BEHIND THE MECHANICS

The Conveyance of Political Messages through Video Games

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ABSTRACT

This study is a response to the growing demand for more critical examinations of the video game as a communicative as well as interactive medium of mass culture. It reflects the game in regard to its potentials and abilities conveying a message to its audience and sets it into a broader discourse of mass communication. The analysis focuses on opinion forming games and their agendas whilst scrutinizing the methods through which certain messages are delivered to the player. The study is primarily based on qualitative research and analyzes the mechanisms of manipulation through examples with an emphasis on the mechanics and rules of the game, its visual aesthetics, its narrative structure and the emotional dimensions of the gameplay. The analysis illustrates that games are effectively used to render the image of war and to frame the enemy in a stereotypical manner in order to match certain political interests. They also function as a recruitment tool for the military as well as for political and ethnic fractions. In addition the study demonstrates the positive potentials of the medium by referring to serious games which offer complex perspectives and profound knowledge about certain topics and encourage the player to aim for creative and constructive solutions in order to finish the game successfully.

The results of the study demonstrate that video games can no longer be categorized as a subculture of entertainment for young men. With the growing acceptance of the medium as a part of mass culture its influence especially on young people had been taken into account by certain groups which made use of the video game to convey their messages to an audience. The analysis shows the inner complexity of the medium and gives examples for attempts to use its potentials by concluding that these efforts are far from being utilized fully. In this regard the study offers impulses for further research which should fill the void and explore the possibilities games provide and how we can make good use of them.
I wish to thank Marie Beschorner without whom this study would not have been possible. Your patience, support and tireless efforts of guidance lead me through the foggy maze of my thoughts and helped me polish and reflect the ideas presented in this study. Thanks to your endless faith in me I realized competences I previously did not believe to possess. I dedicate this work to you.
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INTRODUCTION

Games of all types aim to convey a message to its participants – some simply want to be a playful medium which provides the player with joyful experiences, others offer a challenge and hints about how to master it, some chose an educating and others an entertaining method. The agenda of games may differ but their informative nature should not be underestimated. Not every game is just entertaining – some might also communicate political opinions or imply the intention to leave an impact on the gamer. Whether it is for entertaining purposes or by sending a political message: Games communicate and they do it in an interactive way.

Game designers are growing evermore capable of portraying and conveying messages through their games. Despite their abstraction of reality they manage to represent it to such a degree that their participants accept the game’s rules and its world as their own. In this regard the gamer can only successfully master the game if he reads the messages which it communicates and stick to its regulations. Herein lies a great potential – the possibility to be taken into fantastic, foreign or simply different worlds and to enjoy the freedom and limits these worlds have to offer – but also a risk: It is easy to follow the mechanisms of the game without realizing that it has a hidden agenda of its own which aims to manipulate the participants believes about certain subjects or infiltrate his opinions.

Computer Games are mass media: They can no longer be categorized as a subculture of entertainment for young men. The industry has grown as a medium and may soon be as big as the film industry (PERRON and WOLF 2009, p. 228). Its importance for and impact on our society will only continue to grow whilst people advance to utilize the potentials the game offers to reach an audience.

The usage of games to spread political messages is nothing new in history. The Nazis for example made use of games to influence the masses and established them as a tool for spreading their ideology. Today opinion forming games are also a strong weapon of the propaganda machine’s arsenal – therefore their importance to our informative society will only continue to grow.

This study will focus on the computer game as a communicative as well as interactive medium of mass culture. It is interested in opinion forming games in particular and the messages they are communicating. The analysis aims to describe the methods the game uses to convey these messages and why it is so successful by doing so. The purpose of the study therefore is to reflect the medium in a critical way by defining its agendas as well as its core mechanics which are potentially able to affect the player in a certain way.

Chapter One reflects media and its communicative power through historical examples and aims to evoke a critical attitude towards the subject. It sets the video
game into a broader context of mass communication and describes its significance as an opinion forming tool within the social-political discourse.

Chapter Two will define the method by describing the analytical approach toward the subject. The analysis itself will primarily be based on qualitative research and this chapter will justify the choice of games which are taken as a foundation for this study.

Chapter Three combines the analyses of games with the interpretation as well as the discussion of the results and focuses on games with a political message or agenda.

Chapter Four summarizes the results of the analytical part and draws a conclusion. It also gives recommendations as a prospect for future research.
1. THROUGH A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Like many forms of art games depict and represent the present moral and cultural standpoints of its time. A game which is notorious for its message is the board game *Juden Raus!* (Jews out!). The game was developed in 1936 and was a response to the anti-Semitism that permeated Nazi Germany. The game was published via Günther & CO and was introduced as a ‘very fun game for the whole family’.

The players took turns rolling the dice and moved their figures across a board to collect Jews at certain collection points. These should in turn be escorted out of the city walls – as a gesture of deportation (fig. 1). The player who managed to deport 6 Jews won the game.

The player figures consisted of men in pointy hats which resembled the traditional Bavarian hats. The Jews, the player had to collect, were in the shape of cones and were suppose to be placed on top of the figure’s head. The cones were decorated with grotesque caricatures of Jews which resembled the illustrations of the Nazi propaganda (fig. 2). These caricatures represented the generally accepted view of the stereotypical Jew in Nazi Germany. It is hard to miss the message the creators of *Juden Raus!* tried to send to its participants. The game was developed one year after the Nuremberg laws were announced and it obviously tried to advocate the Nazis message of anti-Semitism.

Board games like *Juden Raus!* are just one example for opinion based game designs which spread a political message and influence people’s beliefs about and attitudes towards certain subjects. In this connection the game uses mechanisms like the creation of ethnic stereotypes as well as a narrative frame which support and convey the message. As we will see later on, it therefore uses similar mechanisms like contemporary computer games, although the latter have more advanced possibilities to make use of them.
The board game was just one tool of the Third Reich’s massive propaganda which utilized nearly every medium available and demonstrated – like never before in history – the power of mass media and its immense impact on society. As for today this power has grown even stronger. The media is part of our everyday life and our most important source for information. But the quality and validity of these sources of information are not always reliable. The internet unites billions of sources and authors which spread messages on blogs, forums, personal and official websites and therefore makes it very difficult to verify reliable sources from unreliable sources. This problem is not exclusively limited to the internet, although this medium seems to be the most corruptible. History, for instance, provided us with a very nice example of TV media coverage which created a myth which was accepted as common knowledge and persistently survived several decades: In 1958 the Walt Disney documentary *Wild Wilderness* spread the misconception of the lemmings as animals with suicidal tendencies which deliberately run over cliffs to drown or be dashed to their deaths. No fact has ever proven this story to be true but the images shown in the documentary and the explanations given by the narrator’s voice were obviously convincing enough not to question the subject and except it as verified knowledge. This is but one example for falsified media information and there are more:

Especially in times of war mass media becomes a tool for influencing people in their opinions about the right or wrongs of the war or the arrangements made by the government. The Vietnam War in particular demonstrated that a war can also be lost by media – the media coverage about the battles was rich with images and brought the war home into the living rooms of the American families. Although the government tried to channel and control the coverage, it cannot be denied that the media played a significant role for the changes of the public opinions about the war and their revolt against its cruelties (LANDERS 2004, pp. 1-5; HALLIN 1989). The US-government demonstrated that it learned its lesson when it came to the Persian Gulf War in 1990/91. TAYLOR (1992, p. 33) characterized this conflict by appropriately terming it the “Video-Game-War”: Mass media presented a war which reminded the viewer of computer simulation games and “promised absolute precision and minimum ‘collateral damage’” (JAHN-SUDMANN AND STOCKMANN 2008, p. xvii). Abstract images taken from above showed buildings in cross-hairs as distant targets, human bodies appeared as tiny dots on the ground and had to be shot not on an eye-to-eye level but from a far distance with missiles. Commanders kept the press ‘up to date’ in media briefings by revealing little more than abstract lines on a whiteboard to demonstrate the process of their troops. Dead bodies and casualties were almost absent from the coverage. Instead mass media conveyed the impression of a clean, sterile and technological operation.

An example of how a game of chess came to represent the embodiment of a conflict was during the Cold War at the World Championship in 1972 when the American contestant Bobby Fischer met the Soviet World Champion Boris Spassky at the finals. It was perceived as the face-off between the two rivaling superpowers and considered to be of great political importance. The match was closely covered by the...
media and people around the world tuned in to follow the showdown (WAITZKIN 2008, p. 7).

These examples should raise awareness for the influence of media on the cultural discourse of our society and show that mass media – even when it appears as an almost trivial part of everyday life – should be scrutinized more critically since its messages are not always reliable information and quite often they reflect the interest of certain parties more than being objective statements. The given examples also refer to the strong connection between media and warfare (GORMAN AND MCLEAN 2009, pp. 208-229) and emphasize the efforts military and government are taking to shape and control images and information in order to convey their message of a preferably smooth and clean war. In this regard it does not surprise that the military did not get around of getting aware of the potential of video games as a tool for improving the image of war or as a training and recruitment facility for soldiers. The value of the medium seems immense considering that it mainly attracts a target group which is similar to the target group of military recruitment. Therefore it seems to be no coincidence that the military quite often can be found on computer game exhibitions and trade fairs with a booth to present a simulation game whilst trying to enlist new recruits (like the German ‘Bundeswehr’ on GamesCom 2010 for instance). The origins of military games go back to the late 1970s were games like Mech War were used for wargaming, simulation training and skill enhancement. With a rapidly developing technology which offered more and more possibilities the military stressed the importance of the medium by founding the Institute for Creative Technology at the University of Southern California in 1999 (MACEDONIA 2002, p. 7). Studies for instance have shown that many young soldiers during World War I and II were reluctant to fire at their enemy. When this knowledge reached the Army they aimed to correct this by desensitizing their soldiers (GROSSMANN 1996). Some scholars like David GROSSMANN (1996; GROSSMANN AND DEGAETANO 1999) state that video games and violent movies can have a desensitizing effect on their gamers or viewers. This is one reason for the interest of the military in computer games especially in times where the technologies allow the creation of much more ‘realistic’ scenarios and experiences.

Gaming technology allowed “the military to create sophisticated training modules while taking advantage of the media that young soldiers have grown up using” (RENTFROW 2008, p. 92). This fact was also crucial for the army’s move towards the decision to release commercial versions of their training games and their collaboration with the entertainment sector (for example Real War in 2001 or Full Spectrum Warrior in 2004). HERBST (2008, p. 72) states that the differences of the civilian and the military versions are marginal in most of the cases: Whilst the visuals are almost identical the games offer more learning objectives to the soldier whilst the civilian player does not need to be concerned with these. RENTFROW (2008, p. 93) refers to a statement of the creator of America’s Army who pointed out that these games are “more effective at delivering the Army’s message to young people than hundreds of millions of dollar the Army spends yearly on advertising”. Therefore the $
16 million the Pentagon put into *America’s Army* seem well invested for their purpose.

The historical view on the influence of media should encourage adopting a more critical perspective on the sources of entertainment, knowledge and information which surround us and which are part of our everyday life. Media communicates but the messages are not always visible especially when they are wrapped in entertaining experiences.
2. **ANALYTICAL AND METHODICAL APPROACH**

The analysis is primarily based upon qualitative research and focuses on around 10 games which will be discussed in detail. Additionally the study draws references towards other games to show similarities or as a contrast. Each game was observed and carefully chosen with regard to certain aspects like its message and perspective. The method involves the analysis of the visual aesthetics of the game and aims to provide exemplary images to illustrate the results. It also lays a focus on the narrative structure and the gameplay. Altogether the study will emphasize the following aspects: The *Rules and Mechanics* include the options given to the player and the actions he can perform. The *interactivity* defines the player’s procedures and the consequences of his actions and choices as a dialogue between gamer and the game. *Visual aesthetics* cover everything you see and can range from style and colors to characters, environments or details. The *narrative frameset* provides the player with a story and a sense of purpose. *Emotional triggers* describe in which way the gamer gets emotionally affected by the game and derive from the visual aesthetics, the narrative and the interactive part of the game. The aim of the analysis is to decipher the message(s) provided by a game and will focus on the mentioned aspects to describe how the message is conveyed through them.

The games which will be discussed in this study share a common denominator in the sense that they aim to influence the player by conveying a political message. The majority has a clear political agenda and strives to interweave the entertaining aspects of video games with the message they wish to spread. By involving the gamer in an engaging and interactive manner he consumes the message subconsciously through the game’s procedures.

The analysis will lay one focus on war games which are seen through a westerner’s point of view and which mainly are set in a Middle Eastern conflict area. *Americas Army* for example is a military first person shooter game which is governmentally funded by the United States. The game is distributed for free via the internet and is meant to act as a recruitment tool for potential recruits. *America’s Army* is an interesting subject for study since it is backed by the government and aims to spread a clear political message.

Patriotic flag-waving games like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2008), *Homefront* (KAOS Studios, 2011) and *Medal of Honor* (Danger Close, EA Digital Illusions CE, 2010) create a glamorized portrait of war by personifying the American soldier as a heroic icon. At the same time they manage to form stereotypic views on the enemy which they are fighting. This will be a second focus of the study.

As a counterpart to the typical western view on war the analysis will also include games such as *Quest for Bush* (Torque Co., 2006), *Under Ash* (Dar al-Fikr, 2002)/*Under Siege* (Afkar Media, 2005) and *Special Force* (Solution, 2003) which
were developed from a Middle Eastern perspective as a response to the numerous westernized representations of international conflicts in video games. The developers range from radical Islamic organizations like Global Islamic Media Front to Shi'a Muslim militant groups and political parties such as Hezbollah.

Finally the study will go into games which aim to spread an educational political message: PeaceMaker (ImpactGames, 2007) and September 12th - A Toy World (Newsgaming, 2003) try to demonstrate how you can resolve certain conflicts without answering with brute force.
3. **Analysis**

3.1 Sugarcoating War: Recruitment and Representation of War through *America’s Army*

The first version of *America’s Army* came out in 2002, since then there have been several sequels. The recent version can be downloaded for free via the official website americasarmy.com or gaming portals like Steam (http://store.steampowered.com/). According to MEZOFF (2009) “the game was downloaded almost 2.4 million times between January and July 2008”. It combines training simulations with entertaining game elements and is a multiplayer game. As mentioned in Chapter One and Two *America’s Army* is an important and effective recruitment tool for the US Army and is therefore an interesting subject for this analysis.

In the game you support a team in the role of an infantryman and have the choice between four classes which differ in weaponry. The missions you and your teammates have to accomplish vary from ‘escorting a person to a specific destination’ to ‘eliminating the opposing team’. In order to heal or revive another player you have to perform first aid treatment which you have to learn in a tutorial. The game also includes further tutorials which show you how to improve your shooting skills amongst other things. Since the game lacks a narrative frame there is no overarching goal for the player – he just aims to complete each mission successfully and to advance in military rank.

For the uncritical player the game might offer just joyful entertainment but a more scrutinizing view shows that there is a calculated intent behind the surface of the design. The main goal of the game from the developer’s standpoint is to inform and educate the player about life and building a career in the Army and what you gain from it. The following analysis will show how the game achieves these goals and what indirect messages it communicates to the player:

The official website (americasarmy.com, n.d.) claims that *America’s Army* is one of the most realistic Army simulation games. However, if we have a closer look at the visual elements of the game it becomes quite obvious that it does not really portray authentic representations of war. This can be proven with several examples:

First of all the game does not set out to convey the true horrors of war. Blood and gore are absent; the environment looks intact and untainted by war. There are no civilians, no burning or demolished buildings or other elements which give you the impression that there is an ongoing conflict (fig. 3).
Since there is an absence of blood and gore the death of a soldier becomes a quite weak representation of the cruelties of war and its casualties. A shot soldier simply falls down and is no longer part of the current mission. He remains on the ground without blood and quite often he is lying curled up in a fetus-like position (fig. 4). As Rentfrow (2008, p. 94) states, America’s Army "limits the very thing that defines warfare" by rendering the consequences of violence to an almost invisible scale. The message the game conveys is addressed to potential recruits who should be confronted with a simplified war scenario which seems more appealing than frightening. The consequences of violence are not visualized; instead the focus lies on establishing an educating and informative perspective on team play and tactics and creating an unspecific environment.

In this regard the strategies which the developers of America’s Army used were similar to the strategy the US government utilized to shape the media coverage during the Persian Gulf War or the latest Iraq conflict. In both cases the coverage gives the impression of efficient and clean warfare with minimal casualties and destruction executed by well trained and professional ‘experts of war’.

Since the game blinds out aspects like death or suffering from the cruelties of war it offers no possibility for the player to feel compassion with the casualties and victims of a conflict. Actually, it seems to be very unlikely that the player gets emotionally affected by the game at all – apart from feeling stressed or angry whilst being attacked or pleased with his successes. He neither feels affected by the death of a comrade nor by the killing of an enemy. The lack of civilians also generates a war
scenario in which no uninvolved person needs to suffer from the fighting and in which collateral damages do not exist.

In *America’s Army* you are also never given the choice to play the opposing side. Each team sees itself as portrayed as soldiers of the American Army. But in fact the game always pictures the opponent of one team as non-American. So therefore – without being aware of it – a player is always both: the American soldier out of his perspective and the foreign soldier out of the enemy’s perspective who himself believes he also is an American. The mechanics and rules of the games therefore restrict the experience of playing to an Americanized view without the option of exploring a different perspective. In this respect the aim of the designer is to facilitate a patriotic attitude amongst the players who all experience themselves as a part of the American Army.

A scrutinizing look on the interactive communication of player and game also provides evidence for a rather unauthentic representation of military procedures than a realistic and honest view on the subject. The game simplifies military advancement in ranks by giving the impression that you just have to kill a specific amount of people or be a good team player in order to reach a higher rank (fig. 5). In combination with the ‘Go Army’ section at the main menu which provides information about the military service in the US the game aims to make the player believe that there is a link between gameplay and real military careers (fig. 6). It almost looks like a successful player of the game would also make a good soldier in real life.

*America’s Army* has proven to be an effective propaganda and recruitment tool since it reaches out to teens and young adults and caters to their interest. In addition it is entertaining and free. The game provides the player with positive reinforcement and camaraderie whilst blinding out the dire consequences war can bring. This in turn might encourage gamers to establish a career for themselves in the Army without reflecting upon the sacrifices they might have to make.

### 3.2 Stereotypes, Stigmas and Simplification: Framing the Enemy

Games like *America’s Army*, *Call of Duty*, *Homefront* and *Medal of Honor* are just a few examples of western games which place their emphasis on American patriotism and heroism. These ‘flag-waving’ games are made by western developers and reflect a westernized view on certain events and – as in *Call of Duty 4* or *Delta Force: Land Warrior* (NovaLogic 2000) – also on conflicts in the Middle East. Scholars like WILSON (2003, pp. 108-9) point out that the majority of videogames shows exactly this western perspective with a focus on white, western heroes who – in most cases – are portrayed as victors who fought for a good and ‘righteous’ cause. Middle Eastern cultures and identities on the other hand are highly rendered within a stereotypical frameset, which mark Arabic identities for instance most likely as ‘villains’ or
‘terrorists’ which have to be combated and defeated in battle (KARIM 2006; CAMPBELL 2010, p. 70). The negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims intensified after the events of 9/11 and gave room for the popular image of the hostile Islamic extremist, when in reality only a miniscule percentage of Arabs are terrorists. In this respect the representation of Muslims and Arabs in video games matches the general image of these ethnics within European and American media: WINGFIELD and KARAMAN (2002, p. 132) state that “the Arab world – twenty two countries, the locus of several world religions, a multitude of ethnic and linguistic groups, and hundreds of years of history – is reduced to a few simplistic images”. This lack of representation of alternative Middle Eastern identities can be seen as one reason for the rising number of games which put efforts in offering counter representations to the westernized view:

“Most video games on the market are anti-Arab and anti-Islam,’ says Radwan Kasmiya, executive manager of the Syrian company Afkar Media. ‘Arab gamers are playing games that attack their culture, their beliefs, and their way of life. The youth who are playing the foreign games are feeling guilt.” (Roumani, 2006)

*Quest for Bush* could be seen as an answer to *KumaWar*, which was based upon real missions of the American Army mainly in Iraq and other Middle Eastern conflict areas (fig. 7). *KumaWar* is a typical example of a game which simplifies the perspective on Arabs and Muslims by rendering them as terrorists and extremists. The game was updated each month with new missions which referred to actual events. The last mission updated was the assassination of Osama Bin Laden (fig. 8). In *Quest for Bush* – a game created by the Global Islamic Media Front – you play an Islamic soldier whose mission it is to kill George W. Bush (fig. 9 and 10). Practically

![Fig 7: Ingame footage from *KumaWar*](image1) ![Fig 8: Killing Bin Laden in *KumaWar*](image2)

the game changes nothing else but the perspective and the visuals – the player does not learn anything about the conflict itself and therefore does not gain a profound understanding for the circumstances behind the reasoning of the agenda. From a westerner’s point of view it sends an alarming message since it portraits the assassination of an important political figure of the Western world. It also does not
offer an explanation which would help to gain a better understanding for their motives. However, we fail to take into account that we have numerous titles in which we threaten the Middle Eastern nations. In this sense it seems as if games like *Quest for Bush* are not more than a tool for ventilating aggressions against Western societies whilst several Western games make the player believe that it is okay to kill Arabs and Muslims since they are seen as accepted enemies by the general public of the Western world. This image is generalized by media coverage and reflects upon ongoing conflicts which are threatening the Western way of life in the same manner the Russians were portrayed as the enemy during the Cold War. Much like *Quest for Bush* points out that the Americans are the enemy to their way of life.

In 2004 the Lebanese movement Hezbollah released a compilation of games to influence children with their anti-Israeli rhetoric. The compilation was published under the name *Fata al-Quds* (Hadeel, 2004), which means: “The children of Jerusalem”. The games consisted of action games and mutations of old classics from the 80’s like *Pacman* and *Space Invaders* (fig. 11 and 12). To convey their anti-Israeli message on the visual level all the graphical artifacts of foes had been replaced with the Star of David and huge spiders with the face of Ariel Sharon. In the *Space Invaders* modification the player has to defend the ‘Dome of the Rock’, which represents a part of the most important religious site in the Old City of Jerusalem (fig. 12). In a simplistic way the developers of the modification provide this version of the game...
with a narrative frame by turning a space invasion into the defense of Jerusalem against Israeli Jews. Hezbollah’s aim was to indoctrinate Islamic children with the idea that they should reclaim Jerusalem, as can be seen in the opening clip of the compilation where it says “Jerusalem belongs to us”. Although these games differ from America’s Army the message they convey is similar: They wish to introduce the children to their rhetoric and are therefore ideological and propagandistic manipulation tools. The goal is to influence children at a young age to make them potential future soldiers who will fight for Hezbollah’s cause when they reach adolescence. As a response to American first person shooters like America’s Army the Hezbollah also developed a game – Special Force – which strengthened the Arab or Muslim identity and relied strongly on patriotic and religious ideals. Special Force’s target groups are teenagers and young adults who should be encouraged to devote their lives to reclaim Jerusalem.

Under Ash and its sequel Under Siege are first person shooters created by the first Arab game developer Afkar Media. This study will focus on Under Siege, which can be characterized as a game with a documental approach since it is based on actual events documented by the United Nation records. It covers a timeframe between 1999 and 2002 during the second Intifada. The game shows the Palestinian perspective through characters which are individualized on the visual aesthetic level (they look unique and don’t match stereotypical standards) as well as on the narrative level since the game provides each main character with an emotionalized background story.

The protagonist played by the gamer is called Ahmad, who is present at the Mosque of Abraham in Hebron when a radical Jewish fundamentalist, Baruch Goldstein, shot and killed 29 Muslims and injured 125 people in 1994 (SISLER 2008). In this introduction of the game the player has to survive the shooting and try to disarm Goldstein. Afterwards he has to fight the Israeli Defense Force. From here on the game resembles a typical first person shooter since it offers no alternative perspective: The conflict cannot be solved in a peaceful manner, the only option the game provides is to fight and kill the Israeli enemy. However, the game draws one distinction: In contrast to other games Under Siege does not exclusively focus on the fight between two opposing forces. It also tries to include a perspective on the civilians which are part of the conflict. The mechanisms of the game force the player to take the civilians into account and to avoid collateral damage. By ignoring this rule the player immediately loses the game. Although Under Siege is not able to overcome the dualism of two fighting opponents whilst representing just one perspective it distinguishes between soldiers and civilians. In this respect it does not differ between Israeli and Palestinian civilians and therefore considers influencing the player to channel his aggressions just towards the opposing force (SISLER 2008). Even though this might sound good we have to take into account that the purpose of the game is to portray the Israeli occupying force as an enemy which can only be defeated through armed resistance.
3.3 Constructive Entertainment: Complex Perspectives, Education and Transfer of Knowledge in Serious Games

The examples above have shown that a majority of attempts made by developers to spread a message through video games is limited to a one-sided perspective. Propagandistic games like America’s Army or Quest for Bush are not interested in educating the gamer by providing him with objective information about the conflict; they also do not offer options for peaceful or alternative solutions. The gamer has to kill in order to win. Even games like Under Siege which endeavor to deliver a more complex view, fail by rendering the opposing ‘Other’ in the same stereotypical manner like the other mentioned first person shooters.

But developers have not been unaware of the potential that video games offer to influence people in a more impartial and constructive way. September 12th - A Toy World was released in September 2003 and was the first installment from independent Uruguayan game developers lead by a former CNN journalist – it would later be seen as the title which minted the term ‘newsgame’. It was the first game to shed light on current events by rendering a simulation in which the player could interact and explore the news critically. The purpose of the project was to use the informative and interactive nature of video games to question the War on Terror and to convey the maxim that you cannot extinguish fire with fire.

In the introduction of the game it clearly states that it is in fact not a game but a simulation and that you cannot win or lose (fig. 13). It is set in a Middle Eastern village and populated by clearly distinguishable civilians and terrorists. The player’s only means of interaction is to decide where or whether or not to shoot (fig. 14). The attempt of eliminating the terrorists will result in collateral damage and the loss of civilian lives. Mourning relatives will gather around the innocent dead and eventually turn themselves into terrorists in order to avenge the death of their loved ones. After a series of failed attempts to neutralize the targets the village will be swarming with terrorists. This will in turn render the futility of the player’s means of interaction and force the realization of a necessary alternative solution for the problem.
Despite its simplicity, September 12th exhibits a strong political message and urges to establish new methods to replace the destructive and unsuccessful campaign against terrorism. However, it does not provide an alternative solution or attempt to do so. It should therefore rather be seen as an act to fuel and spark an intellectual discussion about the endeavor. One example of a game which lays its focus on finding a peaceful and unbiased solution for an armed conflict is called PeaceMaker (ImpactGames, 2007).

**PeaceMaker** is a so called ‘serious game’ which challenges the player to “succeed as a leader where others have failed” (ImpactGames 2010) by taking the role of either the Israeli Prime Minister or the Palestinian President to bring peace to the region. Within the simulation the gamer has to weight the pros and cons of political, social and military decisions whilst he is aiming for a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which satisfies both parties. Therefore he has to know both standpoints and cannot restrict his knowledge to the concerns and motives of the party he is representing. He is provided with profound information about the conflict in the form of real media coverage and news footage about actual events (fig. 13 and 14). Depending on the chosen difficulty the presented situation can be dominated by calm, tense or violent behavior. Another distinctive feature of the game is that the two leaders cannot make the same decisions and do not have the same choices since the game takes their political and economical backgrounds into account and reflects on existing resources of the parties as well as on their political interests. **PeaceMaker** is also affected by a factor of uncertainty which relates to real life: The intended outcome of a certain action is not always guaranteed; instead the scenario is mixed with unpredictable events and developments which demand immediate decisions and interventions. The interactivity between game and player is therefore much more complex than in case of the discussed games in Chapter 3.1 and 3.2. In **PeaceMaker** the player is provided with several options which all lead to different results whilst the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ combination of all decisions generates success or failure in the end.
On a visual level the game avoids the stereotypical rendering of Palestinians and Israeli by using media footage which shows different people, personalities and groups in an objectified manner. The footage also raises awareness that each decision made by the player affects people in the conflict regions. The coverage is rich with emotional responses of the Israeli and Palestinian towards political resolutions, developments and actual events and reflects moods and social conditions (fig. 13). In this way PeaceMaker adds an emotional dimension or emotional triggers to the game which complement the otherwise rather abstract surface of the graphics (fig. 15 and 16).

PeaceMaker proves that video games can be educating and informative without losing an entertaining and challenging appeal. The game offers complex knowledge about a conflict and encourages the player to learn as much as possible about the involved parties to be able to finish the game successfully.
The analysis demonstrated that video games can be more than just a means of entertainment: Due to their growing significance within the field of mass culture and mass communication there is a need to take a closer look on their potentials and mechanisms. The study has shown that video games are successfully used to convey messages of different kinds and that they communicate on various levels. The complexity of games allows developers to utilize the potentials of the visual, narrative, emotional and mechanic dimensions of the game. Furthermore the interactive aspect of the medium can be seen as its trademark since no other medium provides its recipients with the chance to interact with its content. Through positive and negative reinforcement, the medium’s influence on its participants grows since it encourages and internalizes certain behaviors which correlate with the conveyed message.

The study has shown that games can be used as effective recruitment tools and spread a very national and patriotic message. They provide an image of war which is highly rendered and blinds out its cruel and negative reality by diminishing the consequences of violence to an almost invisible scale. In this regard games are instrumentalized in the same manner as media coverage during the Persian Gulf War or the latest Iraq conflict.

The mechanisms of the game simplify reality by making abstractions of it in the manner of a black and white mentality. In this regard the analysis raised awareness of the creation of stereotypes through video games which can lead to the confirmation of cultural prejudices by the simplified representation of the opposing ideological or ethnic group. Video games also channel emotions in a special way – they can desensitize players through lack of detail and emotional attachment.

The study pointed out that the minority of developers put their efforts into conveying more complex messages which are not restricted to a narrowed perspective. A large amount of games does not try to educate the player, but simply tries to manipulate him. In this regard games like PeaceMaker or September 12th - A Toy World can be seen as innovative alternatives to one-sided attempts to utilize the medium. These games provide the player with profound information and offer an insight into certain conflicts. They also encourage the gamer to reflect upon given information and to think about creative solutions to solve a conflict.

This examination aimed to show how certain mechanisms of video games are capable of conveying messages. It was meant as an introduction to the subject and did not claim to cover the topic with all its aspects. Instead it was based on a qualitative research to exemplify the communicational dimensions and possibilities of the medium. The results of the research can be used as the foundation for further studies. In this regard it would be interesting to investigate the topic from the developer’s standpoint to create a game which utilizes the full potential of the
medium by conveying complex, multi-perspective messages in an educating as well as entertaining manner. PeaceMaker and September 12th - A Toy World are good examples of games which only touch the surface of a vast and deep ocean which demands further exploration.
REFERENCE LIST

Literature


Internet Sources


Games


**Images**

**FIGURE 1:** Game board of *Juden Raus!* digital photograph, Yad Vahem [Accessed 27th of October 2011: http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/de/holocaust/about/pre/modern_antisemitism_object_gallery.asp]

**FIGURE 2:** Player Figures of the board game *Juden Raus!*, digital photograph, Yad Vahem [Accessed 27th of October 2011: http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/de/holocaust/about/pre/modern_antisemitism_object_gallery.asp]

**FIGURE 3:** Screenshot taken from America’s Army 3, America’s Army 3, MOVES Institute, 2009.

**FIGURE 4:** Screenshot taken from America’s Army 3, America’s Army 3, MOVES Institute, 2009.

**FIGURE 5:** Screenshot taken from America’s Army 3, America’s Army 3, MOVES Institute, 2009.

**FIGURE 6:** Screenshot taken from America’s Army 3, America’s Army 3, MOVES Institute, 2009.

**FIGURE 7:** *KumaWar* (Kuma LLC, 2004), Screenshot, Sisler, V. [Accessed 27th of October 2011: http://www.digitalislam.eu/article.do?articleId=1704]


