

## ***Dead-in-Iraq* and the Spatial Politics of Digital Game Art Activism**

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### **Abstract**

*Dead-in Iraq* is both a memorial to dead soldiers and a war protest. It also happens to take place within an online multiplayer game, namely the U.S. Army recruiting game *America's Army*. This paper examines U.S. based artist Joseph DeLappe's project as an act of digital culture jamming. As a tactic of intercepting information flows, *Dead-in-Iraq* highlights the spatial politics at stake in contemporary culture – and specifically, the spatialisation of protest within mediated culture. *Dead-in-Iraq* is the ludic equivalent of an online pacifist act of civil disobedience; and it serves as an expanded case study to consider how issues of rights and responsibilities are spatialised in online games. At issue here are the imbricated spaces, politics and ethics of digital game art activism.

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Online games offer newly emergent contexts for negotiating notions of public order and civic propriety in contemporary interactive communication environments. Complex regimes of governance and self-governance, complete with seemingly ritualised practices for gamer netiquette and other forms of acceptable interactive player behaviour, are continually evolving in these “synthetic worlds” (Castronova, 2006), even in the most rudimentary networked multiplayer games. But what happens when these imputed social codes are wilfully transgressed? More to the point, is it possible to envisage scope for genuinely democratic participatory cultures in these synthetic worlds, to the extent of accommodating alterity and dissent? *Dead-in-Iraq* is the ludic equivalent of an online pacifist act of civil disobedience; and it serves as an expanded case study to consider how issues of rights and responsibilities are spatialised in online games.

*Dead-in-Iraq* is both a memorial to dead soldiers and a war protest. It also happens to take place within an online multiplayer game. Conceived by United States-based artist Joseph DeLappe, this project commenced in March 2006 on the third anniversary of the Iraq invasion. As part of this work, DeLappe enters the free access U.S. Army online game *America’s Army* with his login name ‘dead-in-iraq’. Using the in-game text messaging system that scrolls across the screen for all users to see, he types in the name, age, service branch and date of death of U.S. service person killed in Iraq since the war started. By January 2007, 3067 personnel had died. DeLappe describes his role within the project as follows: “I am a neutral visitor as I do not participate in the proscribed mayhem. Rather, I stand in position and type until I am killed ... Upon being re-incarnated in the next round, I continue the cycle” (DeLappe, 2007). As of January 24, 2007, he has input 2285 names. He regularly updates these input figures on his project website (DeLappe, 2007), where he also provides the latest figures for the increasing number of U.S. war dead. He plans to continue with *Dead-in-Iraq* until the war is over.

DeLappe calls the project an “online gaming intervention” because “[b]y bringing these names into that context it’s not only a way of remembering, it’s bringing a reality into the fantasy” (cited in Craig, 2006). He regards *America’s Army* as “a tax-payer funded propaganda and recruiting and advertising tool for the Army” (cited in Kuo, 2006). For DeLappe, the game is collusive in promulgating and perpetuating “a fantasy about killing and being in the military, but nobody dies, there are no consequences. It’s a complete fabrication ... it’s free, it’s fun to play, it’s seductive, it presents a fantasy portrait of what war is like” (cited in Kuo, 2006; original ellipses).

Developed by the U.S. Army and launched on Independence Day 2002, *America’s Army* has attracted much media and scholarly attention for being an overt army recruitment tool. Henry A. Giroux (2006), for example, is critical of how “domestic militarisation” in the U.S. has become “widespread in the realm of culture and functions as a mode of public pedagogy, instilling the values and the aesthetic of militarisation through a variety of pedagogical sites and cultural venues” (p. 197). He notes that the collaboration between the military and entertainment complexes has produced pedagogical game-texts like *America’s Army*. Giroux maintains that “the pedagogical force of popular culture itself” has become “a major tool used by the armed forces to educate young people about the ideology and social relations that inform military life – minus a few of the unpleasanties” (p. 199).

At the same time, however, other scholars like David B. Nieborg (2006) and Zhan Li (2003) suggest that critiques of the game need to be balanced with the varied critical and creative engagements with the game as reflected in, say, certain blogs, fan-sites and game mods. At any rate, Nieborg emphasises that the U.S. Army's strong stance against the creation and circulation of mods (or modifications) of their game underscores how this game has been carefully designed to portray and market the Army's image and its core agenda. Indeed, if anything, the subversive and agentive potential implicit in game modding is recognised. Nevertheless, such forms of agency appreciably also function within circumscribed social, economic, and demographical parameters. In addition, this agency acts – and is acted upon – within the contexts of particular political and cultural economies. These putative limitations certainly extend and apply to DeLappe's project as well, even though it seeks to mobilise its commentary by cannily operating *inside* the game. The question remains: can, and should, *Dead-in-Iraq* still be conceived of as a productive agentive act?

DeLappe's online intervention in state-sanctioned information flows may be interpreted as a form of culture jamming. While jamming has often been directed at advertising culture, adusting is by no means its only function. Spanning a broad genealogy that encompasses the Situationists and Electronic Civil Disobedience, the act of jamming cultural circuitries of hegemonic, and increasingly corporatised, information flows has today evolved to become a significant activist and artistic mode of critique, protest and disruption. As Naomi Klein would further have it, "The most sophisticated culture jams are not stand-alone ad parodies but *interceptions* – counter-messages that hack into a corporation's own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended" (2001, p. 281; my emphasis).

As a tactic of interception, *Dead-in-Iraq* highlights the spatial politics at stake in contemporary culture – and specifically, the spatialisation of protest within mediated culture. The project draws on broader traditions of war protest involving the symbolic invocation and naming of the war dead. Such acts are being revived today. Examples include the "Naming of the Dead" public ceremonies in 2004 organised by the international Stop the War Coalition (Dabrowska, 2004; Stop the War Coalition, n. d.), and the reading of the names of U.S. war dead on an episode of *Nightline* televised in the U.S. in 2004 (Carter, 2004). At the same time, however, the process of invoking names of the war dead in public spaces of protest almost always involves specific rhetorical manoeuvring in anticipation that it will inevitably be indicted, by some, as an act that exploits or dishonours the troops. This is especially so when the war is still in progress and while the lists of names continue to grow. Coterminous space for commemoration, memorialisation and remembrance must seemingly be created. Moreover, it is not uncommon for such an honorific space to perhaps even precede the protest, the activism, the dissent itself. Thus, by rhetorical obligation, DeLappe has to present his project as a specifically ordered conjunction – memorial *and* protest – lest it overly transgress the social boundaries of civil propriety and sanctioned critique.

Yet, through the persistent typing of names, *Dead-in-Iraq* provokes salient questions. What happens if there are instead no names to publicly reflect on or mourn? What happens when the war dead die again on being edited and editorialised out of mediated existence? What public sphere is born in their absent space? The answers might lie in Judith Butler's (2004) observation that "the prohibition on certain forms of public grieving itself constitutes the public sphere on the basis of such a prohibition" (p. 37). That is to say, the public sphere is "created on the condition that certain images do not appear in the media, certain names of the dead are not utterable, certain losses are not avowed as losses, and violence is derealized

and diffused” (pp. 37-38). The enactment of such prohibitions “not only shore up a nationalism based on its military aims and practices, but they also suppress any internal dissent that would expose the concrete, human effects of its violence” (p. 38).

The naming of U.S. war dead in DeLappe’s project is thereby not only necessary, it is also necessarily nation-specific in order to function as a domestic interception into *America’s Army*. When he interrogates the game’s method and content of communication – be it in terms of its ostensible “hyper-reality” (GamePolitics, 2006) or its sanitising of the brutalities of war (Craig, 2006) – he is not peddling in scare-mongering abstractions. This is a game with considerable social impact, political consequence and economic underpinning. Rebecca Clarren (2006) reports that “[w]ith 7.5 million users since its release in 2002, *America’s Army* has become the main place where young people learn about the military, according to a 2004 marketing survey conducted for the Army.” Furthermore, “[a]s of June [2006], *America’s Army* users had clicked on [the U.S. Army’s recruitment information site] GoArmy.com 1.35 million times. With users having spent more than 160 million hours playing *America’s Army*, the military figures its investment of \$2.5 million per year to expand and update the game is well worth it”. The names in *Dead-in-Iraq* provide textual dissonance within this nexus of entertainment, recruitment, and the economic bottom-line. When “BgRobSmith” observes the names being typed in by dead-in-iraq and momentarily pauses mid-game to ask, “are those real people?? [sic]” (DeLappe, 2007), the corporeal dimensions of this textual dissonance are brought home.

DeLappe takes his cues from art history, citing Dada as his creative and polemical touchstone for “bringing art to the street, taking that kind of thinking and translating it to computer game space” (cited in Kuo, 2006). Dada performance art in particular was often confrontational. Artists delighted in startling unsuspecting passers-by with their impromptu street performances, for example. The historical project of the European avant-garde movements such as Dada and Surrealism in the early twentieth century can be in part regarded as a multifaceted cultural project that strove to wake people up, as it were, and resuscitate a social function for artistic practice, rescuing it from the confinements of bourgeois institutional art (Bürger, 1984). By claiming such a lineage of radical cultural practice for *Dead-in-Iraq* and by bringing a type of online performance art to the virtual streets this time, DeLappe is, in essence, advocating a political refunctioning of art in general and digital game art in particular. His site-specific art project is therefore a performative act of interception into digitalised quotidian existence.

At the same time, he directs attention to questions about the ownership of Internet space. What is at issue here is the imbrication of public and private space with increasingly corporatised digital territoriality. As Jonah Brucker-Cohen (2006) summarily notes, “the work truly raises the general ire of those participating in this game environment”. DeLappe is aware of the negative response he usually provokes but he is equally committed to challenging game spaces with this project. As he puts it, “What are these spaces? People say, ‘We come into these games to do A, B, and C, not C, D, and F.’ My response is to say, who says you’re only allowed to do those things in these spaces? ... The Internet is a space designed for public environments” (cited in Kuo, 2006). One irate gamer however retorts: “This isn’t freedom of speech. If I were a server admin I would ban him. He can write an editorial, or do a plethora of other things that are protected under the notion of freedom of speech. Going into a server paid by someone else, and doing this against their wishes is not protected under freedom of speech” (cited in Lahti, 2006). Another gamer is similarly critical: “Personally, I’d kick him out of a game I was hosting because he wasn’t participating

in the game. The idea that I should be subjected to someone else's ego trip just because we happen to be inhabiting the same virtual real estate is foolish" (cited in Lahti, 2006). These views, DeLappe's included, belie a range of presuppositions about the putative freedoms available on the Internet. But who actually 'owns' the ludic space in *America's Army*? Legal eagles may side with the U.S. Army; but ludic space is, in turn, also created through play practices, however broadly configured. Accordingly, the underlying sentiment among some gamers is that this is *their* space, a space for unfettered play, unencumbered by real world inconveniences (e.g. Craig, 2006). It is not necessarily deemed to be the 'right' space for DeLappe's project, even though a few might agree in principle with his views (e.g. Lahti, 2006). Once again, as in the imperfect logic of modern territorial sovereignty, the democratic right to dissent is agreed upon, on the proviso that you do not express it in my space.

The myriad provocations engendered by digital game art projects like *Dead-in-Iraq* do not lend themselves to tidy resolution. Critics of this project, and its ilk, consistently question the actual impact created (e.g. Craig, 2006; Lahti, 2006). To be certain, reflexive self-questioning will raise comparable niggling doubts: "What if, despite all the rhetorical flair its adherents can muster, culture jamming doesn't actually matter? What if there is ... only semiotic shadowboxing?" (Klein, 2001, p. 296) Indeed, after all, it has been widely noted that the U.S. Army seems to have no problems whatsoever with *Dead-in-Iraq* (Craig, 2006; Kuo, 2006; Lahti, 2006). DeLappe is himself somewhat circumspect when asked to measure the impact of his project thus far. As he concedes, "A lot of times I'm completely ignored. More often than not I am vote-kicked [from the game session]" (cited in Kuo, 2006). Perhaps one of the most glaring flaws in *Dead-in-Iraq* – and possibly one of its major contradictions – is that for a project that essentially aspires to create dialogic space with and for other gamers, *dead-in-iraq's* doggedly unresponsive typing might be obscurantist and too wilfully monologic.

Yet, at the same time, perhaps an outcomes-based approach to quantifying the success of digital game art is inadequate, especially when the latter adopts an interventionist mode of practice. At base are the complex politicised provenances of site-specific digital game art activism. Surely the point of a project such as *Dead-in-Iraq* is not to demand how its effects are to be measured. Instead, the point must lie in asking, again and again, what such acts of jamming, interception and dissent, no matter how brash or subtle, are collectively a gauge of. As Klein would say, "Perhaps the gravest miscalculation on the part of both markets and media is the insistence on seeing culture jamming solely as harmless satire, a game that exists in isolation from a genuine political movement or ideology" (2001, pp. 308-309). *Dead-in-Iraq* may well be a single project, but it is neither a lone voice nor an aberrant act of protest.

An evaluative approach that negotiates the overarching sum of the project's contextual parts is crucial, if only because it allows for a reading of *Dead-in-Iraq* in terms of how it proffers an ideological counterpoint and a sense of critical alterity that is not enabled within *America's Army*. After all, this is a game where players can only ever view themselves on-screen as members of the U.S. Army. You might well see and target terrorists on your computer screen, but the 'terrorists' look at their screens and see themselves as U.S. Army members hunting you, their terrorist. Representational politics, perspectival affinities, and ludic engagement remain highly orchestrated and insidiously controlled in this virtual hall of mirrors. Therein lies an analogous tale about interactive communication environments and the relative freedoms currently available within online synthetic worlds.

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