

Instrumentalism and the Ethics of Videogame Play: The *Tactical Iraqi* Controversy

Elizabeth Losh,
University of California, Irvine

Competing Positions on Ethics

Games

- are sites that model communicative exchanges
- provide tools that allow learners, patients, or other disenfranchised individuals to realize intended personal or group objectives
- represent a pragmatic strategy of negotiation with a less than ideal world
- foster exploring institutional environments and testing the architecture of boundaries
- are stages for persuasive political rhetoric
- are virtual environments that function as ideological deceptions
- are visual representations of public deliberation

Tactical Iraqi



A Pre-History of Tactical Iraqi

The Center for Advanced Research in Technology for Education (CARTE) at the Information Sciences Institute of the University of Southern California previously authored a range of imaginative but seemingly disconnected distance learning initiatives that featured computer generated animated agents, software capable of expressive speech analysis and synthesis, and programs organized around the presentation of pedagogical drama.



Mission Game



Skill Builder

Week 1: Foundations of Business 3: Theory
Lesson 1: Greetings & Introduction

Learn how to introduce yourself

! In Arabic, the verbs *am* and *are* are not used. For example, in English we say **My name is John** whereas in Arabic they say **My name John**.

'esm	name
'esme	my name
'esme <i>John</i>	my name is <i>John</i>

! You can also introduce yourself with the word 'ana'. 'ana' means I and is only used for emphasis.

'ana 'esme <i>John</i>	I, my name is <i>John</i>
'ana <i>John</i>	I am <i>John</i>

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Tools: Pronunciation, Culture notes, Grammar details, Dictionary, Progress report

Arcade Game



What are the core problems that *Tactical Iraqi* is designed to solve?

- A chronic shortage of Arabic speakers among military personnel
- A combat environment in ambiguous urban warfare settings of occupation and reconstruction
- A resistance to classroom language instruction in the planned population of learners

Social and Perceptual Realism

What common rituals make us more likely to identify a given situation as realistic?

Alison McMahan

How does the *agora* function in digital spaces?



(The *agora* is the environmental bubble in which social exchange and mutual appropriation is permissible according to Ostwald.)

A Pre-History of Embodied Language Learning



Georgi Lozanov:
Suggestology
and
Suggestopedia



Constraining Transgressive Play

James Paul Gee has argued that there are pedagogical benefits to challenging the norms of explicit instruction in situated learning contexts.

Yet military videogames generally punish transgressive play and limit exploration of the virtual environment, to such an extent that human subjects at first avoided the game space of *Tactical Iraqi* entirely or “cheated” to reach the ostensible rewarded objective.

The Commercial Market for Language-Learning Software

The *Living Language* series models norms of politeness in which interactions are highly regulated and proprietary rights to the physical space is not contested.



“Knock and Talk” Missions

How do soldiers learn to follow very different rhetorical rules?

How is personal space negotiated?

How do strategies and tactics differ?

Is there a role for politeness?



Positive and Negative Face

Brown and Levinson recommend negative politeness as the safer course.

Negative politeness is generally the less risky strategy than *positive politeness*

“It is safer to assume that H prefers his peace and self-determination than he prefers your expressions of regard.”

Yet military missions may necessarily constrain the spatial freedom of others during interrogation, quarantine, search, or arrest.

Exactly who is being persuaded when we talk about “persuasive games”?

Are there lay audiences watching as well as professional ones?

Are there domestic audiences listening as well as international ones?

What cultural narratives are re-enforced by creating media spectacles around these games?

Stuart Moulthrop

“The declaration (or acclamation) of war may distract attention from preexisting conflicts inherent in information culture.”



The First Great Debate

Mimesis: games imitate “real” life and in turn encourage players to act in the “real” world in ways that imitate game play.

Catharsis: games provide a socially acceptable outlet for experiencing destructive behavior and help players understand the consequences of anti-social actions.

The Second Great Debate

Narratology: games tell stories that are organized by structural elements in a plot line in which players identify with particular characters

Ludology: games subvert cultural narratives because the “rules” allow for reciprocity and subversive play

A Third Great Debate?

Instrumentalism: games function as tools that give the player enhanced abilities as an individual to effect change in virtual or real worlds.

Functionalism: games function to maintain a society's homeostasis and protect existing institutions and ideological paradigms.

Nick Montfort, on a "great article" . . .



"The BBC article quotes Hannes on gestural differences between U.S. and Arabic cultures, something the program aims to point out to trainees. There are many interesting issues raised by *Tactical Iraqi*, but the game should remind us that virtual environments don't erase the body, and that this can make a difference in how we use our bodies in the "real" world, too."

Gonzalo Frasca: "Shame on you, Tactical Iraqi!"

"They are pulling the trigger with every single line of code they create, with every single page of design doc they write . . . The Army money that funds your projects is tainted with blood . . ."



Pragmatic Responses

Communication saves lives

Lesser of evils arguments (verbal vs. physical violence)

Could serve a public diplomacy purpose

Soldiers might realize the human costs of war if they share a language with its victims

Military vendors won't cease to be

“A Posteriori” Logic

“There is **no such thing as an ideologically neutral piece of software**. Of course, teaching a language is a great thing. However, it does not make sense to see Tactical Iraqi as a game without a context.

“It is a game to teach Arabic to an Army that illegally invaded Iraq.”



Andrew Stern:



“Gonzalo, it's good to hear dissenting voices about military-oriented serious games, even about games that are ostensibly intended to make soldiers more educated and culturally aware.”



“Military funding (e.g. DARPA) is relatively pervasive in computer science in general, helping fund many researchers, including some you know. (The project I'm consulting on is Army-funded.) Such research, like the interactive narrative research I'm working on for ICT, can be applied to many other domains.”

“Personally, right now, working for the US military and thinking that it could be a good thing, given its recent and not-so-recent record, I consider that naive.”

“I told you before to stay away from narratologists . . .”

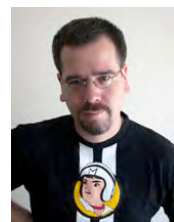


“Among the more pacifist folks I know, one of the ‘strategies’ for dealing with the ethical issues DARPA and other military funding raise is to think of such research as subversive: they’ll take the military funding and use the resulting research for initiatives that undermine the military.”

Ian Bogost



“In this global world, it's always hard to know who is behind who, and what is connected to what. It's almost impossible to predict the network of consequences of your actions. When I work for a client I set my limits on the foreseeable consequences. Let's say that I try to take a sincere ‘to the best of my knowledge.’”

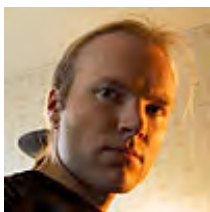


Andrew Stern:



“Ideally of course, the military uses such research in morally acceptable ways, as I hope my contribution would be — e.g. cultural education. Naive? Well the truth is, the interactive narrative research I'm doing is somewhat general, and I would want to be working on similar work even if it weren't military funded, and would want to make the technology available for license; the military would then be free to just license that directly.”

Hannes Vilhjálmsson, speaking as “a peace activist myself”



- 1) When I met in person a group of soldiers that had just returned from duty in Iraq I was struck by their awareness of the mess they were in and their desperation to get out of there alive - and to them, being able to make friends not enemies was absolutely crucial for their own survival.
- 2) The game rewards non-violence over violence - in fact, you fail the game immediately if things start to take a violent turn.



"A journalist recently asked me: 'so, you work on identifying persuasion techniques in videogames. What if your research falls into the wrong hands?' It is a valid question. Whoever develops tools will face this dilemma and have to live with it. However, I think there is a difference between 'developing X that could be used for harm by A' and 'helping A so they can use X.' In the first case, it's A's moral responsibility the one that is at stake. In the second it is mine."

Does any of the *Tactical Iraqi* debate get very far outside the instrumentalist paradigm?

Frasca uses the word "tool" at least six times to explain his positions in the ethical debate?

Even anti-instrumentalist Bogost uses the term:

"The position that any **tool** that requires one to accept the situation in Iraq explicitly excuses the logic that brought it about."

The Tool Approach in Action

Voice Response Translator



“The Human Terrain”

Policy analyst Max Boot in an editorial in *The Los Angeles Times*

The FlatWorld mixed reality facility at USC’s ICT



Virtual Tourism

What are the effects of architectural pastiche?

How is the area of game play constrained?



Virtual Iraq



A HMD exposure therapy simulation that uses digital assets from other ISI/ICT projects and *Full Spectrum Warrior*.

The object of the simulation is to allow the patient to create personal narratives about real-life traumatic events that foster psychic integration rather than the symptomology or dissociation of PTSD. Some versions of the simulation use a motion platform and/or scent release device.



Telemedicine

Rehabilitation and training in virtual environments for amputees, spinal injury patients, the blind, and the developmentally disabled.



Virtual Classroom

Albert "Skip" Rizzo
ADHD Children



Geographies of Trauma

Virtual World Trade Center
Cornell and
the University of Washington



Virtual Bus Bombing
Tamar Weiss,
University of Haifa



Virtual Vietnam
Jarrell Pair and
researchers at Georgia Tech

The Spatialization of Memory in the work of Jacki Morie

The Memory Stairs



DarkCon



The Rhetoric of Walking Michel de Certeau



Ian Bogost, the figure of the *flâneur*, and the concept of “Procedural Rhetoric”

Showing pervasive problems being solved could potentially create political spectacles

The shortage of Arabic speakers

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among the veteran population

The difficulty of locating improvised explosive devices



Ambush! from BBS,
another DARWARS
project

Mainstream Media Coverage of *Tactical Iraqi*

Newsweek

USA Today

The Los Angeles Times

The New York Times

National Geographic

Forbes

BBC

National Public Radio

ABC News

In what ways could you argue that *America's Army* is actually a "better," more ethical game?

It fosters certain forms of community

3-D characters are not racialized

It allows for occasional protest

Embodiment gaps invite critique of its oppositional logic

It is possible to challenge authority despite stern consequences



Is there a rhetorical function to making training, language-learning, or therapy visible to the public?

Regardless of the intentions of their creators, are policy-makers motivated to fund projects that *show* intractable problems being tackled regardless of their efficacy?

If audiences for broadcast media in the general public do not participate in interactive experiences do they have any opportunity for ideological critique?

Slavoj Žižek: “Welcome to the Desert of the Real”

By using the film *The Matrix* as an analogy, Žižek argues that until the attacks of September 11th, the U.S. was shielded by an artificial but ideologically comforting socio-economic, political, and cultural virtual reality environment that separated it from the violence and privation of the rest of the world.

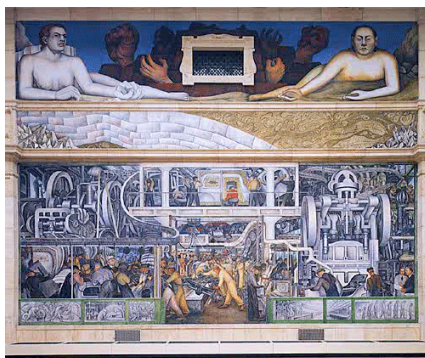


“If there is any symbolism in the collapse of the WTC towers, it is not so much the old-fashioned notion of the ‘center of financial capitalism,’ but, rather, the notion that the two WTC towers stood for the center of the VIRTUAL capitalism, of financial speculations disconnected from the sphere of material production. The shattering impact of the bombings can only be accounted for only against the background of the borderline which today separates the digitalized First World from the Third World ‘desert of the Real.’”

Ironically, since those attacks, government agencies have created even more VRE's so that games and simulations can safely model military and public health situations of crisis.

In particular, a number of other "Virtual Iraqs" were to have been recreated; these included plans to construct a digital replica of the looted National Museum in Baghdad.

Making Things Public



Taxpayer-Funded Games as Public Property

“Scientific laboratories, technical institutions, marketplaces, churches and temples, financial trading rooms, Internet forums, ecological disputes – without forgetting the very shape of the museum inside which we gather all those *membra disjecta* – are just some of the forums and agoras in which we speak, vote, decide, are decided upon, prove, are being convinced.”

Bruno Latour

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Lewis Johnson of the Information Sciences Institute for allowing me to interview him about this project and for access to his published studies, game scripts, character descriptions, and personal reflections in several follow up e-mail exchanges. I am also very grateful to Albert “Skip” Rizzo of the Institute for Creative Technologies, who permitted an extensive interview allowed me to use the *Virtual Iraq* system twice and shared his rich archive of digital files that demonstrate virtual reality exposure techniques and clinical findings. Michael Zyda of the Game Pipe Lab at USC, who co-created *America’s Army*, also granted me an extensive interview.

My e-mail and web addresses

lizlosh@uci.edu

<http://eee.uci.edu/faculty/losh>

<http://www.virtualpolitik.org>

<http://www.digitalrhetoric.org>