

# WEAPONIZING PLAY

## Hugh Davies

This paper looks at the history of overlap between games and warfare and discusses the ethics and implications of militarizing today's most popular entertainment format.

The relationship between military and gaming is not new. Long before the recent evolutions in digital technologies, there existed games that simulated war and attracted the eye of competitive gamers and soldiers alike. Numerous ancient vases depict the Trojan War heroes Ajax and Achilles hunched over a small table, playing the popular war game *Petteia*, both players gloriously attired in full battle armor. Some sources believe this image refers to a passage in a now lost epic poem in which the warriors become so immersed in the game, indeed "as fixated as a pair of slackers at an Xbox" that they forget to join the real battle now underway. [1]

There are many other examples. The ancient East Asian game of *Go* and its close cousin *Chess* are both visibly abstracted from warfare. The Prussian game *Kriegsspiel* was credited for training officers in the art of battle before they went on to defeat Napoleon. The reported success of this intricate map based game played no small part in the widespread use of topographical maps and game mechanics in planning and strategizing battles in Europe and the Pacific in the Second World War. Immersive battle experiences that were applicable in both war and play were also popular among men and boys alike in the early Twentieth Century. H.G. Wells published two books on the subject: *Floor Games* (1911) and *Little Wars* (1913), both offering children and adults extensive rules and strategies for war-gaming with miniatures. [2]

The invention of video games in the 1960s heralded a new era. These entertainment devices had evolved through the hacking of radar screens from the Second World War, but by the late 1970s, sophisticated computer games were being used as military training tools. Most notable was *Army Battlezone*, a game that instructed soldiers in the use of the then new Bradley Fighting Vehicle. Early 1980s cinema introduced the weaponization of play in the science fiction adventures; such as *War Games* (1983) and *The Last Starfighter* (1984). The future military role of game entertainment was also signaled by President Ronald Regan who delivered a speech at Walt Disney's EPCOT Centre in 1983 declaring: "I recently learned something quite interesting about video games. Many young people have developed incredible hand-eye coordination in playing these games. The Air Force believes these kids will be outstanding pilots should they fly our jets." [3] These words were recalled following 9/11 when it was reported that the pilots who flew the planes into the World Trade Center had planned and trained for the attacks using Microsoft Flight Simulator. [4]

A new precedent occurred in 2002 with *America's Army*, the freely downloadable, teen-pitched entertainment and training package. *America's Army* is not stand alone, it comes with a swag of teen-targeted merchandise – including comics, t-shirts, action figures and posters – extending the brand awareness of the US Military and forging new connections between the Armed Forces and the pool of gamers it sees as potential recruits. [5]

These connections included involvement in 'grassroots' *America's Army* tournaments held at gaming cafes, 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 out with the gamers, complete with an Army-logoed Hummer full of recruitment-related brochures and freebies in tow. [6]

The US Army has reported that through these new engagement tactics it has caught the interest of a whole new generation of potential soldiers, who it is simultaneously attracting and training through the *America's Army* game. News of the game's success has spread. Earlier in 2011, it was reported that the People's Liberation Army of China have teamed up with Wuxi Giant Interactive Group to create their own military video game which pits Chinese soldiers against their main opposition, the US Army. The proudly named *Glorious Mission* computer game training tool has affronted the American Military by adopting their own strategy of engaging potential soldiers through video gameplay. [7]

It is easy to understand, given this selective history, how the discussion about video games often becomes a discussion about war and violence, this paper, however, has deliberately focused on militarized games. Games themselves do not promote war, but offer play, an experience so intrinsic to nature that even animals participate in it. Both games, and play, are more universal and communicative than spoken language. Furthermore, the fact that entertainment experiences are co-opted for purposes other than entertainment is certainly not limited to games. Adapting of the functions of games for purposes other than the enjoyment of play has now become a popular field unto itself known as 'gamification.' The concept of gamification, of adding a gaming component to a non-traditional medium, thereby creating brand loyalty and encouraging consumer engagement by integrating products and concepts with player's lives in meaningful ways, has become a staple of the advertising world. [8]

There are significant criticisms of gamification. Some dismiss it as a buzzword that re-brands old ideas and practices towards a new corporate fad. Others condemn it for its over simplification of game mechanics and player motivations. While there are numerous complaints of the field, I claim that the significant conundrum of gamification is that its emphasis is not on fun, but on altering perceptions through fun. Whether gamified products and services (also referred to as funware) achieve this ambition is questionable, but the very ambition is concerning enough. What gamification purports to instill in the mind of the player is ideology. It offers emotion hacking or love bombing to potential customers/players of the highest bidder, and, as is often the case with games, we may find the highest bidder is the military. However, as has repeatedly happened before, the concerns about the weaponization of games have been raised only when military forces other than our own have adopted the strategy. Recent claims about Al Qaeda's gamification of Jihad have suddenly brought up questions that should have been raised long ago about the manipulative potential of gamification. Again, it is the reputation of games that suffers. [9]

Games have a strong history of involvement with war, but they have a stronger history of demonization. They are regularly accused of causing distraction, violence and inactivity, despite each of these states being contradictory of the other; furthermore, games are often, as in the ancient example first used in this paper, accused of all three simultaneously. While the well meaning attempts to develop Serious Games have tackled some of these criticisms, with numerous successes, the result of putting games to use also appears to be back firing. Perhaps if we cannot find appropriate ways to put games to work, it is best to leave them as entertainment.

## **References and Notes:**

1. Ed Halter, *From Sun Tzu to Xbox: War and Video Games* (Thunders Mouth Press: New York, 2006).
2. A detailed overview of the history of overlap of war and games is mapped in Ed Halter's 2006 study *From Sun Tzu To Xbox, War and Video Games* (Thunders Mouth Press: New York, 2006).
3. Ed Halter, *From Sun Tzu to Xbox: War and Video Games*.
4. Kobina Amoakwa, "The flight software that 'trains the terrorists,'" *Daily Mail*, 25 July 2005, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-357006/The-flight-software-trains-terrorists.html> (accessed August 29, 2011).
5. Ed Halter, *From Sun Tzu to Xbox: War and Video Games*.
6. *Ibid.*
7. David Axe, "Gamers Target U.S. Troops in Chinese Military 'Shooter,'" *Wired*, May 17, 2011, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/tag/glorious-mission/> (accessed August 29, 2011).
8. Ian Bogost, "Persuasive Games: Exploitationware," *Gamasutra*, May 3, 2011, [http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/6366/persuasive\\_games\\_exploitationware.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/6366/persuasive_games_exploitationware.php) (accessed August 29, 2011).
9. Brooke Gladstone and Alex Levine, "The Gamification Of Jihad," *On The Media*, Friday, May 06, 2011 <http://www.onthemedial.org/2011/may/06/the-gamification-of-jihad/> (accessed August 29, 2011).