In his book, *Games: Agency as Art*, Nguyen proposes that agency serves as the medium for the artform we call games. “Painting lets us record sights, music lets us record sounds, stories let us record narratives, and games let us record agencies” (Nguyen, 2020, pp. 1-2).

He writes of layered agencies wherein an individual may host multiple ends that, while they may conflict with those necessary for the proper functioning of daily life, may also be temporarily adopted (or aspects of the primary agencies suspended) to suit a specific purpose. Nguyen points to games as an example where an individual might adopt what he calls “temporary ends”, or forms of agency that would in other cases cause agential disunity, but in the scope of a game would simply serve to increase the enjoyment of play until the end of the game; at which point those ends are released and the individual’s typical hierarchy of agencies is restored.

In this model, one of the practical outcomes is to allow an individual to explore forms of agency that, in other venues, might be impossible for any number of physical or social reasons–from say flying through the air like a bird or acting as a Stalinist-bureaucrat checking individuals’ documents in a cold war civic simulation. This exploration can give rise to what Nguyen describes as “unlifelike crystallizations” of teleological judgements–judgments of purpose or ends.

The lived experience of a given person is clouded, in Nguyen’s view, by an overwhelming influx of information and contexts. In contrast, the experience of gameplay is a curated set of contexts and agencies wherein the player has fewer practical options and therefore a much simpler means to decide what to do. From an aesthetic perspective, this restricted but clarified sense of what to do can be liberating and cathartic when juxtaposed with the unlimited but saturated haze of our daily lives.

In an ideal condition, a game player can temporarily adopt these agencies, act out whatever fantasy the game’s context provides, then divest these agential motives to resume everyday life. Nguyen warns, however, that it isn’t uncommon for individuals to become so immersed in the game that they forget to allow their superseding agencies–the ones that afford them the ability to socialize well for example–to override their temporary in-game agencies. He describes a situation where one player fails to realize the real-world emotional state of his opponent, fails to suspend his game-centric temporary agency and becomes therefore guilty of being “something of an asshole” (Nguyen, 2020, p. 57). Most people who have played games will have either encountered individuals less competent at this kind of agential fluidity, or have been so themselves. It’s common enough in American culture to have elicited numerous cliches such as “bad sport”, “sour grapes” and so on.

While this condition is unfortunate and aversive, it tends to subside when the game ends. What I’d like to explore here is what happens when this “unlifelike crystallization” phenomenon described by Nguyen is operationalized.

America’s Army was a video game commissioned and operated by the US Army as a recruitment tool. This program was released in 2002 at a time when online multiplayer first person shooters had reached unprecedented levels of general popularity. It was designed to very closely resemble Counter-Strike, which was among the most popular games of its contemporary genre and has continued to dominate esports to this day (Henningson, 2020).

Counter-Strike was a team-on-team multiplayer first person shooter where one team, the counter terrorists, would face the other team, the terrorists, in various scenarios such as territory control, plant/diffuse a bomb, hostage/VIP escort, and others.

America's Army essentially followed the Counter-Strike model in terms of mechanics (first person shooter, various combat adjacent scenarios etc.) but modified the game design for ludonarrative consistency with the US Army's recruitment goals. These goals were best expressed in a question/answer section of the game's website aimed at the parents of children who might play the game:

> "With the passage of time, elimination of the draft and reductions in the size of the Army have resulted in a marked decrease in the number of Americans who have served in the Army and from whom young adults can gain vicarious insights into the challenges and rewards of Soldiering and national service. Therefore, the game is designed to substitute virtual experiences for vicarious insights. It does this in an engaging format that takes advantage of young adults' broad use of the Internet for research and communication and their interest in games for entertainment and exploration." (Wardynski, 2002)

In the game Counter-Strike, one team would be "the good guys" and the other "the bad guys"–using the American vernacular shorthand of that era "counter terrorists" and "terrorists" respectively. However, in America's Army, the player's team would always be "counter terrorists" and the opposing team would always be "terrorists."

The modifications–though at first glance seem like a benign marketing gimmick–can take on some nefarious qualities when viewed through the agential lens as espoused by Nguyen. "When I speak of agency, I am generally thinking in terms of a fairly traditional conception— in which agency involves intentional action, or action for a reason" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 18). Though Nguyen goes on to note that his conception is open and by no means definitive, it is suitable for the sake of his next argument: "Games turn out to be a way of writing down forms of agency, of inscribing them in an artifact… Once we can write something down, that enables us to more easily study and refine it" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 18).

Nguyen above details the mechanism clearly employed by the United States Army to a very specific end. What Wardynski (2002) calls "insights into the challenges and rewards of Soldiering and national service" are entirely abstract; especially when contextualized as game rewards. What Wardynski isn't saying is that these in-game "rewards" are obtained through the player's skillful application of simulated violence. Nguyen explains that "games can let us indulge our impulses toward aggression, lose ourselves temporarily in the predatory delights of competition, and do so in a morally acceptable way" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 177). Moral acceptability is clearly on Wardynski's mind as he accounts for the potential concerns about exposing children to such violence; saying, "We built the game to provide entertainment and information without resorting to graphic violence and gore. When a soldier is killed, that soldier simply falls to the ground and is no longer part of the ongoing mission" (Wardynski, 2002). He explains how the game's "honor points" system discourages Rules of Engagement (ROE) violations, fratricide, and so on by reducing the number of total points. He fails to mention that the primary–and clearly most cathartic–way to increase points is through the completion of missions that necessarily require simulated homicide.

The full picture shows that Wardynski is aware that this game obfuscates "Soldiering and national service" with "honor points" achieved through violence, is cognizant of the rhetorical power of such an obfuscation and sees it as a crucial component of the US Army's recruitment regime. Wardynski finds it salient that, "[t]he values we take on in games are clearer, easier to apply, and easier to evaluate than our enduring values" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 191). He operationalizes that phenomenon to induce children to valorize an abstract fantasy: that state-sanctioned homicide is a cathartic means of achieving honor. He is frank about what he sees as the national interest in doing so when he says, "In elementary school kids learn about the actions of the Continental Army that won our freedoms under George Washington and the Army's role in ending Hitler's oppression. Today they need to know that the Army is engaged around the world to defeat terrorist forces bent on the destruction of America and our freedoms" (Wardynski, 2002).

It feels important to mention that none of this implies that there is a definitive correlation between simulated violence and an individual's desire or willingness to conduct violence in real life. Much academic writing offers a wide array of positions on this and it is by no means a settled debate. If I were claiming that the US Army was successfully turning peaceful civilian kids into bloodthirsty child-warriors then I would be able to cherry pick any number of studies to 'prove' that claim. I am not making that claim. Mine is simply that the US Army demonstrated through its actions and its words that it could employ a game as recruitment propaganda to condition children towards its ends. It believed it could engineer a social situation where children would eventually become adults who were sympathetic to its ends.

> "I suggest that multiplayer games are social technologies and that they can rearrange our social relationships to some end. In some games, that end is creating productive, enjoyable activity out of structured competition. But that is not the only end, as we shall soon see. More importantly, the social engineering is exactly that: engineering." (Nguyen, 2020, p. 181)

All of this is to say that the Government of the United States willfully employed video games to groom children for military service.

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