, that made it a phenomenon. "Tactical games take the best elements of first-person shooters and add in accuracy and teamwork," says Jason Bergman, news editor at [Shacknews.com](#). "You simply can not do well in a tactical shooter without teamwork."

Teamwork is also key in America's Army, as a strategy and as a value Col. Wardynski wants to impart. Notwithstanding how some misinterpret the Army's new "Army of One" slogan, says Wardynski. "What [that] really means is that the Army is a lot of individuals put together so that it adds up to more than the sum of the parts -- and the game is sort of designed to capture it as well."

Some have dismissed the game as a recruiting gimmick. But the weight that the Army puts on this project might be better gauged by looking at the other duties that fall to the colonel -- while he tracks the download stats for America's Army, for example, Wardynski also handles personnel and funding issues for Afghanistan's very fragile, very real army. This is not the brainchild of a geeky corporal in Pentagon P.R.

As it turns out, the priority placed on America's Army is due to its integral place in "transformation," a new American military doctrine that aims to fully upgrade the Army into an information-driven force. "Mr. Rumsfeld talks about it a lot," says Wardynski. Starting next year, they'll begin to implement helmet-mounted, heads-up displays [HUDS] that will provide the next iteration of infantrymen with real-time data on terrain, enemy concentrations and so on -- "and it looks a lot like a game," according to Wardynski.

While writing a dissertation at the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, Calif., Wardynski would return home to watch his kids play games like Mechwarrior, and he was impressed by their ability to process multiple data streams from several HUDs at once. "The kinds of kids that are very comfortable with lots of information coming at them in visual presentations will feel very comfortable with our transformed Army," he says. This was the seed to America's Army; the funding to create it was approved in the final year of the tech-friendly Clinton administration.

So Wardynski and MOVES were already developing the game when American Airlines Flight 77 went plowing through the northwest side of the Pentagon. Among the 189 killed was Wardynski's boss.

Up to then, the designers were leaning more toward narco-terrorists or drug traffickers as the opposing combatants. "After 9/11 it was pretty clear the United States was at war, and we do have real enemies out there," says Wardynski.

When I ask Wardynski about the theories of Lt. Col. David Grossman, his "Oh, yeah" is mixed with a barely audible sigh. After the Columbine massacre, Grossman enjoyed momentary prominence for his theories of "[killology](#)."

By playing first-person shooters, Grossman asserted to "60 Minutes," Clinton and anyone else who'd listen, kids were training in a "murder simulator," being taught -- as the Army does in boot camp -- to deliver expert kill shots on reflex.

So does this mean America's Army is rearing the next generation of serial killers?

"We brought in Ph.D.s in behavioral science, political science, Army experts in training, and I have yet to find one who [subscribes to these theories]," says Wardynski. (Grossman did not respond to repeated requests for an interview.)

In a similar vein, I challenge Wardynski on the game's dearth of on-screen gore. (Hits are rendered with a prim red dot, as if the weapons were shooting out magic markers.) Doesn't that sanitize the gruesome aftermath of an M-16 hit? Gore would disqualify the game from getting the intended Teen rating from the ratings board, he responds -- and besides, "We respect our audience [enough] to know that if we don't have that in our game, they're not dumb and they'll still know that [gore is] part of combat."

Even with terrorism designated as the primary enemy, care was taken to keep scenarios and combatants as generic as possible, says Wardynski. While his men in Kabul are conducting subject-matter reviews, so that future missions can be based on active units in Afghanistan, no nation or people is identified in its depiction of terrorists: "There's some blond white guys, there's some skinheads ... so it's not like we settled on any ethnic group or anything like that." (This despite the Nation's dishonest claim that the game encourages "Arab bashing.")

There's nothing generic about the opponents in NovaLogic's Delta Force: Black Hawk Down, who fire at you from turret-mounted jeeps, or from the rooftops in the game's vividly rendered, 3-D Mogadishu. They unmistakably resemble the Somali militants who took the lives of 18 U.S. soldiers, after downing two troop choppers with rocket-propelled grenades -- an operation orchestrated in part by Qutb disciple and bin Laden consigliere [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#).

The United States' subsequent withdrawal from Somalia was a milestone in the al-Qaida narrative, one more victory that proved that atrocity would be met with retreat -- eventually making their designs on New York and Washington seem like an inevitable next step.

For unrelated reasons, the game generated some controversy, especially after Mark Bowden refused to have anything to do with NovaLogic's project. "I think there's a substantial difference between a work of art, which I consider a film to be, even a Hollywood film, [and a game]," Bowden explains, reached while on a train headed for Manhattan. For him, "A game is a game. It's something that you play. And this story is about real people, and I know many of the family members who lost brothers and husbands and sons in that battle. And I did not want to be part of something that turns it into a game."

"Mr. Bowden is certainly entitled to his opinion," NovaLogic producer Wes Eckhart e-mails me later, "but who is he to judge what a work of art is, or even what an acceptable form of entertainment is?" Eckhart says that NovaLogic hired two Rangers who fought and were wounded in the conflict as the game's subject-matter experts, and on their request, will donate some of the profits from the game to charities that will benefit those families.

"[Games] have a certain amount of potential value in making someone interested in history or in the military or how the military operates," says Bowden. "It has that kind of educational value." But he's skeptical their utility may extend beyond that. "In terms of preparing someone for the actual experience of combat, particularly infantry soldiers, I just regard that as really unlikely. Because I think the essential element in real combat is terror. And I don't believe you can re-create actual terror in a video game. It's a game; you can turn it off whenever you want to."

I ask Bowden how many games he's actually played. "I think I got pretty good at Super Breakout, but that's pretty much the extent of my video game experience." He readily agrees that declining NovaLogic was a visceral reaction to the medium, though "I have no personal grudge against video games; my kids play them all the time."

Bowden's reputation as a journalist of military and international affairs is without peer -- his stunning [Atlantic Monthly profile of Saddam Hussein](#) is a tour de force -- so it's understandable if he's not also versed on the latest in interactive entertainment. If anything, his wariness says more about the distance between generations, and the mediums they call their culture.

The tactical shooter is already a tool in the military's regimen. "Indeed," says Eckhart, "a modified version of NovaLogic's Delta Force is used for training plebes in their first year at West Point. The software helps teach principles of maneuver, elements of combat power and land navigation."

Capt. Jason Amerine, a West Point grad who recently served in Afghanistan, agrees with Eckhart's observations on the value of games as training tools. "The Army taught me all the skills I have, but at the same time, a lot of these first-person shooters, I think that they do tend to kind of get you in the right mind-set for some of the situations you might encounter in real life," he says. He compares them to the battle drills of his field training. "When you're sitting there in some of these multiplayer shootouts, engaging your opposition, I think that it does kind of condition you a little bit to know what to look for. You get those visual cues down, I think is the best way to put it."

Capt. Amerine is a Green Beret with Fifth Special Forces Group. And when Defense Secretary Rumsfeld demanded summary "boots on the ground," two of the first were Amerine's. Scarcely a month after 9/11, his A-Team detachment was airdropped deep within Taliban-controlled territory, to link up with then-tribal leader Hamid Karzai and his lightly armed band of highly irregulars. Armed with an improvised arsenal of satellite phones, Karzai's charisma and the best air support after the wrath of God, Amerine's detachment and Karzai's freedom fighters rode in motley caravan from village to village, fomenting rebellion, gathering a makeshift militia, until they reached and took the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar. (A friendly fire incident blew out Amerine's left ear and battered his leg with shrapnel, removing him from action days before Karzai marched into the city.)

Kandahar's fall was a turning point in the conflict, but Amerine names as his proudest moment an earlier engagement, when he and his men deployed on a ridgeline above the small town of Tarin Kot. Kandahar's leaders had sent 500 heavily armed Taliban and al-Qaida fighters rumbling to the town in 80 vehicles, with orders to slaughter its civilians, sparing neither woman nor child (retribution for driving out their Islamist masters, days earlier). From the height of the ridgeline, Amerine and his men turned a tripod-mounted laser onto the convoy, to guide in the F-18's that were arcing into position, high above. (Amerine's unit was eventually forced to return to town, and continued directing the airstrike from there -- even as village children laughed and scampered at their feet.) The Taliban murder party was still barreling through a narrow valley, closing on Tarin Kot, when the laser-led bombs found them. And discounting the battered survivors who fled back to Kandahar, killed them all. The town was secure.

At the moment, though, Amerine is still trying to secure a copy of [Battlefied 1942](#), a new tactical shooter set in various World War II theaters. "Babbages messed up and gave away the copy that I pre-ordered," he says, "but I should be picking that up I think tomorrow." He speaks with an easy, placid drawl that belies the ferocity of his chosen profession -- but seems more reflective of a childhood spent on Oahu. Recovering from his wartime injuries, he's now earning a master's, in preparation for lectureship duties at West Point.

When he first got a chance to play America's Army, "I was really curious what the Army was going to come up with," says Amerine. "Knowing Col. Wardynski and the people who were working on the game, I had high hopes that it would be something pretty hot." A longtime gamer who counts Command and Conquer and Rainbow Six among his favorites, Amerine was not disappointed. It was so realistic that for the first time, he says, "I was actually looking at it more as a soldier than even a gamer -- but it happened to be good in both ways."

And what's impressed him, playing America's Army, is how many competitors he's fought who come to the game without his experience base, but learn usable tactics on the fly: "You could tell in some cases you have significantly younger people, probably junior high or so ... they'd be saying things back and forth that indicated to me that this was sort of an extension of guys who grew up on Rainbow Six and other first-person shooters ... the techniques they would use just by figuring it out would end up being very similar to what we would do in real life." He found himself up against kids staggering their formations, using smoke to cover their approach, closing on the enemy with fire and maneuver, individual movement techniques (IMT) -- in short, acquiring through gameplay knowledge that was once available only through military training.

At one point during his tour in Afghanistan, Amerine was on a ridge, outside a town where Taliban gunmen had pinned down Karzai's men with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades.

"So I got on up there and started shooting to try and get my guerrillas into the fight ... [T]he Taliban were all shooting AK-47s and RPGs, and with my M4 and an ACOG, I was able to outshoot the Taliban. Especially at 300 meters, they weren't very good shots. The RPG was getting close," Amerine deadpans, "but I got him before he could get me."

Emboldened, the freedom fighters returned to the fray, and helped Amerine drive the Taliban from the village. But during the firefight, Capt. Amerine had an odd thought. "It was kind of funny, because it was sort of like, Well, this is just like what I did on my computer, I guess." Having reenacted similar scenarios so many times, he found these games had helped prepare him for that moment, when he came up firing. "It definitely made it easier ... in a lot of ways it was similar to what you would see if you were playing a sniper in the original Delta Force, for example."

And apart from his concern for the safety of Karzai and the soldiers, Amerine describes the experience as, well, fun. "It was exhilarating, the actual going through it, bullets whizzing over your head, bombs blowing up. But as far as taking human life, that's a horrible aspect of the job -- but you know, they were trying to do the same thing to us, and we got them first."

And about here is where the similarities end. "When I was in a shootout with the Taliban, it occurred to me that I had to stick my head up to shoot at them and I might very well catch a bullet between my eyes ... and I was aware of it, but I knew what I had to do. That's not something you can re-create in a computer game, the fact that your life is in danger. And also, when you actually have to see the results of what you did, when you go over and you see the enemies that've fallen by your hand, that's something else you can't re-create."

But even here, developers are seeking to convey, if not the horror, the strategic implications of violence. With America's military dominance never in doubt, victory now depends not just on winning the battle, but on preventing as much as possible the friendly fire and civilian casualties that

would turn domestic and world opinion against the action. So in "America's Army," the server keeps tabs on your fealty to the military's strict rules of engagement (ROE) -- crossing them too often gets you removed from the game, thrown into a virtual depiction of Fort Leavenworth prison. (Multiplayer games are usually anarchic, free-fire zones.)

And in the single-player game of Black Hawk Down, says NovaLogic's Wes Eckhart, "In most cases, killing civilians or noncombatants will result in the player losing the mission and being forced to replay it." Not only that, many of the game's missions emphasize the U.S. effort to protect the United Nations' relief effort to the warlord-enforced famine that was devastating Somalia.

This overall shift of focus is a positive development for the genre, says MIT's Henry Jenkins. "It seems to me that they may be making some interesting steps toward achieving the 'meaningful violence' I have been advocating," he says, "heightening the emphasis on choice and consequence."

For Amerine, it's an essential element to "America's Army" working as an educational tool for gamers who'd consider a place in the military: "On the one hand, we're becoming extremely technologically advanced; nobody can be computer illiterate in the Army anymore," he says. "The other aspect to it, though, the human aspect, that's the part that we also need to make sure we never lose sight of, because we can never forget our humanity. We still need to remember we're out there using very lethal weapons; often we're in close proximity to noncombatants, to civilians, and [we must] protect their lives as well as we can while we're attempting to engage the enemy."

Fortunately, Amerine suspects that "America's Army" gamers who do end up in the recruitment office will have a reservoir of experience to draw from. "I don't think that they'll really quite appreciate a lot of the lessons until they do it for real, and then they can kind of make the mental leap to put [the gameplay and real-world experience] together."

For his own part, as he heals and continues his education, his only regret is that he's not part of the latest deployment. "All my friends, all my soldiers, they could be invading Iraq soon, and I'm going to college -- that's kinda hard to take ... I'd want to be out there sharing the risk with everybody rather than ... watching it on the news."

When asked about Hamid Karzai's recent narrow escape from an assassination attempt, he speaks of his friend the president of Afghanistan as of a fellow soldier. "He's an incredibly brave man who's truly a patriot for his country. He knew from the beginning that there'd be people trying to assassinate him ... So this really doesn't change anything -- he's still going to work hard to bring stability to his country, and he'll just keep dodging the bullets as he tries to do so."

He might soon act as an advisor to future expansions of "America's Army," so I ask him what kind of missions he'd imagine, if the designers were to implement, say, laser-guided airstrikes.

"You can lase a target from several kilometers away," he says. "So one thing might be you have an observation post, you have a laser setup, where you're trying to lase the enemy, and you're trying to protect your position as enemy forces are coming right up on you."

It occurs to me that such a mission would resemble what Amerine did in his finest hour, when he turned a beam of light on the would-be butchers of women and children, and brought down the thunder.

When Sayyid Qutb came to America, he reportedly admired the country's scientific and technological achievements, but seethed with contempt for its obsession with "entertainment, or what they call in their language, 'fun.'" But perhaps Western culture is poised for the ultimate in ironic revenge -- America's Army heralds the day when computer gaming's synthesis of entertainment and technology will become the greatest threat to the terrorist menace, as it continues its struggle to carry out the jihad of Qutb and bin Laden's fevered longings.

"We're going to continue to be out hunting for terrorists," Amerine promises me, "and doing what we can to support the Arab world." When I thank him for what he did in Afghanistan -- helping uproot the al-Qaida network, liberating a brutalized people, stuff like that -- Amerine answers cheerily, "I really had fun doing it."

In his early 30s, Amerine is among the first generation of soldiers to grow up with computer games. It's not hard to have confidence in the soldiers who'll come after him, kids in their early teens who are already giving him a hard fight, online. You can see them in the field, in subsequent years, 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.

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