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26. TOGETHER WE BRAND: AMERICA'S ARMY

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ABSTRACT

This paper signals the aesthetic and socio-economic implications of a new generation of commercial media culture in an age of computer network-facilitated participation. It explores the cultural status of the online game *America's Army: Operations* (US Army, 2002) that has commerce at the core of its brand identity. The game exemplifies the linkage of commercial goals with cultural texts through creating engaging experiences, initiated by commercial corporations for reasons of promotion and profit, enabled by computer networks, and – to a lesser extent – given form by various members of the public.

KEYWORDS

Advergaming, design, brand experience, participatory culture, marketing aesthetics

"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".¹

INTRODUCTION

The recent proliferation of digital technologies has reactivated debates regarding the aesthetic status of new, technologically enabled expressive forms, and challenges regarding the role of commerce in the production of culture have been mounted. Digital technologies have made questions regarding originality and reproducibility particularly difficult, and they have blurred the lines among producer, distributor, and consumer to a far greater extent than previous media forms. Computer games, digital audio and video production equipment, and the Internet have enabled new forms of production, distribution, facilitating what has been termed participatory culture. Since the late-1990s researchers have shown an increasing interest in this linkage between new technologies and publics, looking in particular at the formation of new social collectivities and 'bottom-up' redefinitions of cultural practices. These studies have tended to recover aesthetic status and social power by casting the work of participating publics as transgressive² or as at least unintended³. The actions of users were thus seen as taking basic materials provided by commercial interests (themselves in many cases, aesthetic objects), and

¹ Au, W. J. Weapons of mass distraction. Salon.com (4 October 2002).

² Against the perceived economic interests of the commercial culture producers and providers, like Napster.

³ Not considered by producers or providers but also not perceived as harmful, a la Star Trek fan fiction.

actively re-appropriating and redistributing them as cultural practices. Think of activities such as writing fan fiction and creating spoofs (fake advertisements) and modifications on the Internet. Henry Jenkins (2002) has summarized this aptly: "patterns of media consumption have been profoundly altered by a succession of new media technologies which enable average citizens to participate in the archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation, and re-circulation of media content."

The introduction of Mosaic and the Pentium chip in the mid-1990s profoundly changed the notion of re-circulation initially associated with digital culture by decentralizing computer networks and enabling the peer-to-peer exchange of sound, image, and text. The Internet could be used for more than looking up information or sending email. Instead people formed networks, effectively constructing 'user-created search engines' for the exchange of music files (KaZaA), games, and increasingly, news and chat. While the present moment is marked by a legal standoff between robust communities of users (cultural co-producers) and the established media industry (particularly the music and film industry), some elements of the corporate media world have taken a different approach, embracing the new technological use rather than attempting to outlaw it. These corporations have found their way to online participatory networks and are attempting to use them for their own good. Advertisements in the form of games, movies and the like are created to promote a com-

pany's product or service, but they crucially rely upon blurring the boundaries between production and distribution, encouraging the target audience to work for them. Whether by playing games with embedded advertising, or inadvertently sending marketing information back to advertisers, or simply by passing advertising texts within one's circle of friends, the target audience and the larger dynamic of participatory networks are 'used' by corporations to achieve their ends.

The linkage of commercial goals with cultural texts is not new (television and film texts often embed commercial messages, and most art works are elements in thriving commercial industries), but the scholarship on the cultural status of pointedly commercial culture remains poorly developed. Equally underdeveloped is research on product aesthetics and identity, even while product attributes and benefits, brand names and brand associations are no longer sufficient to attract attention from customers. The emergent corporate tendency to create engaging advertisements in the form of entertainment, offers customers memorable sensory experiences that tie in with the positioning of the company, product or service and should therefore be studied. This paper seeks to address these lacunae by exploring the online game *America's Army: Operations* (AA:O)⁴ as an in-game advertisement (advergame) for the US Army that has adapted the game format in order to create ever-changing consumer experiences. This questions how we should consider the cultural status

⁴ AA:O is a game in constant development: Patches, containing new training programs, bug fixes and new maps are issued on a regular basis. The version described in this paper is the Windows version of 1.9, officially released on August 7, 2003. AA:O is available on Windows PC's, on the Mac since the 16th of July 2003 and there is a Linux version of AA

available since 21st of August 2003, players from all versions can play on the same servers. The way to obtain AA:O differs from its commercial counterparts. Because AA:O is a free game one cannot go to a store or website to order the game. Players have to download the game (for free) or go to an Army recruiter to pick up the game (US only).

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of artifacts that have commerce at the core of their identity as well as the concepts aesthetic experience and branding experience. Examining online advertising through games will become here an anchor point for corporate aesthetics, from which a customer gets an overall impression of an institution.

A MILITARY ENTERTAINMENT COMPLEX

On Independence Day in 2002 the online multiplayer first person shooter (FPS) game AA:O was released by the US Army. The game is developed in-house by the Modeling, Simulation and Virtual Environments Institute (MOVES) of the Naval Postgraduate School (California) on Unreal's latest engine technology and designed by a group of professional game developers, simulation researchers, and graduate students (Lenoir, 2003). The online game is developed to inform people about the US Army and as such is functioning as a recruiting tool. In February 2003 a paper on AA:O was published that offers great insights in the popularity and goals of the game⁵: "Game use as of 16 November 2002 saw 1,007,000 registered accounts, 614,000 graduates of basic rifle marksmanship and combat training (BCT), and more than 32 million missions completed (averaging 6 to 10 minutes). Missions per day average 338,380, with players typically accomplishing 21 missions after BCT. Assuming 10 minutes per mission, we calculate gamers racked up a combined 263 years of nonstop play in the first 58 days alone [...]. To put it another way, if these hours were payable at minimum wage (\$6.75 an hour), the bill would hit \$15,590,367 for 58

days. And if we project the 4.6 years of play per day to 1,679 years of play per annum, we are looking at \$99,279,270 of intensive effort donated gratis by America's youth."

A short military history is in place to motivate this popularity and come about of AA:O as both a recruiting tool and its status within the military educational program. For over fifty years the Department of Defense (DoD) has actively worked to promote and engage in the development of war game design, which was mainly the terrain of commercial designers. With the rising costs of (live) exercises much effort was poured into the research and development of computer simulations, the military equivalent of games. In the early 1980s, the construction of SIMNET (SIMulator NETworking) replaced both live exercises and costly high-end stand-alone simulators and made a shift from individual towards collective training. The choice for simulation is obvious both from an economic as a technological perspective, a great deal of modern warfare nowadays is electronically mediated by (computer) screens. The booming innovation of commercial simulation technology did not go unnoticed and accompanied the fade away Cold War threats in the 1990s, the military-industrial complex transformed into the military entertainment complex (Lenoir & Lowood, 2003). In 1994 the Federal Acquisitions Streamlining Act started a new era in the simulation and networking endeavours of the US military. Policymakers were ordered to primarily

⁵ Zyda, M. et al. Entertainment R&D for Defense. IEEE Computer Graphics and Applications, (January/February 2003), 28-36.

look into the possibilities of using commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) alternatives for virtual training purposes, a move which should serve the commercial sector as well. This resulted in several modifications of commercial games on different platforms. In 1996 one of the early first-person-shooters, *Doom II* (id Software, 1994), was modified by the US Marines to serve as a FPS tactical training tool: *Marine Doom*. This modification gave US Marines the opportunity to train and develop military skills and decision-making with a four-member fire team.

Nowadays a wide array of games is used for training purposes by all branches of the US Army⁶. Both COTS games as well as custom, special designed, games are used for simulation, readiness and training, rehearsal and retention (Maguire et al. 2002). At this moment for example *Battlefield 1942* (Digital Illusions, 2002) is used by both the US Army and the US Marine Corps while *Falcon 4.0* (MicroProse, 1998) is used by the US Air Force. *AA:O* is used by the infantry before setting foot on the real shooting range⁷, while *Full Spectrum Warrior* (Pandemic, 2003) shows the beneficial flow of knowledge and technology between the US Army and commercial game developers. It is developed as a training tool but will also be released to the public. The complete proof of the institutionalisation of games by the US military is the inter-Service Academy competition *Warlords*⁸, where teams from the service academies compete against each other, in what gamers would call a LAN-party.

THE US ARMY BRAND

According to a study issued by the DoD, conducted by McKinsey and Company, the US Army did not have a brand until two years ago. There was no synthesis of all attributes of the US Army that create an identity, such as logo and service packaging⁹. An evolved brand is generally developed to embody a visual, verbal, social, political, and cultural language to build a relationship with a public. In short, a brand is the public's "perception of an integrated bundle of information and experiences that distinguishes a company and/or its product offerings from the competition" (Duncan, 2002). The US Army has put a strong emphasis on its branding strategy, after its discovery that its recruiting targets seemed far-fetched. Since 1995 the US Army missed its recruiting goals three times, i.e. in 1999 there had been a shortage of 6,500 recruits. The answer to its recruiting problematic was a change in the way the US Army communicates with the young people in the USA. A short-sided approach to rely simply on its name, the US Army learned that they needed ongoing insights in research-based advertising in order to understand the attitudes and needs of young people. A Marketing Strategy Office (MSO) was created that works with commercial professionals, i.e. Leo Burnett Worldwide; it changed its approach from a requirements contract to a performance-based one in order to actively promote what the US Army stands for (i.e. government-to-consumer or G2C) by increasing its benefits and decreasing its costs to increase the numbers of recruits (revenues)¹⁰. The ad campaign the MSO came up with was "Together We Stand: An Army of One"¹¹ which addresses

⁶ See for a complete review of COTS games used by the military <http://www.dodgamecommunity.com/>

⁷ See Moves 2002 activity report, www.movesinstitute.org

⁸ See <http://www.usafa.af.mil/warlords>

⁹ See http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Jan2001/t01102001_t110army.html

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ The slogan used to be 'Be all you can be'.

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roughly three functions of a brand: It refers to both the values the Army finds important, i.e. teamwork (expressive function) and a social-trend that demands that the Army needs to address individual needs and interests in order to meet a younger generation of potential recruits (social-adaptive function) that is interested in how the Army can benefit them as an individual (impressive function)¹².

The US Army spends about 2\$ billion per year to attract 120,000 recruits, including through this ad campaign that consisted of several print ads and commercials on TV to generate traffic for the www.goarmy.com recruiting website¹³. These numbers compared to building AA:O - for 7\$ million - means that if the game generates 120 potential recruits, it has broken even¹⁴. And since the game is online the recruitment site's traffic has increased with 28 percent, directly derived from the AA:O site¹⁵.

The new slogan and US Army logo drive the brand of the Army. It is the same, and therefore recognizable, for all Army departments (e.g. Army Reserve, National Guard) and strengthens the individual options a soldier has upon joining the larger team of the Army. AA:O is part of the brand. The game is a so-called advergaming, which refers to "the integration of advertising messages in online games and [which] is increasingly being used as an integral part of Internet marketing and advertising strategies to promote goods and services to potential consumers"¹⁶ (Buckner et al., 2002). In addition,

advergaming build relationships between consumers and products by transferring the emotion of the game to the Army brand that is powering it and creating an engaging, rather than passive, experience:

"The [...] game is an entertaining way for young adults to explore the Army and its adventures and opportunities as a virtual Soldier. [...] It does this in an engaging format that takes advantage of young adults' broad use of the Internet [...] and their interest in games for entertainment and exploration"¹⁷.

The (aesthetic) design of AA:O is such that the advertising message of the Army is central to gameplay which is discussed in the next paragraph.

By making the game accessible for gamers worldwide, the recruiting goal goes beyond its original scope and brings AA:O as *propagame* to the surface. In the FAQ section on the official website is explicitly stated that even when you are living outside the USA you can play AA:O, because "we want the whole world to know how great the US Army is"¹⁸ By stating that the US Army is the best and most advanced army in the world and representing this through the game and the community, the status of mere advertising is challenged.

AA:O also serves as test bed and tool, providing the US Army with the opportunity to test new findings in the area of military simulation. An example of this

¹² See Franzen, G. and Bouwman, M. De Mentale Wereld van Merken. Alphen aan den Rijn: Samsom, 1999 (p. 201)

¹³ See note [9].

¹⁴ See note [7].

¹⁵ See note [5].

¹⁶ Buckner, K. et al. (2002) "Advergaming: A New Genre in Internet Advertising", in: http://www.dcs.napier.ac.uk/~mm/socbytes/feb2002_i/9.html

¹⁷ <http://www.americasarmy.com/faq.php>

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Shilling, R. et al. Introducing Emotion into Military Simulation and Videogame Design: America's Army Operations and VIRTE. Proceedings of the GameOn Conference. (London, 30 November 2002) 151-154.

purpose is research conducted by the MOVES institute demonstrating the emotional impact of sound in virtual simulations¹⁹. This purpose marks a positive development for the commercial game industry because of the Army's intent to "share" their research findings with the for-profit sector. Lastly, AA:O is also an *edugame*. While the game does not seem to be a pure military simulator or training system, it is used by the US Army for training purposes and its educational features shine through. By means of instructing how to become a soldier, grenadier or sniper, AA:O teaches gamers about tactics, gun use, core values, and the like. The medic training is exemplary for this purpose: Gamers who want to become a medic need to pass four separate training courses: airway management, controlling bleeding, treating shock and a field test. After a classroom lecture, including a PowerPoint presentation and bored classmates, a mandatory multiple-choice test follows. Failing the test prohibits a gamer to play a medic.

The Army's strategy of using a game for marketing purposes works very well, however, in contrast to many non-governmental developers of advergaming, no marketing information is gathered of AA:O players. The Army only acquires someone's information unless the latter willingly forwards for example his or her scoring information to the Army's recruiter. Thus, the US Army's online presence and marketing communication, especially through AA:O, brand equity is built to elicit a direct response and put its

benefits in front of its gamers without gathering explicit information. The AA:O is therefore a direct communication tool that is designed to generate a request for further information (lead generation), and a visit to an Army-related place of business (traffic generation). By creating leads and traffic through AA:O's design and characteristics, the Army's brand is not about 'just a logo'. It is much more, namely, it is the *experience* that occurs when a gamer comes into contact with the Army's game.

AESTHETICS MARKETING: GAMEPLAY

So far, not much attention has been paid in the branding phase of marketing to how a symbol is strategically created and how a brand conveys a positioning and value through aesthetics²⁰. Exploring AA:O as a communication tool to convey the Army's message encompasses a particular take on the notion of 'cultural economy'. It neither refers to the 1970s approach to study the relationship between economics and artistic activities nor the during the 1980s coined culturalist critique of economics and political economy that largely focused on cultures of consumption (Negus, 2002). AA:O as a cultural site of production is emphasized - where the G2C model is explored through the visual design and gameplay of AA:O and the come about of participatory clusters surrounding the US Army's brand.

As outlined earlier, the Army's MSO came up with the 'Army of One' campaign which eventually led to its most successful counterpart in accordance with the

²⁰ Research focuses largely on naming and associations and broad strategic marketing issues, and neglects the variety of sensory elements that work together to create a brand identity (see Schmitt & Simonson, 1997).

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Army's target group, the free online game. Based on many years of experience in the development of visual simulations a very attractive game was created that brings the many faces and activities of the Army to the foreground through experiences. The creation of engaging aesthetic experiences is a relatively new marketing paradigm and has evolved out of two earlier phases; on the one hand, the attributes and benefits phase which involves a technique of classifying buyers according to the benefits that they look for in a product or service (Kotler 1997), on the other hand, the branding phase where a product or service provides an image - beyond specific product or service elements - and stands for a degree of quality (Aaker 1991). Schmitt and Simonson (1997) coined the term 'marketing aesthetics' to refer to the overall trend towards lifestyle and value systems. Consumers base their choices on "whether or not a product or service fits into his or her lifestyle or whether it represents an exciting new concept - a desirable experience"²¹. It is about the marketing of sensory experiences in strategic communication from G2C that contribute to the Army's (brand) identity. A variety of possible sensory elements that come together to create a brand experience are described through the analysis of (marketing) aesthetics of AA:O, i.e. a game description, audiovisuals, basic training and clans

AA:O's urge for realism results in a distinct game while still using conventions from the squad-based tactical FPS genre. Certain features like the strict

Rules Of Engagement (ROE) make AA:O a game that contrasts the most popular FPS of all time, Counterstrike. 'Bunny hopping', continuous jumping to avoid enemy fire, respawning, unlimited ammo, shooting while running, the lack of training and unrealistic environments and scenarios are absent or reduced to a minimum in AA:O. Along with a significant slower pacing and the obvious fact that it is a free game, these are all characteristics that appeal to many gamers. As one AA:O player eloquently argues:

"If you want a game with grenades that go "bang" between your legs, try Counterstrike. But if you want a game that blows your balls off, than play AA" ²².

The goal of a mission means always completing an objective, which may be turning valves, crossing a bridge, or preventing the opposing forces to complete their objective. The virtual space of AA:O consists of seventeen realistic modeled maps, differing in objective, size and location, ranging from desert to mountainous to urban terrain. When entering a server a player has to choose which side he wants to play on. Regardless which side is chosen, one is always playing from the perspective of an American soldier and accordingly views the enemy as Opposing Forces (OpFor). Missions can take up to twelve minutes and when a player is killed in action, (s)he will not respawn and has to wait during the remainder of the mission.

²¹ Schmitt, B. and Simonson, A.
Marketing Aesthetics: the Strategic
Management of Brands, Identity, and Image
New York: The Free Press, 1997 (p. 16)

²² Signature of the forum member
(CYBA)JakkedUptron*****

Points are awarded when a mission is successfully completed or when an opponent is killed. Points will be lost when a player loses a mission while being a squad leader or violating the ROE - killing a member of the same team. Violating the ROE results in losing points or immediate expellation from a server, subsequent violating the ROE will result in banning an account. A certain amount of points is needed to raise one's Honor, a persistent statistic which gives other players a hint of a gamer's skills and dedication. This system turns out to be an effective way to stimulate gamers to extend play time, especially for male gamers, who are known for their goal-orientedness. By reducing luck to a minimum through training, players can improve their skills and gain experience, expertise and thus status. One can only imagine what will happen when AA:O will start offering additional features representing the level of skill, dedication and progress, i.e. a medal system.

The playerbase of AA:O and its surrounding community consists almost solely of (young) males. The apparent military and masculine character of the US Army rings through in AA:O, a masculine construct made by men and played by men²³. Male gamers are known for their preference for action games, military content and weapons. Gamers demanding female avatars are silenced with the simple argument that women are not allowed in armed combat such as displayed in AA:O and for the sake of realism, female avatars are discarded and discussion about it results in flaming and female bashing.

Audiovisuals

Great efforts are made to produce the highest sense of realism. Because of AA:O's place within the MOVES Institute, developers have a great amount of expertise at hand and have direct access to Army sites, weapons and equipment after which a great deal of the audiovisual material is modeled. Weapon handling, such as weapon clearance and reloading procedures, is modeled after official Army procedures. Besides communicating through text and sound players can also use authentic hand signal animations. The games' visual style therefore can be described as three dimensional photorealistic while avoiding the photorealistic sub style of illusionism as much as possible (Järvinen, 2003). The auditory elements present in AA:O are used to further immerse gamers into the virtual battlefield. Diegetic sounds consist of onsite recordings of weapons and ambience and US Army personal is used to impersonate the voice of non-player character, like the drill sergeant in basic training and the in-game communication system. AA:O is one of the first games that fully supports Dolby 5.1 and also Creative's EAX 3.0 is used to further enhance auditory realism by enhancing spatiality and help gamers become more 'situationally aware'. To enhance realism even further nondiegetic sound is completely absent. Many players laude the efforts of this pursuit and stress the fact that AA:O's photorealistic style adds significantly to the creation of realistic engaging experiences.

²³ Nieborg, D.B. Good Job Soldier, A gender analysis of America's Army (draft, 2003)

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Basic training

A player can choose between official Army servers or private servers to play on. Official servers are monitored and players can ask an Army Game Administrator (AGA) 24 hours a day to solve their problems, such as other players' bad behaviour and use of derogatory language or slander, which is ground for removal. After installing the game, players have to first register themselves, supplying a unique username and their email address for activation. After registering as an AA:O player, one is obliged to go through the single-player part of the game: basic training. This functions both as a tutorial and it depicts real-life basic training, all training parts are accompanied by a short explanation of the training and the history of its real life counterpart. Just like real recruits who must complete basic before joining Army units, gamers must complete training courses to advance in online multiplayer missions. Many curious players will experience the realistic approach of this training when they fire their weapon prematurely or in the wrong direction (e.g. the drill sergeant) and have to start all over. In order to unlock certain maps and features one has to go through additional training levels, such as advanced marksmanship (sniper training), the Airborne School and medic training. Thus, the structure of the game advertises indeed gamers on the Army's policy and services that may be expected when joining the Army!

Clans

The "Army of One" slogan is fitting AA:O like a '*insert hilarious comparison here*', emphasizing and enforcing teamwork through various gameplay elements. Going at it alone not only will make it more difficult to complete objectives, i.e. to win, teamwork is also one of the cornerstones of the ROE. Ignoring orders from the leader of a squad is ground for removal from a server²⁴. The need for teamplay and the militaristic structure of the game motivates aficionados to get organized to both survive and win; a good example of this phenomenon are clans. Clans are the virtual equivalent of a sports team, differing in size, nationality and involvement. Clans are hierarchically structured and many clans follow the same philosophy, structure and training principles of the US Army. And just as in the US Army, AA:O enforces in-game social interaction by ways of interpersonal dependency. The emphasis on teamplay, along with different weapons and roles, and environments demanding co-ordination, may result in the heightening of player interaction (Manninen, 2001). This heightened player interaction is accompanied by the games' way of dealing with 'dead players'. Because of the fact that using *dead-chat* is the only occupation a player has when he is not playing, besides watching other gamers play, there is a considerable amount of player interaction, which often results in spreading the symbolic capital of the game which further accomplishes one of the major purposes of the game, supplying people with the needs to talk about the US Army and military related subjects in a relatively controlled environment.

²⁴ See <http://www.americasarmy.com/rulesofengagement.php>

One of the most distinct elements of AA:O is its pursuit of realism, which rings through in all elements of the game, i.e. the gameplay, audiovisual style but also offgame elements like registering results in a personal jacket. One aspect of AA:O, in line with the games' main purpose, recruiting, is far from authentic; the representation of killing one's opponents. The so-called 'blood and gore' factor in AA:O is very low for a FPS. Dismemberment, bleeding soldiers and auditory enhancement of dying soldiers are absent. Compared with a game like Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix (Raven Software, 2002) the sanitizing of violence in AA:O becomes therefore even more apparent. The low gore level of AA:O in combination with parental controls resulted in a Teen rating for the game, making it accessible for a wider public.

COMMUNITY BRANDING

"Commercial game culture is structured to harness innate human behaviour: competition, collaboration, hunger for status, the tendency to cluster, and the appetite for peer acknowledgement"²⁵.

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) published a comprehensive study that connects the emergent properties of online communities with new paths of e-business. It shows how businesses tap into virtual communities by either aggregating people in a community initiated by a corporation or by using existing virtual communities for their own benefit. It is important to

frame the way a community is organized in order to study how it evolves, the patterns that are formed and the way in which collective behavior is driven when one wants to examine the relationship between online brand marketing strategies and entertainment forms that serve as advertisements, referred to as advertainment (Watts 2003).

AA:O has given way to an online community that is initiated by the US Army on www.americasarmy.com. AA:O exists of several community clusters that give way to the US Army brand culture. The community consists of 'developers' (can be reached via email, the official forum, or IRC), 'moderators' (for forums and AGA in-game), beta testers, and the gamers. On the one hand, there are the clan members who can be recognized by their tag in front of their name. On the other hand, AA:O has regular players as well as Army servants (reserve) who can be identified - just like the beta testers - by an in-game star. The most important communication channel where these clusters communicate is the official forum where everybody - i.e. in-game officials and gamers - can post and respond to messages. The official forum²⁶ had by mid-August 2003 over 95.000 members, who have posted about 890.000 messages. The site also hosts, among others, a support section, a web log (by a US soldier who is currently serving in Afghanistan²⁷) and announces LAN parties.

As outlined earlier, the game itself is hierarchically structured and does not leave much, if any, room for

²⁵ Herz, J.C. Harnessing the Hive: How Online Games Drive Networked Innovation. Release 1.0 20, 91 (18 October 2002).

²⁷ See http://www.americasarmy.com/features_weblog.php

²⁶ See <http://www.americasarmy.com/forum/index.php>

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in-game activism such as the creation of modifications to provide the community with skins, maps, extra weapons and the like²⁸. However they do offer players the opportunity to give feedback on the message boards on the official website and regular updates of the game are made available. Despite this, the game misses the ingredients games like Battlefield 1942, Unreal Tournament 2003 (Digital Extremes, 2002) and Half Life (Valve Software, 1998) have in offering players the possibility to modify. Modifications can give old games a new life and add replay ability²⁹; Recently however, the Army has become more aware of the importance of its online community and comes up with new ways to participate. For instance, a 'recorded gameplay contest' where gamers have to record their gameplay on a thirty second to two minute video clip that is put on the web site or a 'desktop wallpaper contest' where gamers can submit their 'fan created' wallpapers, because the development team would like 'to see what kind of artists are in the gamer community'. On the community side there are many requests for official LAN parties, as well as an official statistics website and an official AA:O league.

Although not very popular, gamers can play AA:O for money against each other³⁰. Far more popular among gamers is to get organized in clans. The idea behind clans is that it creates loyalty through the expansion of social aspects of playing³¹. Not surprisingly the AA:O community reaches far beyond the official site. There are many affiliated sites, both offi-

cial and semi-official, and more importantly the many fan and clan sites. Generally, fan sites bring the latest news, host files, artwork and movies, conduct interviews with the official development team, and facilitate special events. A striking example is a Polish fan site³² that organized an IRC chat session with Army professionals and a US Army recruiter. Another example of a fan site that has proved to be a valuable source and a huge success among AA:O players is ArmyOps-Tracker³³, a German-English website that tracks the official servers of AA:O. It provides players with statistical information derived from the game such as the amount of kills, deaths, points gathered, honor; it also shows the players who are at that moment online which can come in handy for friends and clan players. Since its release the website and its tracker system have registered over 50.000 members. With the advent of the latest patch ArmyOps-Tracker was no longer able to track the game servers which led to quite some upheaval throughout the community, urging the game developers to adjust server settings to ensure a proper functioning of ArmyOps-Tracker. This request was honored and signifies an increasing awareness on the side of the officials of the importance of the community for the success of the Army - and its creation of brand awareness - through the game.

The AA:O community also discerns clans that are very important in shaping the community, often in accordance with or sometimes challenging the boundaries of the game. The AA:O community clan

²⁸ See note [17]

²⁹ Au, W. J. Triumph of the mod. Salon.com (16 april 2002).

³⁰ See <http://www.ultimatearena.com/games/home.jsp>

³¹ See <http://game-research.com/reports.asp> Online Gaming Habits (2002).

³² See <http://www.americasarmy.pl/?lang=2>

³³ See <http://www.aaotracker.com>

mean for gamers immersing themselves (even) further in the game experience and community. Clans fight against each other in special leagues. AA:O does not have an official league of its own (yet), but there are many clusters that organize AA:O tournaments and ladders. Like many sections of the AA:O community tournament sites are player-driven and therefore free of charge. One of the main general tournament sites is Teamwarfare League³⁴ (TWL), which has organized twenty AA:O ladders wherein several hundred clans participate, while the ArmyArena³⁵ is dedicated to AA:O tournaments only. Also, clan members tend to be more involved in making (clan) movies, creating works of art, and taking part on message boards to critically engage in discussions to improve the game and website (so-called 'cultural creatives'). As such they explore emerging ways of participation by engaging in the created brand experience. Even while players may not really care about joining the Army by the messages that are conveyed throughout the website and in-game, they do contribute to the come about of a brand culture.

AESTHETIC TOTALITARIANISM

In this paper we have attempted to sketch the corporate tendency to create engaging advertisements in the form of entertainment. It does not provide any answers but raises interesting questions regarding on the one hand, the cultural status of online entertainment-as-advertisement (e.g. are these types of advertainment part of an aesthetic experience or branding experience? Are they opposed or are they

part of the same entity, or are they continuous? What is the cultural / aesthetic status of advertainment on the Internet), and on the other hand, regarding participatory culture in a commercially mediated environment (e.g. how do commercially structured ads and participatory networks fit and/or challenge the notion of participation and collaboration? What is the status of business-to-consumer, consumer-to-consumer, and peer-to-peer in a commercially structured network? What does that mean for the brand and the branding experience?).

The US Army brand is the provider of aesthetic game experiences; it offers an appealing destination where the Army institution, its representations and gamers intersect. The properties of the Internet and the elements of the game design give way to an interaction with the players that drive brand awareness by associating the game with the military lifestyle - by creating interactive, engaging experiences the game gives way to an informative brand experience which hopefully leads to joining the Army - and forge a memory that inspires brand loyalty, i.e. returning to the official websites. This tactic of the US Army to use AA:O for promotion purposes through aesthetic marketing means foremost creating loyalty³⁶, but also cutting through information clutter, affording protection from competitive attacks, and saving costs while increasing profits. By creating transient images through AA:O the US Army is among the main players to link its commercial goals with a cultural text, resulting in ever-changing consumer experiences. Indeed, Michael Zyda (MOVES)

³⁴ See <http://www.teamwarfare.com>

³⁵ See <http://www.armyarena.com>

³⁶ The self-evolving, self-aggregating culture that comes about, based on visual design and gameplay, shapes a brand-loyal culture that consists of various community clusters (e.g. clans, jammers); these are 'spin-offs' that are directed towards a more diversified play of the game such as tournaments and fan sites.

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poses an intriguing question when addressing AA:O's success: "What if the game rebranded the US Army into 'America's Army'?"³⁷

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³⁷ Trent Gegax, T. Full Metal Joystick. Newsweek 14 October 2002 (Online)

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