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War Games at Work: Networks of Power in the U.S. Army Video Game Project

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**Abstract**

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This ethnography documents and explores the interconnections between the U.S. military, video games, and cognitive labor by focusing on the production, marketing, and deployment of the official U.S. Army video game, *America's Army*. The video game, now in its third iteration, has been available as downloadable freeware since 2002, and has contributed to a variety of other applied military technologies used by enlisted U.S. soldiers. Its chief objective, however, has continually been directed towards increasing the quantity and quality of Army recruits while retaining enlistees.

My starting point is in the acknowledgment that the militarized relationships exemplified by *America's Army* call into question tacit ontological divisions between the virtual and the actual, work and play, education and entertainment, and war and game—divisions that up to this point have helped humans make sense of the world and their place in it. I argue that the blurring of these divisions is yet another part of the evolution of biopolitical power. I follow three thematic threads in this development in biopower vis-à-vis military games, investigating how militarized connections to digital games alter how wars are fought, how enemies are imagined and created, and how both labor and entertainment are mobilized for the purposes of war.

The trajectory of this ethnography moves from more historical and institutional foci towards the increasingly specific and personal. Chapter 1 introduces the Army Game Project, research methodology, and theoretical concepts. Chapter 2 contextualizes the Project by providing an oral and institutional history. Chapter 3 explains the rationale and logic of the Project, drawing primarily upon interview material with Colonel Casey Wardynski. Chapter 4 examines the fictional enemies of the game, contrasting them with “Real Heroes,” actual soldiers held up as model citizens by the game. Chapter 5 visits the Virtual Army Experience and the Army Experience Center, two recruiting efforts implemented by the marketing agency Ignited. Chapter 6 explores the idea of “cognitive labor” in the military entertainment industry, in particular the situation of the *America’s Army* video game designers. Chapter 7 reconnects each of these threads with the topics introduced in the opening chapter.

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## **Dedication**

To my parents, whose unwavering support in this and all endeavors led me here. These pages are infused by your influence, and, looking back on it all, seem simply to be a natural coalescence of the interests of a computer scientist and an English literature teacher.

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## I. Introduction\*

### PJ Goes to War

*“The action takes place in an oppressed yet stubborn country—Poland, Ireland, the republic of Venice, some South American or Balkan state....”*

—Jorge Luis Borges, “Theme of the Traitor and the Hero” (1998:143)

PJ’s world is very limited and intense. It is confined to one large street that is about four blocks long and filled with an array of abandoned shops, hotels, vehicles, and restaurants. This street is bordered by smaller parallel and interconnected alleys—two to the east and one to the west. A bright but cloudy sky casts brilliant shadows upon brownish gray buildings and shattered rubble in the streets of this city called Travnizeme. PJ, however, gives scant attention to these details, as he knows that he and his fellow squad of US Army soldiers have a critical mission to undertake. As PJ’s Squad Leader explained in the mission briefing earlier, a group of Czervenian enemy soldiers is fast approaching. They are seeking to escort one of their VIPs to safety. PJ is unaware of the overall strategic and political implications of his mission; he does not know who this VIP is or why he is so important. This information is not relevant to the situation at hand. He knows only that his squad’s mission is to kill this VIP at all costs before he can make it to the extraction point on the other side of the city.

Five of his squad mates—Fire Team A plus the Squad Leader—head west to cover the exits from a side alley. The responsibility of PJ’s unit, Fire Team B, is to cover the eastern sector

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\* All given names in this dissertation that initially appear without a surname are pseudonyms. Names that are accompanied by a surname are the actual names of individuals. See note 10 for further naming details and conventions.

for possible enemy VIP extraction attempts. As two soldiers in PJ's Fire Team run towards stairs that will take them to a roof top overlooking the main street, his Fire Team Leader, LawBringer007, calls out the full name assigned to PJ when he first joined the Army: "Perplexed Jaguar, follow me!"<sup>1</sup> "Sure thing LB7," PJ answers. They dart north down an eastern side alleyway, up a short flight of stairs and around several corners. LawBringer007 continues north down the alley at a dead run. PJ follows, but hesitates, knowing by experience that such incautious tactics are one way of getting quickly killed. Instead, PJ checks his flanks and squares off, bringing up the iron sights of his M16A4 machine gun. He covers LB7's headlong sprint down the dark alley, but realizes that there is little that he can do to help protect his Fire Team Leader.

Although PJ is still a rather inexperienced soldier himself, he understands that LawBringer007 is demonstrating what his squad mates have disparagingly referred to as "noob" soldier behavior. But LB7 can only learn through experience, PJ tells himself. Sure enough, as his Fire Team Leader runs down the alley past the open back door to a hotel, PJ hears the dreaded sounds of a Czervenian Obran being fired at close quarters and he knows that disregarding LawBringer007's orders was the right decision. He watches through his iron sights as a hidden enemy soldier unloads rounds of bullets into LB7 from inside the hotel. PJ's fire team leader falls to the ground, severely injured and incapacitated, but not yet dead. "I can see him. He's right inside the hotel door," LawBringer007 communicates through PJ's headset. Moments later, though, the enemy soldier edges into the alleyway in hopes of securing LB7 with ropes in order to immobilize him from taking part in further combat. Down the alley and in the shadows, PJ waits until the enemy is centered within his sights, then fires repeatedly. The enemy soldier falls to the ground next to LawBringer007.

Instead of rushing to secure the Czervenian, PJ waits, thinking that perhaps there is another one nearby covering his fallen teammate's flanks. But PJ can hear the injured enemy soldier speaking in his own language over his communications headset, presumably calling for medical aid and informing his teammates of PJ's location. PJ realizes that he must quickly silence the incapacitated enemy soldier, but he hesitates to kill him since this would be a severe, illegal violation of the US Army's rules of engagement (ROE). Although ROE violations have happened regularly in this particular theatre of conflict, PJ also knows that the consequences for such dishonorable actions can include a prompt imprisonment in Fort Leavenworth. PJ has been there in the past and he does not want to go back. So, choosing not to become a war criminal this time around, he cautiously secures the enemy soldier and removes his ability to communicate with teammates or participate in further combat operations.

PJ has been listening to the tense chatter of Fire Team A's squad mates, now apparently engaged in a firefight to the west. In the meantime, LawBringer007 has been bleeding severely, having been shot multiple times in the right arm, chest, and right leg. Although PJ now seriously doubts the utility of having LB7 as a teammate, he knows that healing him would at least get an injured teammate back into the action, if only to cause a distraction for the enemy soldiers to shoot at. It would also earn LB7's gratitude, increase his honor in the eyes of his squad mates, and maybe even get him a medal. PJ crouches over LawBringer007, and after about 15 seconds of first aid treatment—just like what was taught to him during training for basic combat life saving—LB7's multiple bullet wounds are patched up and he is again on his feet. The Fire Team Leader's injuries prevent him from moving very fast, but he is an extra gun and an extra set of eyes for PJ to use to his advantage.

Almost immediately after LB7 is healed, two shadows of enemies emerge from the foliage in a square to the north of the alley. “Two Czervos coming this way,” LB7 calls out, as PJ hears the report of two Obrans and the subsequent impact of bullets all in LB7’s flesh and PJ’s body armor. PJ does not pause to check on the state of LB7—he very likely is dead now—but instead turns around and sprints into the hotel, away from the quickly approaching enemies. He sees some spiraling stairs and continues up them at a sprint in an effort to elude his hunters. Down a hall and into an empty room, back against the wall and crouching down, PJ waits. He feels like a coward, camping in the hotel bedroom like this, but if he plays it right, it might just be the best strategy. He assesses his wounds: a light bullet scrape on his left shoulder, but no severe bleeding, and a direct hit to his chest, but the body armor prevented injury. His radio communication with other squad mates is still active, so he relays the vital information to the rest of the surviving US Army soldiers in the area: “There are two who just came in through the back door of the hotel. One looked like he could be the VIP. I’m in the second floor, side room.” “I’m on it,” the voice of another squad member, TehLux[o]r, responds, adding, “I think we’re the only two left.”

As he waits for his teammate to arrive and the opportune moment to emerge from hiding, PJ reflects upon his experiences in recent weeks. It had been a quick journey from boot camp to Travnizeme, but a journey which had involved hundreds of deaths and failures in addition to emotional victories. PJ has learned and improved his skills with every mistake, and he has made friends—brothers in arms—that he would risk his life for. He has already risked his life for them multiple times, and even died for them, in this theater of conflict. Several days ago he and two others were killed in this very room by a hand grenade tossed into the open window by some lucky noob Czervo.

PJ is brought out of his reveries as he hears gunfire downstairs in the hotel lobby. TehLux[o]r apparently has found one of the two enemies that had been chasing him. All becomes silent following a deafening boom of a grenade from downstairs. Maybe both TehLux[o]r and the enemy were killed from the blast, or maybe the enemy survived. TehLux[o]r, though, is dead; his voice comms are down. PJ hears dull sounds of movement in the second floor's back room overlooking the alley. He moves quietly down the hall, readying his weapon. He turns the corner and sees the VIP facing away from the door and looking out a window. Having heard something suspicious, the VIP moves as if to turn around, but it is too late: a barrage of bullets has left PJ's rifle and entered the head of the VIP. It is an immaculate death, clean of any bone fragments or slippery bits flying to splatter on the wall; only a slight puff of red appears as the VIP ragdolls and flops to the floor.

PJ has completed the mission. Celebratory music plays as time stops in PJ's world, and the glorious, disembodied dead from PJ's squad shout in jubilation. They had all been watching the action from their purgatorial state. "That was awesome, man!" PJ's squad leader congratulates him. "Hey, thanks for helping me out," says LawBringer007. Two minutes later, a different scenario plays itself out in this world of alleys, and with the same respawned people. This time, however, PJ isn't as cautious or lucky; he takes a bullet to the neck. As he bleeds and audibly gasps for air the screen turns red then fades to black. The same alley scenario replays yet again, and again. Perhaps the next time Perplexed Jaguar is protecting the VIP instead of trying to kill him; maybe in some lives he actually *is* the VIP. The possible permutations of this thread multiply as PJ's career in the U.S Army expands, but the constant variables of killing and death, victory and defeat, and honor and teamwork through armed combat are all that PJ ever knows or understands.

The Army Game Project

*“War can never break free from the magical spectacle because its very purpose is to produce that spectacle.... There is no war, then, without representation, no sophisticated weaponry without psychological mystification. Weapons are tools not just of destruction but also of perception—that is to say, stimulants that make themselves felt through chemical, neurological processes in the sense organs and the central nervous system.”*

—Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema* (1989:5–6)

Virilio’s words, written just prior to the consumer revolution in networked electronics, seem even truer today. In PJ’s spectacular war story, a clear delineation of war from its representations is lacking; there are elements which point to an uncanny, inhuman element in PJ’s interactions with both enemies and teammates. And, in fact, PJ is an amalgamation of human and computer—a prosthetic extension of a human user, whoever he or she is—within a virtual world of an online video game. PJ’s narrative may be an overdramatic war story, but for a video gamer who has temporarily suspended disbelief long enough to become immersed in this environment and sequence of game events, PJ’s experiences, and by extension the experiences of PJ’s human player, are very real, embodied, and physically stimulating, involving real adrenalin rushes, increased heart rates, and other real sensory experiences and interpersonal communications. PJ’s war story might be a novelty for many who are unfamiliar with military-themed video games, but for the tens of millions of gamers worldwide who play combat-themed games it is not very exceptional.

Despite its unexceptional position as merely one narrative among the vast array of other virtual war stories that have been enacted within video game worlds since the late 1970s, PJ’s

story still stands out for one reason: it takes place within a public video game environment that has been entirely funded and produced by the United States Army. A hardcore player of the game *America's Army 3*, released by the U.S. Army in the summer of 2009, could tell you that the battle described above took place within a scenario known as “Alley (Day Cloudy),” with the mission type being “VIP” (see Figure 1.1). It is likely that this hypothetical gamer would be able to identify many of the rooms and doors that PJ passed; imagine the nuanced clinks of grenades and ricochets of bullets hitting cinderblocks or bricks (some of the many game sounds recorded from real weapons at U.S. Army firing ranges); and intuitively understand the unwritten rules and interfaces of gaming that might leave many uninitiated people lost.



**Figure 1.1: In-game marketing image for the “Alley” level of *America's Army 3*.**

This hypothetical gamer playing as PJ would most likely not be in the Army or interested in joining it, although many people who play *America's Army* are veterans or prospective recruits. *America's Army*, after all, is an elaborate interactive advertisement for the U.S. Army and, like most ads, only a small portion of people who experience it fully buy into it. The Army,

however, does not need or expect every player of the game to be completely persuaded to join the Army; a user of *America's Army* who comes to accept Army norms, priorities, and ways of thinking about the world—one who moves further towards not questioning the status quo of the “military normal” (Lutz 2009)—counts as a success for the Army as well. This is the essence of the logic behind the Army’s long-term investment in entertainment and interactive technologies that possess a persuasive power—investments considered by many to be outside the sphere of what the military does or should do.

*America's Army*, released by the U.S. Army on July 4, 2002 for free download and online play, articulated one of its goals as being “to educate the American public about the U.S. Army and its career opportunities, high tech involvement, values, and teamwork” (Army Game Project 2002:1). In achieving these goals, the game went beyond the call of duty, for numerous people worldwide began playing it as a form of entertainment and socializing. Since its inception, the game continued to evolve with periodic updates and it consistently ranked among the most played online games. In 2009, *America's Army* was awarded five Guinness World Records, reflecting its massive appeal: Largest Virtual Army (9.7 million registered users, about 10 times the total size of the actual U.S. Army); Most Downloaded War Video Game (42 million downloads); Most Hours Spent Playing a Free Online Shooter (231 million hours as of August 2008); Earliest Military Website to Support a Video Game; and Largest Travelling Game Simulator.<sup>2</sup> Successive versions of the game—such as *PJ's world of America's Army 3* (2009)—in addition to modifications designed to train Army soldiers and applications that aid in the development of future weapon technologies, resulted in the expansion of this once small project to encompass a large network of commercial and military institutions known as the Army Game Project.

The Army Game Project has been at the forefront of “serious games” and military entertainment in the past decade. In 2002, when the Army recruitment rate was falling due to deployments, the Army Game Project contributed to a new push by the Army to market itself to potential recruits and the public at large. It also spearheaded the development of various software packages now being used to develop leadership and weapons training for soldiers in the U.S. Army. With a history of contractual agreements between a variety of companies in the electronic entertainment business, including game industry giants such as Ubisoft and Epic Games, the project has been located at a dynamic nexus between a deregulated, neoliberal business model of military contracting and more traditional state-run military organizational practices. Through its business arrangements, the franchise at its height expanded well beyond the online game to include commercial console versions of the game, *America’s Army* plastic action figures, a coin-operated arcade game, a downloadable cell phone version of the game, a high-tech cooperative venture in Army recruiting outreach at the Army Experience Center in Philadelphia, and also a 10,000 square-foot mobile mission simulator dubbed the Virtual Army Experience, which toured throughout the U.S. to air shows and NASCAR events, hosting hundreds of people for a 20-minute, immersive Disney-style simulated Army gaming/recruiting experience (Allen 2009).



**Figure 1.2: The front cover of the September 2008 *Soldiers* magazine, which featured *America's Army* and other military gaming initiatives.**

With all of these popular cultural appearances, it could be easy to overlook other applications of the *America's Army* platform that have been developed for military training and weapons development (see Figure 1.2). For example, one application teaches new enlistees before their entry into basic training some essentials in land navigation, military grid referencing for maps, and first aid. Others include a training exercise created for the United States Secret Service, applications which test and simulate future weapons under development, a close quarters combat simulator using live fire ammunition, and a convoy skills trainer geared towards enabling soldiers to make better decisions while under stress. These adaptations of the *America's Army* game were designed throughout a network of commercial and military studios in Raleigh, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Orlando, and elsewhere, and their activities were overseen

at two offices: the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis at West Point (OEMA), and Redstone Arsenal's Army Software Engineering Directorate (SED) near Huntsville, Alabama.

The reasons for the existence of such a broad network of offices devoted to the Army Game Project are multifaceted, and the benefits for the Army in placing a high-caliber game in the middle of popular gaming culture were numerous. In addition to being an efficient and cost-effective marketing tool to target the enlistment of male teenagers, *America's Army* was also seen by its designers as a relatively cheap way to train soldiers while increasing retention rates by providing "a realistic intro to the Army before getting to boot camp" (Zyda 2004). Added salary incentives; greater opportunities to gain advanced university degrees within the Army; and an institutional push by the Army to market itself as an option with multiple career trajectories also play into this retention strategy. Following the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, both the manpower requirements of the military and resources of the U.S. government became severely taxed; *America's Army*, designed by military economists to cut costs while concurrently increasing recruitment efforts among teens, suddenly became very relevant to the Army. By challenging many of the more entrenched and expensive "legacy" models of recruitment, however, the project quickly made institutional enemies—and staunch supporters—within the greater organization of the Army. Following the economic downturn in 2008, the rate of recruitment to the U.S. military predictably rose, with the result that funding to the Army Game Project, once relatively reliable, was extensively cut. The future of the program remains to be seen, but the questions raised by the circulation of *America's Army* and other Army Game Project products are very much apropos in a society shaped by the economy of war (Der Derian 2000; Turse 2008), immersed in the interactive spectacles of conflict (Stahl 2010; Virilio 1983), and alienated by a pervasive overload of information (Berardi 2009a).

This dissertation investigates these networks of the Army Game Project and the multitude of sociocultural issues that become highlighted by its existence. These issues, further argued in my thesis below and enumerated in detail in subsequent chapters, are in some cases central to many of the questions faced by Americans and the globalized world. I have chosen to examine the practices of the Army Game Project from an anthropological point of view because it has a fascinating history and depth, one that reaches to the core of the militarized and technocentric American psyche.

### War and Game

*“The military uses games to recruit and train soldiers; the antiwar movement uses games to express the futility of the current conflict; the pro-war movement uses games to express its anger against the terrorists; the news media use games to explain military strategy; and the commercial games industry wants to test the waters to see if we are going to play war games the same way other generations watched war movies.”*

—Henry Jenkins, “War Games” (2003)

*America’s Army* is a significant game in its own right, but it is not the video game itself that exclusively interests me. Following general approaches established by social studies of media, in this dissertation I examine the sets of relationships that surround the production and implementation of *America’s Army*. The main idea behind this approach is that media products are cultural artifacts which can shed light upon a variety of other sociocultural practices and assumptions. A single media product can signify multiple ideas, depending on the context in

which it appears. War games, in particular, are floating signifiers that can be endlessly interpreted (see the Henry Jenkins quote above), even by their designers. This ambiguity of meaning, when coupled with the situational gravitas of conflict, gives war games a powerful but often nonspecific emotional tenor, and this is what makes them so gripping to a variety of people. The Army Game Project, which seeks to impose a very specific institutional message upon their game, nevertheless cannot change the fact that media products are always received by a range of individuals and open to a variety of interpretations.

In choosing to look at *America's Army* as a cultural artifact in this way, I take a broader perspective than more formalistic investigations of video games (sometimes referred to as “ludology”), which have been undertaken under the rubrics of media studies and the growing interdisciplinary field of video game studies. Those reading this dissertation with the expectation that it is exclusively about a video game might end up disappointed. The structure and design of *America's Army* and its related products are indeed aspects that inform my investigation; the underlying rationale behind my decision to examine *America's Army*, however, rests not in the qualities of the game itself, but in its position within a kind of liminal space among several trends that are becoming increasingly important and apparent. Three of these trends deserve further explanation as they figure prominently in the scope of this dissertation.

First among these general trends is the rising popularity and use of video games. When I grew up in the 1980s, video games were typically discursively relegated to the domain of preteen boys, and the medium was considered in the eyes of many to be an adolescent toy—often a useful scapegoat portrayed as being a dangerous medium perpetuating and giving rise to social ills such as aggression and the decay of critical thinking, but nonetheless a toy that would never be a legitimate medium of information, communication, and propaganda in its own right. If this

point of view was ever a valid one to begin with, it definitely no longer holds true. Video games have grown up, along with their players; the average age of a video game player in 2008 was 35 years old, and 75% of all video game players were over the age of 18 (ESA 2009:2). Games have entered into mainstream media, and even during the economic downturn beginning in 2008 sales increased as the demand for them grew.<sup>3</sup> The industry as a whole has grown significantly, with nearly \$11.7 billion in sales in 2008, compared with \$2.6 billion in 1996 (ESA 2009:11). The sheer variety of video games has grown as well, and although the plots and premises of many games are inane and infused with niche interests, there are just as many games in the market that present narratives and situations compelling enough to give one pause. Like film, it is medium that is constantly reinventing itself through the creation of new types of genres, which cater to an increasingly broader range of consumers. Everywhere, a “convergence” is taking place between networked media (Jenkins 2006), and games are at the center of this process.

The evolution and growth of online gaming has been extensive in the past 20 years, with a vast array of gaming choices now available for individuals. Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) are now in abundance, and social scientists have shown that entire virtual economies, cultures, and ways of being exist within these worlds—*World of Warcraft* (Chen 2009; Krzywinska and Lowood 2006), *Everquest* (Castronova 2005; Taylor 2006), *Second Life* (Boellstorff 2008; Pearce 2009), and *Ultima Online* (Dibbell 2006) being among the most popular and thoroughly investigated. The overall consensus is that these online virtual worlds are very real, and that to speak of them as an anomaly outside the sphere of “real life” is incorrect. There is a co-evolution taking place between these game worlds and the world of “meatspace,” a term originating in cyberpunk fiction, which refers to the physical world of flesh and blood.

*America's Army* is not a persistent, expansive MMOG in the vein of these games, but as an online multiplayer game it also takes part in this societal joining between virtual and actual.

The pervasive and social media gaming market further blends the virtual with the actual to the point where these terms lose distinction, and these markets have likewise experienced major growth as smart phones and items such as the iPad have grown in popularity. (“Pervasive” here refers to a game industry term for games played on phones or other portable devices, but the term is also demonstrative of more theoretical discussions explored below.) In the aftermath of the 2008 economic crash, as groups of developers rushed to create new applications for the iPhone and Facebook, the pervasive gaming market held an almost grail-like promise of exodus for game developers seeking to break the precarious cycle of hiring and layoffs regularly experienced by the knowledge economy’s cognitariat. Average consumers likewise embraced these games, as they were readily networked into cell phones, were relatively inexpensive, and involved games that could be played intermittently, without large time commitments.

This increasing variability, variety, and interoperability in games over the course of the last 20 years has coincided with a second important trend, which is the rising, and now also essentially pervasive, scale of quotidian consumer interactions with visual representations and simulations of war. War has always been a function of vision, and vice versa; the technologies of seeing have always been directly related to the technologies of fighting (Virilio 1989), and this holds true for video games. Imagining war as if it were a video game first entered into widespread public consciousness during the First Gulf War in 1991, which was hailed as being a “video game war” due to the news media’s prominent and unprecedented reliance on aerial bombing video images and digital representations of the conflict. These images made it appear as if U.S. military engagements in Iraq were a game, similar to those which were being played in

the homes of many Americans. They showed war from the perspective of the pilot and the military strategist, but this produced an unexpected level of detachment between the actual killing and the way in which it was represented. And indeed, even prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait general Schwarzkopf's staff had run simulations of the invasion and possible U.S. military responses to such an extent that, after the start of the war, military officials sometimes became confused in their reports (Der Derian 2000:15). The cycle of information enacted in the First Gulf War, in which military personnel relied on news media outside Iraq to provide them with up-to-date coverage of events inside Iraq, created a scenario of simulation that became far removed from the actual fighting. Civilians and soldiers died, but it was almost as if the war "did not take place" (Baudrillard 1995). Contemporary real-time, 24-hour news coverage has perpetuated this culture of simulation in which news of an event often precedes the actual event—especially when polling and "shock and awe" is involved—therefore shaping it and affecting the outcome.

James Der Derian argues that the U.S. conflicts since the First Gulf War—from Kosovo to Afghanistan to Iraq—have increasingly participated in this kind of hyper-mediated portrayal of war (2000; 2003). "War has taken on the properties of a game," he writes, "with high production values, mythic narratives, easy victories, and few bodies" (2003:41). One common slogan cried by protesters at military gaming events is that "war is not a game," and yet it has become clear that war is increasingly becoming like a game, both in the ways in which it is consumed and fought. This is not new: war as a social ritual has always held potent anthropological connections to gaming (Huizinga 1950; Stroeken 2012; Finnström and Whitehead In Press a). Finnström and Whitehead, for example, contend that

the actual killings on the battlefield, wherever they happen to be located, are intimately linked to an emerging virtual space created by both news, cinematic and gaming media as well as the mediating technologies of contemporary military violence—such as airborne attack drones, satellite surveillance from space, stealth airplanes and helicopters, night-vision equipment and the associated use of politically covert assassination operations. (In Press b)

But if the anthropology of war has indicated that war is much more than a game, it also has made it clear that to think of war as being a “state of exception” from the natural order of society is incorrect (Agamben 2005). If anything, war brings the issues and priorities of a society into stark relief; in American and other neoliberal societies, for example, war and the military have become subsumed as a form of media entertainment (Ben-Ari and Frühstück 2003; Halter 2006; Lutz 2001, 2009). A new word, “militainment,” has even come into use to describe this process (e.g., Stahl 2007, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Militarization is both a cause and an effect of this trend.

Scholars have for some time been theorizing about the merging of war and game, claiming that game development projects like *America’s Army* “dissolve the boundaries between the military and the public” (Gregory 2006:215) and that the “distinction between things civil and things military [is] an illusion, artificially maintained” (Lutz 2001:8). The coming together of these two trends—the increasing normality of war images in both news and entertainment, and the rise of networked video games as a popular and serious medium—has meant that “video games have taken on a peculiarly resonant role in how we are thinking about war now” (Halter 2006:xxv). I will show how this resonance manifests itself in the products and practices of the Army Game Project.

Biopower

*“We increasingly live in a world in which opting out of technological systems is more and more difficult and yet participation within those systems pushes us to accept structures we might oppose.”*

—T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds* (2006:135)

Underlying both of the trends examined above is a third trend that runs deeper. This is the co-evolution of biopolitical disciplinary structures and capital. It is in this process where the heart of this investigation is located, and where the central argument of this dissertation resides.

Before articulating this argument, it is necessary to understand what I am referring to when I talk about biopolitical disciplinary structures, for which the work of Michel Foucault is indispensable. For Foucault, biopower is, at its simplest, the wielding of power over life. Biopolitics is the political sphere through which biopower “attempt[s] to regulate biological occurrences at the *population* level,” and it can encompass an array of sociopolitical technologies, including demographics, policies, laws, and systems (Elbe 2005, emphasis in original).<sup>5</sup> Rather than approaching individuals as merely legal or political subjects, biopower regards them as living beings whose physical health, mental condition, sexuality, genetics, ability to reproduce, capability to fight, potential to work, and all other biologically-related functions (the list can go on) are central to governance and supervision.

Foucault marks the “beginning of an era of bio-power” in the eighteenth century, when “there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations.” During this period, he writes, “there was a rapid development of various disciplines—universities, secondary schools, barracks, workshops; there

was also the emergence ... of the problems of birthrate, longevity, public health, housing, and migration” (1990:140). These disciplinary institutions became the defining structures through which biopower was wielded in liberal societies, and they exercised considerable power over both individual bodies and populations (e.g., Foucault 1990, 2002, 2003, 2007). They have inevitably changed over time and morphed alongside socioeconomic and political structures; it is important to note that biopower is not stagnant, but constantly evolving, seeking out new forms of control by insinuating itself into the fabric of social life and individual subjectivities.

“Biopower,” Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg write,

is not wielded overtly, but rather “flows” through the very foundations of what we recognize as reason, civilization, and scientific progress. It operates through processes of governmentality that may continue to include physical repression but are primarily organized around monitoring and regulating large population groups through broad interventions such as vaccination campaigns and censures. Individuals are disciplined purposefully and explicitly through institutions, but also subtly and unconsciously.

(2009:18)

In this dissertation, I follow suggestions put forward by Gilles Deleuze (1992), and later developed by autonomist theorists such as Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) and Bifo Berardi (2009a, 2009b), that the nature of biopower has changed. The disciplines described by Foucault have evolved to a new point of disaggregation and diffusion. There is now a perpetual crisis within social institutions such as prisons, schools, factories and corporations, and the military. This ongoing crisis is still rhetorically presented as a “state of exception,” but is, in fact, the status quo for neoliberal states (Agamben 2005). The control wielded by these institutions, however, is not fading away, but is instead becoming dispersed beyond the institutions

themselves. This marks a more advanced evolution in biopower to increasingly encompass life and subjugate bodies, expanding via globalized capital ever further into human biology and subjectivity.

This evolution in biopower has produced what Deleuze calls a “society of control” (1992), which is achieved when total institutions are no longer required to produce subjects. “In the disciplinary societies,” Deleuze writes, “one was always starting again (from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory), while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything—the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation” (1992:5). The work of Mike Davis (1988, 1990, 2006) can be seen as a description of the dystopian effects that the control society has had on the everyday life of individuals living in Southern California and the impoverished, sprawling slums in cities worldwide. Davis illustrates in detail how the institutional systems of greater Los Angeles have been enduring a slow decay while concurrently spreading their capacity for control and surveillance throughout society. Public space, for example, is militarized to such an extent that it is unclear whether Davis employs a metaphor when he writes of “fortress Los Angeles” (1990; see also Finoki 2011; cf. Hoffman 2007). Even the California prison system, which persists as one of the most expansive and expensive in the world, is in a state of enormous crisis (Gilmore 2007). With characteristic nihilism, Jean Baudrillard writes that these systems of “prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, that is carceral” (1994:12).

Just as the specific pull of institutions has become more generalized, in the society of control the ontological categories that were once integral to those disciplinary societies described by Foucault are now becoming increasingly blurred through the diffusion of the biopolitical

disciplinary framework. Binary configurations of envisioning social organization, for example, are eroding, and categories once defined in terms of their opposites are falling into irrelevancy. Four such categories of particular importance to this dissertation are those that have separated the once discrete spheres of military and civilian, war and game, education and entertainment, and work and play. The blurring of these binaries is one effect of the evolution of biopower from a disciplinary power based at the institutions to a disciplinary power increasingly diffused and distributed throughout the control society. It is worth pointing out that in describing this diffusionary process of biopower, I am not bemoaning the demise of the fabled “good ol’ days” when we knew the difference between work and play, or war and game. I am merely describing the foundation and starting point from which this investigation unfolds.

So what does all of this have to do with a video game? Quite a lot, actually, especially when the game is produced under the auspices of one of these classical disciplinary institutions—i.e., the military—and distributed through digital media networks that have become essentially pervasive. Bifo Berardi argues that networked information, communication, and entertainment are areas in which the possibilities are now so unlimited and pervasive that the human capacity to process and interpret has been stifled (2009a). An overload of information and expressivity has, paradoxically, taken away our abilities for comprehension. This is also a process of biopower; like Deleuze (1992), Bifo marks a

transition from a form of authoritarian biopolitical power that is persuasive (like the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century) to a form of biopolitical power that is pervasive (like the contemporary infocracy). Persuasive power is founded on consensus: citizens must understand the reasons of the President, General, Secretary or Duce.... Instead, the infocratic regime ... grounds its power on overload, the acceleration of

semiotic flows and the proliferation of sources of information to the point of the producing of white noise of indistinctiveness, irrelevance and indecipherability (2009a:112–3).

The fact that the primary function of *America's Army* is to persuade should not undermine the relevancy of Bifo's statements in regards to this dissertation. Like other total institutions (e.g., Rhodes 2004), the U.S. military still retains much of its disciplinary institutional orientation in the persuasive and classically authoritarian sense, and the products of the Army Game Project employ a persuasive power that seeks the consent of individual citizens (see Chapter 2). (A favorite book of the project's long-time director, Colonel Casey Wardynski, is B.J. Fogg's *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do* [2003].) But the situation of *America's Army* amongst a militarized culture industry and economy speaks to a larger, omnipresent form of power described by Bifo. This is the biopolitical process of pervasive cultural militarization, enacted (in part) through the harnessing of high-tech "cognitive labor" and the intermeshing of the technologies and economies of entertainment and war. Understanding the structure of labor within these entertainment and war economies is vital to this investigation, as the old binaries of work and non-work break down almost entirely.

### Cognitive Labor

*"High tech workers tend to consider labor as the most essential part in their lives, the most specific and personalized. This is exactly the opposite of what happened with the industrial*

*worker, for whom eight hours of wage labor were a sort of temporary death from which s/he could wake up only after the alarm bells rang, announcing the end of the working day.”*

—Bifo Berardi, *The Soul at Work* (2009b:76–77, emphasis in original)

The corporate adoption of the “play-at-work” mantra (and its darker double, the imperative to “work-at-play”) has only accelerated in the past decade and seems not to be abating (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2005, 2009; Kline et al 2003). A variety of social networking tools problematizes the work–play binary even further as employees continue to use networked technologies during work while extending working hours beyond discrete activities and temporally bounded segments of time. This has led some to describe these sets of practices as being a primary characteristic of a post-Fordist “regime of high technology capitalism—the sort of capitalism in which video and computer games are right at home” (Kline, et al 2003:65). Similarly, the rhetorical distinction which once existed between the world of the civilian and that of the soldier has become increasingly vague through a wide variety of media representations (Gregory 2006; Halter 2006; Lenoir 2000, 2003) and militarized practices (Lutz 2001, 2002; Network of Concerned Anthropologists 2009) in the contemporary attention economy. As a video game that touts one of its goals as “compet[ing] in the electronic entertainment space for youth mind share” (Wardynski 2009:15) in order to encourage the consideration of military enlistment at an early age, *America’s Army* seems to actively and effectively perpetuate this ambiguity—more so than many other forms of military recruitment and media campaigns.

With the evolution of biopower has come the evolution of prevailing forms of labor, and the current post-Fordist, neoliberal economy can be generally distinguished from its Fordist predecessor by the economic privatization and deregulation of formerly state-run industries and

social service programs; shorter production cycles; more networked and less hierarchical structures of organization; greater mobility of jobs, coupled with increased instability in long-term employment; and the centrality of new technologies in all of these processes (Virno 2004). Among the starkest characteristics of post-Fordism is the increase in the ambiguity between work time and leisure time. There is no longer “a clean, well-defined threshold separating labor time from non-labor time.... [S]ince the ‘life of the mind’ is included fully within the time-space of production, an essential homogeneity prevails” (Virno 2004:103). Bifo Berardi refers to the individuals working under this state of affairs as members of the “cognitariat” and the work that they undertake “cognitive labor” (2009a, 2009b).<sup>6</sup>

These general conditions describe the cognitive workplace of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Once the separation between work and non-work time becomes ambiguous, other qualities of human labor power become privileged. While the ability to carry out manual tasks has remained essential, other skill sets have grown in importance: “Just as in [the industrial] phase all forms of labor and society itself had to industrialize, today labor and society have to informationalize, become intelligent, become communicative, become affective” (Hardt and Negri 2004:109). Although specific types of labor have always compelled or required employees to project an intuitive and emotional tenor in their work (e.g., flight attendants, service work), types of cognitive labor more extensively capitalize upon these affective, mental, and social qualities of employees.

Video games, as a rising part of the contemporary global information-entertainment culture industry, operate as an exemplary industry in the post-Fordist cognitariat, emphasizing “scientific know-how, hi-tech proficiency, cultural creativity, human sociability, and cooperative interactivity” (de Peuter and Dyer-Witford 2005). It is an intensely cyclical industry that has

always entailed a significant amount of labor precariousness, with studios commonly laying off a majority of employees after major releases of games. This trend became more pronounced following the economic recession beginning in the autumn of 2008. In this highly competitive trade that has blended work and non-work time almost seamlessly, even artists, designers, and engineers receiving state unemployment checks have had to continually labor to keep their skills fresh and their portfolio new. Cognitive labor, which privileges these “soft skills” for work in areas such as video game design, is also a central characteristic in the “soft sell” marketing and recruiting efforts of *America’s Army*. Harnessing cognitive labor is both a means—through the development and use of game technology—and an end for the Army, since these are precisely the qualities in soldiers that the U.S. Army seeks to recruit through novel practices such as the technologies of *America’s Army* (Wardynski et al 2009). Cognitive labor, the hegemonic form of labor in the post-Fordist economy of flexible, precarious workers, tends to generate subjectivities that are thoroughly militarized.

### *Militarization and the Military Normal*

*“Militarization is a step-by-step process by which a person or a thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas. The more militarization transforms an individual or a society, the more that individual or society comes to imagine military needs and militaristic presumptions to be not only valuable but also normal. Militarization ... involves cultural as well as institutional, ideological, and economic transformations.”*

—Cynthia Enloe, “How Do They Militarize a Can of Soup?” (2000:3)

I find Enloe's definition of militarization most useful. As she and others have outlined (e.g., Der Derian 2001; Gray 1997, 2005; Lutz 2006; Stahl 2010; Turse 2008), militarization happens through industrial practices, infrastructural arrangements, policy planning, political decisions, consumer marketing, and entertainment mediums that have come to have vested interests in the continuation of economies which are centered on, or tied closely to, the military. The processes by which individuals interact with, and buy into, these militarized economies is militarization. Enloe, for example, explains how even a can of soup that contains pasta-shaped Star Wars satellites reflects militarized ideas that have been adopted as taken-for-granted assumptions by both the producers and consumers of soup (2000:1–35). These kinds of micro-level processes of militarization are just as important to trace as the larger social ones, as they illuminate aspects of ordinary life that are often taken for granted.

The militarized economy of the United States stretches far beyond “the military industrial complex” described by Dwight Eisenhower in his farewell presidential address in 1961. Today, industries and organizations devoted to the continuation of a militarized economy now exist at all levels, employ a large percentage of workers, and are central to the overall economic orientation of the United States. The stretch of this economy is vast and alarming, covering most economic sectors, including entertainment, communication, food, and academia, not to mention arms manufacturing (Turse 2008).

The catchphrases that academics and writers have used to describe what now exists include expressions such as “the military entertainment complex,” “MIME-NET (the military industrial media entertainment network),” “empire” (with a capital “E” or a lowercase “e”), or, simply, “the complex” (see Der Derian 2001; Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004; Lenoir 2000; Lutz

2006; Turse 2008). Other kinds of “complexes” have been invented to describe other militarized relationships. While these terms act as sometimes useful shorthand for describing the conduct of arrangements, practices, organizations, policies, transactions, assumptions, and ideologies in a militarized economy, they also have the potential to obscure that which they describe. Describing any kind of “military complex” as a single, monolithic entity belies the constant negotiation of contracts, incorporation of new technologies, introduction of new policies, and the assortment of dynamic interactions between multiple parties of individuals and organizations within a militarized logic of production. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write,

The notion of a ‘military–industrial complex became a mythical emblem for the control exerted by the war industries over human destiny as a whole. It came to be considered, in other words, as the subject of history rather than the result of complex relations among industry, warfare, and institutions in response to resistance and liberation movements. [It] has thus become a form of historical oversimplification that serves to eliminate any real considerations of class conflict [or] insurgency. (2004:40)

Fortunately, anthropology is well-suited to examine exactly what is circumvented in the notions of the military complexes—namely, the logics, norms for behavior and expression, and histories and narratives of individuals who have been directly involved in aspects of militarized life. Anthropological studies have gone well beyond talking about the general idea of the “complex” to examine specific manifestations of militarized life.<sup>7</sup> The production of this kind of “military normal” (Lutz 2009), which normalizes and prioritizes military needs and military themes by treating them as a given, largely unquestioned fact, is one of the themes of this dissertation. Like the kinds of pervasive, automatic social processes (called “automatisms”) described by Berardi (2009a), the military normal is a social automatism that is almost

involuntary on the societal level in the United States. It is involuntary because myriad militarized institutional relationships have made it the status quo. Of this phenomenon, Anne McClintock writes, “The militarization of our culture has become so pervasive that every crisis of neo-liberal capitalism rolling in is seen as the next war” (2010). The logic of the military normal is sometimes difficult to escape, even for anthropologists studying it.

I must add that the specters of the tired, worn out debate centering on the issue of video games vis-à-vis violence and aggression often still haunt (for me) this connection between militarization and video games. The tropes of increased individual aggression as a result of playing violent video games are apparent in countless decontextualized psychological studies, alarmist news reports, and political campaigns that single out games as a cause of social issues related to violence whenever a school shooting, suicide, or unexpected teen murder happens (see Jenkins 2003, 2004, 2005). I must be clear in stating that militarization is not synonymous with this. In writing about militarization, I am not writing about the “causes” or “roots” of violence, for even violence, guns, or the idea of “peace,” for that matter, can be militarized or demilitarized (Enloe 2000).

### *From Theory to Ethnographic Practice*

*“My guess is that you might have a near impossible time getting in to OEMA. They tend to be very busy and wary of people studying them.”*

—Mike Zyda, former director of MOVES, the original development institution of *America’s Army* at the Naval Postgraduate School, in an email to the author (May 12, 2006)

War, media, and biopower enact dynamic interconnected processes, which are constantly morphing and changing. The ultimate product of these intertwined processes is militarization, but the cultural expressions of a militarized society are continually changing. In this dissertation I argue that military-themed and -sponsored uses of media such as *America's Army* both express and perpetuate a pervasive militarization of popular culture in the United States. In doing so, I hope to disabuse the reader of any notion that the military sphere in the United States is confined to merely the armed services. I follow three thematic threads that investigate how the military use of video games is changing 1) how wars are fought, 2) how enemies are imagined and created, and 3) how both labor and entertainment are mobilized for the purposes of war. These threads—war's fighting, war's imagining, and war's mobilization—run throughout this dissertation; they are not confined to specific chapters, but continually resurface throughout, with chapters focusing on one or more of these aspects in detail.

An understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of these thematic threads is not necessary to grasp the arguments of this dissertation, but those familiar with Paul Virilio's connective ideas between war, speed, and cinema (1989); Jean Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality (1994; cf. Eco 1986); and the previously introduced concepts of cognitive labor (Berardi 2009a, 2009b) and biopower (Foucault 1990; Hardt and Negri 2000) will find an ongoing engagement between these ideas and the respective themes involving war's fighting, war's imagining, and war's mobilization. Although I am informed by the work of writers originating in the Italian autonomist movement (Berardi 2009a, 2009b; Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004; Lazzarato 2006, 1996; Virno 2004; Weeks 2011), such overarching theories need to be balanced by a solid foundation of fieldwork data—with the open possibility that the data might

contradict or challenge the theory. As anthropologist Catherine Lutz writes, “Despite a plethora of books with empire in the title scholars have virtually no empirical idea how the broad mass of people in the United States see the nexus of their nation, power, and the rest of the world. This is an eminently ethnographic question” (2006:597). I draw upon descriptive details from the praxis of fieldwork in order to articulate and understand the sinews that connect individual actors to larger trends such as empire, biopower, militarization, and cognitive labor.

Research in the game developing community, especially the military game developing community, is one of the largely uninvestigated areas within game studies, and I hope that this dissertation can contribute to furthering investigations of this influential group of media producers. The ways in which I went about examining this topic have dramatically shaped what I have discovered. This is the nature of ethnography, as is any self-reflexive scientific endeavor seeking to take into account the contingency of information—how it was collected, by whom, for what purposes, and under what conditions. My own fieldwork journey developed from a lifelong passion for video games. Although I consider myself a native of the first-person shooter game genre (FPS, see Glossary) that applies to *America’s Army*, along with role-playing and strategy genres exemplified by series such as *The Elder Scrolls* and *Total War* game franchises, my interactions with the Army soldiers, game developers, marketers, and government project managers have not been from the point of view of an insider. I often play video games obsessively, but this does not make me a video game developer or marketer; I have family and friends in the armed forces, but I nevertheless am an outsider when it comes to things military. As an outsider, I chose to look at the workings of the Army Game Project to trace the connections and meanings of this project across the wide spectrum of actors invested in the development, marketing, and presentation of this hybrid product known as *America’s Army*.

When I first became interested in pursuing this project, I decided almost immediately to go to the top. I emailed the project's director, Colonel Casey Wardynski, in the spring of 2006. I wanted to study as an anthropologist the behind-the-scenes process of military game development. I explained this to him, emphasizing the long-term nature of most ethnographic studies and my desire to do work in an institutional setting. Having been discouraged by other former disgruntled *America's Army* producers (see opening section quote and Chaplin and Ruby 2005:192–221), I doubted that the U.S. Army would allow an unknown graduate student in anthropology access to its game development institutions, and so I was resigned to the fact that this investigation might have to be undertaken from outside the institution, looking in.

To my surprise, Wardynski replied to my message and, after a couple more rounds of emails, invited me to his office in West Point in July, 2006. Thanks to departmental pilot research funds, I was able during the summer to do the journey from my parent's house in Tennessee to the United States Military Academy. As I drove there for the first time along the Palisades Parkway, the beautiful scenery of trees, mountains, canyons, and rivers seemed, to my untrained eye, the last place on earth that a military base should be located. The campus is a veritable fortress on a hill, positioned at a strategic curve in the Hudson River as it pushes its way south through the Adirondack Mountains towards New York City. Leading to the main campus security gate, the buildings of the small and cozy town of West Point oozed the airs of affluence, privilege, and education.

I did not give this a great deal of attention, though, for I was going there to do my first project interview and I was nervous. Colonel Wardynski's workplace was in the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA), which he directed from 1995 until his retirement from the Army in 2010. In an odd twist—or perhaps not considering how the social sciences

have historically served as arms of the military (Price 2004, 2008)—OEMA shared the same building as the Department of Social Sciences, Department of English, and the Combating Terrorism Center (see Figure 1.3). I arrived there 20 minutes early, walked through the building’s corridors to get a feel for the layout, and sat down outside to write. “What the hell am I doing here?” I asked myself in my notes. I had enthusiastically plunged into the academic study of video games, but was still woefully ignorant about the Army. Although my father had been in the Navy for several years before I was born, it was my first time ever as an adult to be on a functioning military base and I was still intimidated by people in military uniform. If I had been 10 years younger—17 years old—I would have been exactly the kind of person that OEMA was the most interested in reaching, for one of the principal long-term goals of the Army Game Project was to normalize the Army for the average American teenager as something within their world of experience and possibility.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1.3: The Outside Entrance to the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis. Photograph by the author, July 2006.**

Wardynski loved to talk, and I was happy to let him do so. My questions were ill-formed, without much direction, and the entire interview went unrecorded.<sup>9</sup> It was not a failure, though, because I achieved what I had come there to do: namely, to gain approval from the top to undertake ethnographic fieldwork at places central to the Army Game Project (AGP). The reasons for colonel Wardynski allowing me to do so were unclear at the time; my project of “studying up” the networks of institutional power (Nader 1972), I thought, would be perceived as a nuisance at best and a threat at worst. I came to understand and speculate more about his reasoning for allowing me access through subsequent conversations and encounters with him during my years of fieldwork as my travels took me to AGP locations in the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, Huntsville, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Indianapolis.



**Figure 1.4:** “Colonel Casey Wardynski is a small, lithe man, with steel-gray hair cropped close to his head; small, flat ears; and intelligent blue eyes that are almost hypnotic in their intensity” (Chaplin and Ruby 2005:213). Photograph by the author, May 2009, of a framed article on display at OEMA: “Full Metal Joystick,” *Newsweek*, 14 Oct. 2002:38.

Colonel Wardynski was an engine, constantly traveling and managing (see Figure 1.4). I did not realize the scope of the AGP initially, but when I spoke with him at this first meeting it became much more apparent. It was a good deal larger than I expected. I came to this first interview at West Point thinking that *America's Army*, the video game, was the sole product of the AGP. It certainly was for many years, but the project was dramatically expanding in 2006. After several years of success with the online game, the colonel told me, other government entities began to approach OEMA with requests for training programs. One of the first to do so was the United States Secret Service, which requested an application that used *America's Army* technology to simulate training exercises for protective detail teams, tactical response units, and counter-surveillance units in the Secret Service.

As more requests began coming in from government and military organizations, the AGP decided that a separate office was necessary to handle them. My first visit to OEMA took place during a period of consolidation as a great deal of AGP project management was being funneled towards Redstone Arsenal's Software Engineering Directorate (SED) near Huntsville, Alabama. Large public outreach programs such as the *America's Army* Real Heroes and the Virtual Army Experience (see Chapters 4 and 5) were just getting underway in 2006 as well. Ubisoft's Xbox video game, *America's Army: Rise of a Soldier*, was out in the commercial market. Most of these projects were being developed by other entities that had little direct affiliation with what I initially proposed to research, the online video game and the original *America's Army*.

As all of this was being explained to me by Wardynski, I came to feel a subtle but growing sense of dread: How was I ever going to study a networked organization of this magnitude? Even if I were to look at only the online game itself, it would entail research at multiple offices and contracting organizations, each geared towards game development, network

management, game community outreach, and marketing. Although Wardynski told me then that, in his words, I had “the green light” to do my research, how would I establish contact with these organizations? As an outside researcher examining the inner workings of a project that has met with its fair share of political and social controversy over the years, would I be looked upon with suspicion by them? Why had the colonel become so easily amenable to the idea of having an unaffiliated anthropologist do long-term fieldwork in the Army Game Project? I was sure that generations of previous anthropologists had been faced with similar questions of positionality and scope. I was equally as sure that they felt, as I felt then, that their situation was exceptional.

Of course, my first foray into “the field” was probably not particularly dissimilar from the experiences of many other new anthropologists. I knew that because of the distributed nature of the Army Game Project my fieldwork would have to be distributed as well. My subject of research demanded, by its very organizational structure, a multisited investigation that “quite literally follow[ed] the connections, associations, and putative relationships” between institutional and individual actors (Marcus 1995:97). The challenge, after getting in to OEMA, was to figure out which institutions were amenable and available in the first place. Rather than having one singular story of “arrival” at my field site, I would be arriving continuously at new locations—some of which would become more receptive and familiar than others over the course of months and years. Access to these sites—development offices, marketing agencies, Army bases, pre-release versions of *America’s Army*, email lists, recruiting and outreach events, press briefings—and to the people within them was a continuously negotiated process of sending emails, dropping names, obtaining permissions and passwords, making calls, and signing nondisclosure agreements. Although Colonel Wardynski had granted me the go ahead to contact AGP institutions on this first visit to West Point, it was by no means a golden ticket.

In the subsequent chapters of this dissertation I feature the interconnected stories of each of these locations. At these sites, I have employed a variety of ethnographic tools of investigation, according to what I have deemed most useful and relevant. Participant observation, that vague term referring to the self-reflexive documentation of the “thereness” of the ethnographer as a tool for data collection, has been my *modus operandi*. I have recorded over 60 interviews with game developers, Army officers and enlisted soldiers, activists, PR representatives, and industry professionals; had many more informal conversations with these same people over lunch, coffee, or beer; gone on countless official tours at military bases, companies, and recruiting events; was given my own office at a game development studio for six months; sat in on studio office meetings; attended video game industry events (Electronic Entertainment Expo and the Game Developers Conference; see Figure 1.5); devoted several weeks of total game time to *America’s Army*, often playing with the developers of the game during play-testing sessions; spent three weeks at a state fair and air show; led impromptu round table discussions at the *America’s Army* marketing agency; and witnessed the layoffs of over 30 people. I documented these and other modes of participant observation as data in one form or another—through audio recordings, detailed notes, document collection, photographs, or whatever other eclectic means were available.



**Figure 1.5: The ethnographer (far left), attending a sneak-peek preview of *America's Army 3* for video game journalists at the 2009 San Francisco Game Developers Conference. Photograph courtesy of Michael Aubuchon, March 2009.**

### Outline of Chapters

*"Tell the truth. Don't say bad things."*

—Major Larry Dillard, Pentagon program director for the Army Experience Center, to the author (May 28, 2009)

The general trajectory of this dissertation moves from more historical and institutional foci towards the increasingly specific and personal. Chapter 2 recounts a history of the Army

Game Project (AGP), contextualizing it within the larger historical military practices vis-à-vis games, mapping the central organizations that formed it, and recounting the history of the project from the developers' points of view. Chapter 3 deals explicitly with explaining the rationale and logic of the AGP, drawing upon interviews and Army documents from OEMA at West Point to make the case that recruitment of the cognitariat is a central goal for the military now and in the future. Chapter 4 looks at *America's Army* more closely, examining the imaginary of war and the fictional enemies of the game. I contrast these abstract enemies to the "Real Heroes," actual soldiers held up as model citizens by the Army Game Project. Chapter 5 takes a closer look at the now non-operational Army Experience Center (AEC) and Virtual Army Experience (VAE), two recruiting efforts implemented by the marketing agency Ignited, while emphasizing the voices of individuals who work at these events. Chapter 6 explores the idea of cognitive labor in the military entertainment industry in more detail, in particular the labor situation of the *America's Army* video game designers. And Chapter 7 reconnects each of these threads with the topics introduced in this opening chapter.

Ethnography—both the doing and the writing—happens through the ethnographer's interactions with people, institutions, texts, and memories. It is an ongoing interpretative process of representation. In the following pages of this dissertation, I present one moment in this process.

## II. Military Deep Play: Histories of War Gaming and *America's Army*

### Origins and Canons

*“It was only natural that the sorcerer should fear for the future of the son he had conceived organ by organ, feature by feature, through a thousand and one secret nights.”*

—Jorge Louis Borges, “The Circular Ruins” (1998:100)

I was sitting at a long conference table, surrounded by several men—all employees of Ignited, the marketing agency for *America's Army*. “I’m sure you’ve heard the story of Colonel Wardynski,” one was telling me,

who saw his sons playing video games and thought that it was a much better venue to start speaking to the youth of America. So he went and banged on a lot of doors to get funding for the program, and was eventually able to get the funding to create the game itself which debuted at E3 [The Electronic Entertainment Expo] in 2002. It was a phenomenal success; everybody thought that because it was coming from the Army, it was going to be cheap. (Personal Interview, April 16, 2009)<sup>10</sup>

Like Athena springing from Zeus’ head, *America's Army* comes packaged fully developed in this origin story, the product of an extraordinary individual who, through his innovation and unrelenting determination, singlehandedly conceived and produced his breakthrough product through sheer force of mental will. These fabled qualities of the *America's Army* origin story were oft repeated in multiple versions, as the oral and written mythology of the project

proliferated across multiple institutional, personal, and media channels. Roger Stahl, for example, writes, “*America’s Army* is the brainchild of Lt. Col. Casey Wardynski ... who hatched the idea in 1999, the year when recruitment hit a low mark. Wardynski recognized both the significance of video games in his own sons’ lives and the need to tap the market for technologically savvy recruits” (2010:109). Zhan Li and Tim Lenoir also separately call it Wardynski’s “brainchild” (Li 2003:12).<sup>11</sup> Phillip Bossant, former art director and executive producer of the game, likewise noted that “Colonel Wardynski recognized and had his own epiphany that appealing to the young means that you have to appeal to the young in ways [with which] they are familiar” (Personal Interview, November 20, 2007). Heather Chaplin and Aaron Ruby likewise write, “In 1999 ... Colonel Wardynski had an epiphany” (2004:214). Mark Long, then CEO of Zombie Studios, an AGP subcontractor, called Wardynski

a real maverick in the Pentagon. He’s a total outside the box thinker and an economist so he has a [...] great engineering sensibility but at the same time is deeply practical. And when he first proposed that the Army take some tiny fraction of their huge recruiting budget and make a video game out of it I’m sure it was like, are you insane? But it turned out to be the best money they’ve ever spent. It made the Army more relevant and more modern to recruits. (Personal Interview, September 28, 2007)

Similarly, Ed Halter writes that Wardynski “suggested ... that a video game could be an effective means to reach the new Gen-Y pool of potential soldiers. Wardynski became the head of the Army Games [sic] Project, which led to the creation of *America’s Army*” (2006:xvii).

Though these statements are certainly truthful in their own way, they underscore the influence and power of an individual at the expense of both historical perspective and the whole

constellation of other entities that have contributed to the Army Game Project. They imply that *America's Army* began out of the blue, without precedent. While Wardynski was certainly the single most influential figure in bringing about the *America's Army* franchise, and is a person who deserves the credit such origin stories give him in terms of envisioning a product and leading it to its completion and subsequent continual evolution, Wardynski is just one person representing one institution within the AGP. Though the project could not have unfolded the way it did without Wardynski's involvement, the connection between the military and gaming was a logical one to make within the U.S. military's evolving cultural milieu of the late 90s and had, in many ways, already been made. *America's Army* is part of a long history of war gaming that stretches back centuries.

This history has been thoroughly traced and standardized through a variety of academic and journalistic sources, to such an extent that it can be dubbed a *canonical history of war games*, full of obligatory genuflections that highlight through detailed descriptions a series of technologies, institutions, and products that have appeared over the course of the past 30 years or more (see, for example, Chaplin and Ruby 2005:192–221; Der Derian 2001, 2003; Gray 1997; Halter 2006:175–238; Herz 1999:197–213; Kline, et al. 2003:179–83; Lenoir 2000, 2003; Lenoir and Lowood 2005; Li 2003; Nieborg 2005, 2009; Pasanen 2009; Stahl 2010:91–112). Like the origin story of *America's Army*, this canonical history—though accurate and informative—has had a tendency to reproduce itself, to the point where the history of war games reads nearly the same in all of these texts, regardless of the writer.

One reason for this is that much of this history is presented as if it *just happens* (Loewen 2007), with the contingencies, personalities, and rivalries that characterize a competitive industry

hardly ever being alluded to (exceptions being the journalistic accounts in Chaplin and Ruby's *Smartbomb* [2005] and Halter's *From Sun Tsu to Xbox* [2006], and Der Derian's academic travelogue *Virtuous War* [2001]). Instead, the development and evolution of the military entertainment complex is often presented in sequence as a historical telos of progress (especially in the detailed accounts provided by science historian Tim Lenoir [2000, 2003], who celebrates the possibilities of a military-funded "post-human future" in a positivistic spin on Donna Haraway's cyborg).<sup>12</sup> Institutions are presented as being a smooth deterritorialized network of interoperable components progressing historically and logically, akin to the kind of network theorized by Hardt and Negri in their seminal volume *Empire*, who write,

In the passage to the informational economy, the assembly line has been replaced by the network as the organizational model of production, transforming the forms of cooperation and communication within each productive site and among productive sites....

Production sites can thus be deterritorialized and tend toward a virtual existence, as coordinates in the communication network. As opposed to the old vertical industrial and corporate model, production now tends to be organized in horizontal network enterprises. (2000:295–96)

If the AGP is such a network, the boots on the ground version is a lot sloppier than the theoretical one.

In this chapter, as an attempt to recapture some of the messiness and historical contingencies that are quite often lost in the canonical history of war gaming, I present an unconventional version of it, tailored specifically to *America's Army*. To achieve this, I draw upon some of the oral and written narratives of approximately 10–15 (mostly anonymous) game developers, primary and secondary textual sources, and my own ethnographic experience,

recognizing fully that this history risks the possibility of falling into the tropes of the canon as well in order to provide a relative amount of historical context. *America's Army*, like all business endeavors, has always been a project that is very much subject to the individuals and institutions that comprise it and that at multiple points in its history the attainability of the project was very much in doubt. I argue that the packaged theoretical notions of “the complex” and “the network,” though still useful, have the potential to obscure these contingencies. It was never inevitable that *America's Army* would be an initial success, a 10+ year franchise, or even published.

### *A Short History of War Games*

*“Computer games and military simulation are like siblings separated in infancy. Although they share the same technological parentage, the commercial game and defense simulation industries have been nourished differently over the last 25 years and developed differently.”*

—J.C. Herz, “Computer Games and the Military: Two Views” (Herz and Macedonia 2002:1)

War simulations are not a new phenomenon, and they can be traced as least as far as the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The games Chess and Go are abstract representations of war that have traditionally been given anecdotal authority regarding their efficacy in the visualization of war, but the modern practice of war gaming had its origins in the game Kriegsspiel, which was designed to train officers to envision battles as being constituted by complex but manageable units of operation. Created by a Prussian officer in the aftermath of Napoleon’s military ascendancy and eventual defeat, Kriegsspiel captured the German public imagination in the mid-

nineteenth century and is one of the first examples of a civil society actively participating in the leisurely gaming against a public enemy. This mathematical simulation of combat and casualties eliminated from the game many of the contingencies common to actual war, reducing battle to a Malthusian calculus of “cost-benefit analysis” (Halter 2006:40–46). It proved to be an efficient mode of training, and similar war gaming practices came to inform the strategies and theory of warfare in other Western European nations and in the United States.

The application and improvement of the kind of war gaming introduced by Kriegsspiel continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and has been influential in shaping how war was envisioned, planned, and taught to officers in the U.S. military and other states (see Caffrey 2000; Dunnigan 1992; Lenoir and Lowood 2005). These practices have not only been a characteristic of state militaries, but have also been enthusiastically adopted—and significantly shaped—by the civilian populations as a form of entertainment. H.G. Wells’ book *Little Wars: A Game for Boys from Twelve Years of Age to Hundred and Fifty and for That More Intelligent Sort of Girls Who Like Boys’ Games and Books* (1913)—essentially a set of rules for playing with toy soldiers—is one early example of this phenomenon, and later board game designers of war games, such as Charles Roberts and James Dunnigan, built upon these previous war games in the 1950s and 60s to develop a full-fledged genre of commercial war gaming that made a general transition from the board game to the computer in the early 1980s (Dunnigan 1992). War gaming for entertainment was largely confined to a small group of niche hobbyists until the commercialization of the home computer.

Video games, as a medium of the computer, originated from within the domain of the military. Most video game historians trace the beginnings of the medium back to defense research projects at Brookhaven National Laboratories, MIT, and Stanford in the late 1950s and

early 60s. The commercial industry did not begin growing until the 1970s, with the fabled game *Pong* and Magnavox's Odyssey game system. Atari's dominance during the 1970s and early 80s—the “Golden Age” of video games—was followed by the North American industry's dramatic crash in 1983, which provided the opportunity for Japanese ascendancy in the industry through Nintendo and Sega through the 1980s and early 90s.

The U.S. military was in the meantime more regularly using simulations in the training of specific skills for specialized military roles, such as piloting special aircraft. SIMNET, the U.S. military's \$140 million distributed simulator networking project developed during the mid-1980s and functional by the late-1980s, was a watershed project in its ability to network a huge number of combat units at theater-level operations within an expansive virtual environment that simulated troop movements and combat. Mark Long recounted how his knowledge and experience with SIMNET contributed to his desire to develop video games and virtual reality technologies, telling me how when he left the Army as a major in 1988,

there was a brand new program called SIMNET that was just being filled in, and that's actually how I got into video games. Until about 1985–87, simulators were multimillion dollar devices that were one of a kind things built by a small number of companies. And they were really only useful for guys like pilots who had really perishable skills. You can't really practice crashing or ejecting from a plane—you need to have a simulator to do it. But as simulation technology began to get cheaper there was a colonel at DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) who had the idea that you could network them and that these simulators could be valuable to guys who drove tanks, not just airplanes [...]. The real value in this system was that it produced collaborative behavior—it wasn't about the quality of the graphics or learning how to engage with the

simulator, because they had better simulators for that. It was more intercommunication between the teams and tank crews and that kind of thing [...]. And just like *America's Army*, they started adding other systems [...] and as early as 1990 you could be in a Navy simulator and fly your aircraft off a simulated aircraft deck and land it at an Army refueling location. They created this great interoperability. And then the Gulf War happened. This isn't widely known, but a lot of armor officers attributed their unbelievable prowess on the battlefield to the fact that they had run simulations over and over again. They brought SIMNET simulators, in fact, over to Kuwait and these guys built a real database of the desert and were training in that way. And at that point I think the Army realized that they had a strategic technology and it gave us this enormous advantage. In the early 90s there was a huge growth in simulation. (Personal Interview, September 28, 2007)

As Mark Long's own career in virtual reality technologies chronicles,<sup>13</sup> in the 1980s and 1990s cooperation increased between the U.S. military and the commercial war gaming and video gaming industry. The popular first person-shooter that defined the genre, *Doom*, was released in 1993 and singled out in Senate hearings on video game violence launched by Joseph Lieberman and Herb Kohl. The U.S. Marines, though, began in 1997 using their own ad hoc modifications of *Doom II* to create *Marine Doom*, which became used unofficially by the service as a combat simulator. Through the creation of more institutionalized arrangements a symbiotic relationship between the commercial video game industry and military simulation became more fully realized throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, with the private sector and not the military being the driving force in low-cost technological innovation. The most visible and canonized institution symbolizing this relationship is the Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT), designer

of the officer combat training simulator *Full Spectrum Warrior*, its commercial Xbox spin-offs, and sequels. The ICT, as a University of Southern California (USC) research institute, draws upon expertise in academia, the military, Hollywood, and the gaming industry to produce a variety of experimental technologies for soldier training in “cultural awareness” (see González 2012) and PTSD rehabilitation, among an array of other research initiatives.<sup>14</sup>

Within this broader context of the emerging military entertainment complex and the hegemonic influence of “militarized masculinity” in the video game industry (Kline et al. 2003:246–268), the contemporary groundwork for *America’s Army* and other venues of cooperation between the Department of Defense and video game entertainment industry can be traced back to the National Research Council’s Computer Science and Telecommunications Board’s publication in 1997 of a monograph entitled *Modeling and Simulation: Linking Entertainment and Defense* (NRC 1997). In this publication, the modeling and simulation requirements for the Department of Defense were articulated along multiple channels, and ways in which the video game entertainment industry could contribute to the development of these requirements were identified. Such needs were deemed important because, among other things, “modeling and simulation technology provides a low-cost means of conducting joint training exercises, evaluating new doctrine and tactics, and studying the effectiveness of new weapons systems” (NRC 1997:1).

It is an intriguing manuscript in that what it forecasted in 1997 regarding the increased connectivity between the entertainment and defense contracting industry has, to a large degree, taken place—perhaps partly as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The long-term research agenda described in *Modeling and Simulation* articulated military requirements for the development of new technologies that would: a) increase immersion in simulated environments through

storytelling and the selective use of sensory details (sight, sound, smell, etc.) to further enable a suspension of disbelief; b) provide capabilities for high-speed networks connecting thousands of computers; c) implement standards for interoperability which would enable different software and hardware programs to work with one another, bypassing proprietary constraints which are common in media industries; d) enable the quick production and reuse of computer-generated characters in simulations while also developing artificial intelligence that could learn by experience; and e) provide software and hardware tools to enable the easy production of simulated environments themselves. To varying degrees, each of these requirements has been met, some with greater success than others. For example, capabilities for high-speed networks are no longer a major problem due to the ever increasing allocation of internet bandwidth, but the implementation of believable artificial intelligence into large-scale training simulations continues to be a difficult, but not unsurpassable, issue.

*Modeling and Simulation* also spends a good deal of time discussing the need to overcome the “cultural barriers” (i.e., differences in business practices) between the commercial entertainment/simulation industry and the military (see also Herz and Macedonia 2002). Many of these differences involve issues of production scheduling and time horizons (typically much longer in military contracting), structures in business models and profit-making, long-term research goals, and, importantly, intellectual property. These industry differences also play out in the products themselves, since

[m]ilitary and entertainment simulations have markedly different objectives. In entertainment the driving actor is excitement and fun. Users must want to spend their money to use it again and again (either at home or at an entertainment center) and hopefully are willing to tell others about it. Unrealistically dangerous situations,

exaggerated hazardous environments, and multiple lives and heroics are acceptable, even desirable, to increase excitement. Defense simulations, on the other hand, overwhelmingly stress realistic environments and engagement situations. The interactions are serious in nature, can crucially depend on terrain features or other environmental phenomena, and generally rely on the user's ability to coordinate actions with other players. (NRC 1997:27)

These significant “cultural barriers” and differences between the defense simulation industry and the commercial video game industry have become less apparent in certain contexts as relationships become institutionalized through entities such as the ICT, which was a direct result of the publication the *Modeling and Simulation* report. The discourse of “cultural barriers” was very much apparent in my own fieldwork as an indigenous explanation that military personnel and developers provided about why work conflicts arose between AGP institutions. Such explanations point to larger issues that this dissertation explores in regards to military efforts in drafting the cognitariat into its domain. The institutional history of the Army Game Project, as an employer and game developer, consistently points towards continual conflicts arising from so-called “cultural barriers” between game designers and the military and shows that these efforts are anything but smooth.

America's Army: A Workers' History

*"I have this theory: You show me a functional family and I'll show you a family that's hiding something really well."*

—Erich Iveans, [Dev]Pye, former *America's Army* producer (Personal Interview, October 31, 2008)

*"I wanted to talk to you; I wanted to get it on the record. So I figured we should spend some time."*

—Chad, former *America's Army* developer (Personal Interview, February 20, 2009)

The Early Years

The Committee on Modeling and Simulation of the National Research Council, which published *Modeling and Simulation* (1997), was chaired by Mike Zyda, who is generally given credit for the composition of the report. Having made recommendations in the report for a framework sponsoring collaborations and connections between the entertainment and defense industries through an academic context, Zyda (then a professor at the Naval Postgraduate School [NPS] in Monterey, California) drafted a proposal for the Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT), which was funded in 1999 by an initial \$45 million grant and later renewed in 2004 at \$100 million (Chaplin and Ruby 2005:207; Halter 2006:215), at the time the largest research grant ever received by the University of Southern California (USC). Zyda, however, was not hired by USC as director of the ICT once it became funded and, disgruntled by what was perceived as a betrayal, started his own research institution in 2000 at the NPS, called the MOVES (Modeling, Virtual Environments, and Simulation) Institute.

This was about the same time as Wardynski's fabled "epiphany" in Army recruitment practices, and he was actively searching for viable locations for the development of a video game project. Following discussions, Wardynski and Zyda both agreed that the Army Game Project would be suitable for MOVES and the NPS, which was primarily a research institution with military officers pursuing masters and doctoral degrees. "MOVES was just the sort of environment that Casey [Wardynski] needed," a published *America's Army* manuscript claims (Davis and Bossant 2004:20). Officially beginning in May of 2000, the project was coded "Operation Star Fighter" after *The Last Starfighter* (1984), a film in which a boy—after scoring a perfect score on an arcade game—is recruited by aliens to save the universe by piloting a real version of the game's ship in a space war (Chaplin and Ruby 216). The expertise of researchers at NPS such as professor Mike Capps (the original executive producer of *America's Army* who later became the president of game industry giant Epic Games) was "piped into the game" (Davis and Bossant 2004:10). Members of the development team visited nineteen Army posts for the purposes of gathering reference material for implementation into the game (Davis and Bossant 2004:11). The Unreal Engine 2, crucial middleware licensed by the project to serve as the foundation for the game's development (see Chapter 4), would, they expected, almost certainly generate pull among players and the game industry in general.

When the project was progressing more slowly than anticipated, a cadre of game industry veterans and friends with experience from Electronic Arts (EA)—Alex Mayberry ([Dev]Abraxas, creative director), Jesse McCree ([Dev]raYGunn, lead designer), and Phillip Bossant ([Dev]whatever, art director)—was hired to take on the role of team leaders for the project. (Mayberry and McCree would later join Blizzard Entertainment to become the lead game producer and lead level designer of the much-acclaimed *World of Warcraft*.) They, in turn,

built a talented development team consisting, at its largest, of 28 largely young and relatively inexperienced, but dedicated, civilian game developers to implement the game along the dual requirements of being not only a fun and compelling game, but also a representative simulation of the U.S. Army.

One individual was hired straight out of high school for his depth of knowledge in military weapons and game design. Another *America's Army* developer recalled this early development period at MOVES, telling me, “When I first came [to the project] there was no real precedent. Some of the people had [game] industry experience, but for most it was their first gig. And they threw together an amazing piece of software for 1.0, coming from where they were [and] trying to meet the requirements.” He echoed a sentiment that I heard repeated often to describe almost every period in the development history of *America's Army*, saying that things were “fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants” (Personal Interview, October 8, 2008). Phillip Bossant also described this early period of the project, indicating that “it was kind of an intense time from December 2001 to July 2002. We basically rebuilt the game and started over. That’s not an ideal amount of time and there weren’t that many of us. It was a risky adventure; none of us knew if we could succeed or not” (Personal Interview, November 20, 2007).

The game debuted in June 2002 at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) to much aplomb and spectacle, with Army soldiers rappelling from helicopters hovering over the Los Angeles Convention Center and storming the building (see Chapter 4; Halter 2006:vii–viii). It was released to the general public for PC gaming one month later, on July 4, as the first game to use the much-anticipated Unreal Engine 2, which featured improved graphical and rendering capabilities, among a whole slate of other improvements. *America's Army: Recon* was the official title of version 1.0, and though it was met with initial skepticism by players, it proved

many wrong. One early fan and volunteer beta tester of the game, who later became its lead designer,

didn't expect hardly anything, because the Army is good at making games—yeah right! But it was the Unreal Engine 2, so it was interesting. That morning [on July 4, 2002] I went ... to get *Warcraft 3* [which was released the previous day] but before I installed that I downloaded *America's Army 1.0*. And, funny enough, it was a week before I opened up *Warcraft 3*. (Personal Interview, November 24, 2008)

The relatively small Army project that began under the auspices of a Navy research institute and a West Point manpower analysis center suddenly was headlines in the gaming industry. “With the success of *America's Army*,” Ed Halter writes, “the real America's Army had, for a moment, become video-game industry rock stars, at a time when that industry itself had taken a quantum leap into the mainstream consciousness and entertainment business credibility” (2006:xvii). In regards to this new status, Bossant told me,

No one was prepared for how well it would be received [...]. Some of the backend structure wasn't as tight as it needed to be, but we survived. I had seen bigger teams, more money, and greater efforts fail. So we were happy to have survived. What we weren't prepared for is how to expertly live in two worlds at the same time—one foot in the entertainment industry, one foot in the government. (Personal Interview, November 20, 2007)

For the next several years, *America's Army* and the military came to dominate the talk about “serious games,” the new buzzword in interactive entertainment, and the military contracting sector effectively colonized much of the press and industry attention at expos such as E3, the Game Developers Conference, and the Serious Games Summit. Indeed, a militarized

framework became more apparent throughout the U.S., particularly in the national broadcasting networks, as the invasion and occupation of Iraq unfolded through the news media in a cinematic fashion (Stahl 2007). In 2003, Zhan Li ethnographically documented in his MIT master's thesis how *America's Army* was played by individuals as a means to more closely draw an experiential connection to the invasion of Iraq, sometimes simultaneously playing the game while listening to news reports. "It was common for both military and civilian players to note the uncanny feeling of playing *America's Army* whilst a real U.S.-led ground war was underway," Li noted, adding that "these feelings of uncanny unease might be attributed to the disorientation of crossing the boundary from identifying oneself with the lifeworld of the hedonistic civilian gamer to that of the morally strong and socially certain lifeworld of the military mindset" (2003:71). Li's careful examination also illuminated how the *America's Army* fan communities and clans of players, such as Christian groups, were appropriating the game in a variety of ways, adding through proselytization, protest, and a variety of special interest communities what game scholars call "emergent" behavior (Pearce 2009) to the intended functions and original design of the game.

### Dissent in the Ranks

Development at the MOVES Institute continued during this time, with updates to the game being released on a semi-regular schedule. After Mike Capps left the team as executive producer following the release of version 1.0, Alex Mayberry was promoted to the position as executive producer/creative director of the team. A developer I will refer to as Chad discussed how at that time

we would meet quarterly [with Wardynski] and it was a release to release meeting. There was no long-term vision, no 5 year plan. He would give us comments, the stamp of

approval, and then, the next day, we would sit down and go over the goals for the next release. And the colonel would say things like, “We really want to get an anti-vehicular weapon, the AT4, [in the game]. They’re about to launch the XM25, so we want to get that in.” And we would say, “that’s going to cost this much,” and we would end up with some list of features for the next release. (Personal Interview, February 20, 2009; henceforth cited simply as “Chad”)

The developers, however, began realizing that they needed a greater organizational structure with project scheduling. Army project managers from OEMA would continuously be giving the development team “feature creep,” new ideas for extra features for upcoming releases without scheduling the features into the workload or costs. This contributed to a general antagonistic feeling in the office towards the Army. Despite the organizational support provided by NPS and Zyda’s MOVES, and despite the “rock star” status that the game had achieved following its initial release, the project was still hopelessly underfunded and risked falling apart multiple times throughout its history, according to numerous individuals. To illustrate this, one person recounted a story about how a finished game update was ready to upload and distribute to players. The update (at least several months of total studio work) would not load from the old hardware of the office’s network drive. The only other copy of the update was saved to a CD, which also would not load. After trying multiple times, a developer took out the CD and blew on it, hoping that this tried and true techno-magic would work. Strangely, it did, and yet the problem of additional expectations without additional funding persisted throughout the project and brought much frustration to the development team.

By September 2003, when the team was about to ship *America’s Army: Special Forces* (version 2.0), “the team was suffering from ‘Army burnout’ and the Army was definitely the bad

guy at that time” (Chad). One former developer left an anonymous online post about that period, clarifying that

it was around the time we hit the number three spot on the Gamespy stats page [for most players] that they started complaining about how we weren’t meeting their expectations. We began to read news stories interviewing Army personnel who talked about how they had built the game. The Navy started to get pissed at the Army because there was never any mention that the game was actually built within a Naval think-tank. A lot of political fights over the project broke out not only between the Army and the Navy, but within different divisions of the Army itself. When the project was just a fly-by-night rogue mission, no one paid much attention to it. Once the Army figured out that the game was the single most successful marketing campaign they’d ever launched (at one-third of 1% of their annual advertising budget), we suddenly came under a very big microscope.<sup>15</sup>

The sentiment of disillusionment was further enhanced by the game’s cadre of leaders, including Mayberry, who by that time had “already moved on mentally.” He and lead designer Jesse McCree “came onto the project as if it was an in-between job, and once 1.0 was successful felt like they had some clout to throw around” (Chad). They had a

hell of a team and pipeline in the fall of 2003. Everybody knew their roles [...] and the vibe [of the studio] was moving toward wanting to move away from NPS and become more commercialized. Alex and Jesse were planting the seeds in the team, and you could see it taking place [...]. We started having meetings about the entire team up and leaving—those who wanted to—and forming a new company with Alex and Jesse called Arsenal Interactive. We were going to move somewhere, probably Bakersfield or San

Francisco. We were going to get a publisher [...] get us some new computers, and get funding to set up a new company and basically walk out on the Army. (Chad)

Philip Bossant described to me the rationale for this, saying that

early in the project, we [him, Mayberry, and McCree] had anticipated becoming a company that did the Army game and did other stuff too. We were young and entrepreneurial. We thought, this is our chance to get together and collect good people. We'll do the Army game and then branch out. You know, it was our dream. But that wasn't such a good match with what the colonel needed, which also took us a long time to understand. (Personal Interview, November 20, 2007)

“It got really bad,” Chad told me,

We started hearing rumors about the Army replacing us, so then we started meeting with EA and Activision on the side. And then we started assigning our artists to do work for those guys, on Army computers and on Army time. [One artist] spent about three months of his time—full time—on a *Wolfenstein* prototype of a character. Army money. Army computers. [Another guy] was doing level design for EA. We had like three bids, and they all wanted us to do work for them to prove [our worth.] We had guys doing all kinds of work. [Someone else] was doing totally different work for a totally different game. We had a logo; we made a movie for Arsenal Interactive. It gets better. So one day [Wardynski] was coming to town and he wanted a progress report. Alex was sick [for around 4 months due to a serious medical condition] and, funny enough, someone had scheduled Activision to meet with for that day about funding our startup company while the colonel was in town. They were at the Hilton and the colonel was at the Hyatt, right

next to each other since Monterrey is pretty small [...]. The Army never knew, and the colonel left.

[But finally,] the Army did end up finding out. It was March 8, 2004; I'll never forget that date. I walked into work and everyone was in the conference room, and there was the colonel in full dress uniform. He never wears full dress uniform. And *his* commanding officer, [John] McLaurin [the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army], along with a lot of other Army folks and DCS [Digital Consulting Services, the direct employers of the developers] were there. They just drop it on us: "Due to conflicts of interest we are moving away from the current management and replacing them." Of course the team just blows up, and gets all rowdy, and people started saying, "well I'm out too." (Chad)

Several individuals on the team voluntarily left once Mayberry and McCree were fired, but others were convinced to stay on the project by Philip Bossant, who took over as the interim executive producer/art director.

Philip was going to walk out too, but Alex and Jesse convinced him to keep the team together. They were still thinking about setting up Arsenal Interactive through the dev team [...]. There was going to be lawsuits. The colonel was really pissed off. But he realized that it would be best to move on, without punishment aside from firing. That's when they also told us that they were moving us from MOVES, as a symbol of a move from "research" to "production." There was also some political stuff going on between MOVES and OEMA [...]. (Chad)

## Rivalries and Expansion

In addition to the issues with the development team—and during the same period when *America's Army* was being exhibited at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' "Bang the Machine: Computer Gaming Art and Artifacts" show in San Francisco—a multilevel conflict between the OEMA and the NPS had come to a head. Accusations of mismanagement made by the Army proved to be validated in an audit published in 2005 by the Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, which detailed that the MOVES had "made 45 improper charges totaling nearly \$500,000 to the Army Game Project and an Air Force Project," "lacked the capability to perform a major portion of work on the project," and had implemented management practices that had the "appearance of nepotism" (2005:i-ii). NPS and MOVES, in turn, had become acutely aware that the Army had been taking full credit for the game, despite the fact that it was developed in a Navy institute. These factors, in addition to what appears to have been a personal political conflict between Wardynski and Zyda, led to a studio change in the spring of 2004 to the nearby Ft. Ord Army base, which was closed but still maintained some operational buildings such as an old military hospital that became the new studio home. When I interviewed him in the summer of 2006, Mike Zyda was still discernibly bitter about the whole situation, interspersing every sentence with a least a couple of obscenities when talking about Wardynski and the Army Game Project.

More studios and government entities were also coming into the Army Game Project, which was gradually expanding beyond *America's Army* to encompass other initiatives. It turned out that the "assets"—art, animations, and designs—used for *America's Army* were cheaply reusable for other government and defense projects, especially when compared to the typical

costs of ordering simulation trainers from large defense contractors. The Ft. Ord studio came to be referred to as AAPA (*America's Army Public Applications*), while another private studio, Virtual Heroes, founded by Jerry Heneghan in Raleigh, NC, began work on government trainers. (This studio was then referred to as AAGA [*America's Army Government Applications*].) Yet another Army team at Picatinny Arsenal in New Jersey (then referred to as AAFA [*America's Army Future Applications*]) began work on simulation trainers and weapons prototyping. "We had these three different organizations that were ostensibly to produce assets for each other," one developer told me, "but they were producing at a different level of quality. The Picatinny guys were not artists, so we had to create a standard set" (Personal Interview, April 17, 2009). With the successful development of the Javelin Basic Skills Trainer (possibly the most discernible cost-saving system that the entire project produced due to \$86,000 price tag for each Javelin missile) a whole list of other training simulators began development at these institutions, including one made for the U.S. Secret Service. An Adaptive Thinking and Leadership simulation was developed in 2005 in cooperation with the Sandia National Laboratories and the J.F.K. Special Warfare Center for soldiers to "take part in online virtual events which include cross cultural communication scenarios with indigenous people" (see Figure 2.1).<sup>16</sup> The Future Soldier Trainer (FST) and Future Soldier Training System (FSTS)<sup>17</sup> were two additional Army Game Project products implemented by the Army to save money by reducing boot camp dropout rates for soldiers through pre-institutionalizing virtual activities that mentally prepared individuals for aspects of basic training.



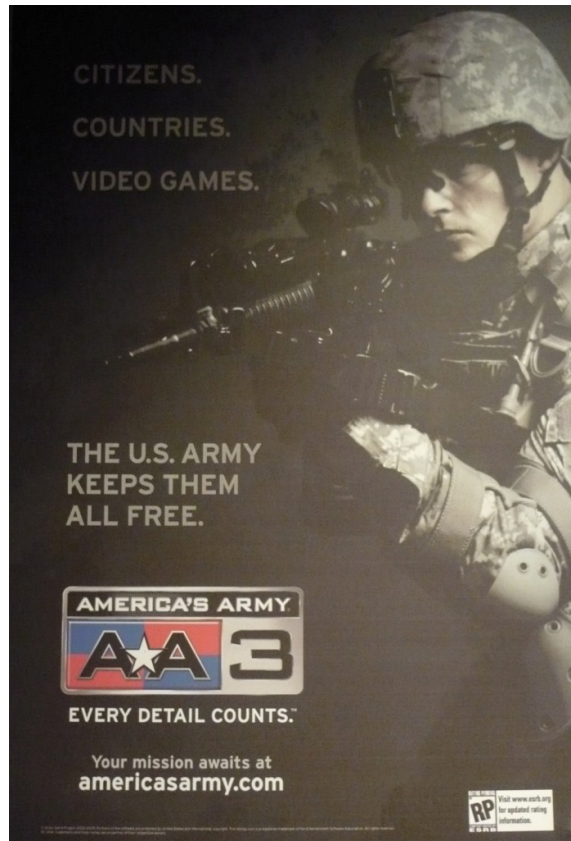
**Figure 2.1. Adaptive Thinking and Leadership training simulation, using the *America's Army* platform. Image produced by the Army Game Project.**

The AGP also executed a commercial partnership with video game publisher Ubisoft shortly after the move to Ft. Ord. Through this agreement, the Xbox and PlayStation 2 game *America's Army: Rise of a Soldier* was developed by the private studio Secret Level and published for commercial release by Ubisoft in 2005. The game met with mixed reviews but was apparently deemed enough of a success to merit a sequel for the Xbox 360, *America's Army: True Soldiers*, which was rushed through development and published by Ubisoft in 2007. *True Soldiers* was by all accounts a terrible game, and provided ample reason for Wardynski to cancel the partnership after its release. According to some, the game's developers Red Storm had been set up to fail by publishers Ubisoft, who gave them a deliberately short timeline.

Other agencies, such as game developer Zombie Studios, data management and software distribution company Pragmatic Solutions, marketing firm Ignited, and contracting organization Digital Consulting Services, each joined the Army Game Project at varying points, and each benefited significantly from the business opportunities made available by the AGP. Seattle-based commercial game developer Zombie Studios came to have a more prominent role in the AGP as

it regularly worked on outsourced projects that supplemented the work of the AAPA and AAGA teams.<sup>18</sup> There had also continuously been issues with the “backend providers” of the game, who were responsible for a variety of issues, including supporting in-game interactions via integrated text and voice communication;<sup>19</sup> account authentication for retrieving saved player profiles, enabling player access to the game, and viewing gameplay statistics; and backend database processing of limited information regarding player statistics, demographics, and internet usage. After going through a couple of backend providers for *America’s Army*, the AGP had by early 2004 settled on Pragmatic Solutions, a startup company in Westlake Village, CA that had the AGP as its major client.<sup>20</sup>

Also with its initial roots in *America’s Army*, Ignited successfully grew as the advertising and events marketing agency for the project (see Figure 2.2; Chapter 5). Based in a L.A. warehouse reportedly bought from Shaquille O’Neal’s failed internet startup business, the company came to garner a wider range of clients spanning multiple industries, including Sony, Princess Cruises, Activision, and Carl’s Jr. The AAPA’s parent company, Digital Consulting Services (DCS) was also involved with the Army Game Project from its early history as the direct employers of the AAPA game developers and handlers of human resource issues such as layoffs and health benefits. In practice, most, if not all, specifications and requirements for the public game came directly from the OEMA and government management, bypassing DCS altogether.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 2.2. Ignited poster advertising the release of *America's Army 3* at the 2009 Game Developers Conference. Photograph by the author.**

The AGP was gradually expanding through these institutional relationships, and several companies were expanding themselves, clearly benefiting from the partnerships. The development team at Ft. Ord, however, was taking a long time to recover from its self-imposed crisis, and developers were leaving on a regular basis following the departure of Mayberry and McCree. (The turnover for the game's development was so high that by the time I started fieldwork at the Emeryville studio in 2007, only six of the 28 team members from early 2004 were still working on the project; by the release of *America's Army 3* in 2009, only two of this group remained.) Because of this,

the Army was getting scared about losing the whole project and all the data. One day the team from North Carolina shows up at our offices with hard drives, USB keys. They just

charge into the office to “extract the data.” They didn’t say, “hey, we’re your replacements if you guys fuck up, and we’re taking everything you have because we’re not sure you’re going to be around next week.” But we were all looking around thinking, this isn’t good. And they were being kinda pricks about it. All of a sudden we have competition now, and they’re taking all of our data? [...] What they wouldn’t say then was that they *were* the backup plan. They were to be ready if our team broke up to take over the project. And that’s why the team to this point still gets paranoid about outside people coming in. (Chad)

This collective suspicion was made apparent to me during my initial presence in the studio for two weeks in 2007 when a developer, as the mouthpiece of the whole team, questioned me for two hours about my research project in order to discern that I was not a “spy” sent from another AGP team (see Chapter 6).

The initial interaction with Heneghan’s new AAGA team from North Carolina colored the relationship between the two teams, and spilled over internally once Philip De Luca ([Dev]Skippy) was hired as the new executive producer in October, 2004.

We had our problems with AAGA because we knew they wanted our project [...]. It just started off on totally bad footing. They were their own company, and we were very envious of that. We were very much looking for an identity as a company [...]. It was dark times, and then the colonel showed up one day and said that they were going to hire this guy Phil de Luca. Come to find out, he was Jerry Heneghan’s buddy, and we already hated AAGA and Heneghan. It looked like AAGA was planting its own executive producer on our team. We didn’t like De Luca. We were not going to embrace him with

open arms, with how he came in, and how he fired people on his first day, and how he hired a bunch of his buddies without talking to us. (Chad)

As De Luca explained,

Jerry Heneghan knew that Monterrey, as he put it, “needed an adult.” [...] The actual environment was incredibly toxic when I got there [...]. The lead programmer at the time had totally poisoned the team [...] so I fired him the day I got there. I also let some other people go because they were complicit in what amounts to fraud. I figured the team had defrauded the government by a minimum of \$200,000 because they claimed to be working on something, never delivered that something, and instead used all of their time to [...] pitch to set up their own company. And I understand why they did it—they were dissatisfied with the government and how the Army was managing them. [The Army] didn’t understand that video game development is comprised of a series of negotiations. They are used to giving an order, and essentially having the person carry it out. So they weren’t prepared for that back and forth. (Personal Interview, April 17, 2009)

The match with De Luca, however, did not work out. “That guy came in and just really tore the team up,” one developer said, “because it was already running out of steam. People were leaving left and right post-2.0. And then they put this guy in there. His management style just didn’t mesh” (Personal Interview, November 19, 2007). This factor, combined with De Luca’s posting of an infamous message directed at game hackers, which acknowledged—against Wardynski’s wishes—that the Army could indeed track individuals based on their IP address,<sup>22</sup> led to De Luca’s six month contract not being renewed. Philip Bossant once again stepped in despite his wishes to remain as the art director, this time as the permanent executive producer.

Heneghan, in the meantime, was pushing to become the director of the entire Army Game Project under Wardynski since it was becoming apparent that a more centralized restructuring of the entire project was necessary in order to bring all of the disparate elements to work together in a more organized fashion. To this end, the AAGA, which became Virtual Heroes, was actively courting the disaffected AAPA employees remaining on the diminished team. A then newly hired developer remembered how

two friends I had were very much into just ditching the project and leaving—going to Virtual Heroes. And there was big turmoil with people taking off and going there. I almost went that route, but I realized [...] that was the wrong idea. But with our small crew [and] people in the office, and bad vibes and just a lot of inner turmoil, it was difficult at first. (Personal Interview, October 10, 2008)

Heneghan's efforts take over the AGP were to also be Mike Zyda's revenge for losing the project from MOVES, since, as Zyda communicated to me in our first and only meeting, he sat on the corporate advisory board for Virtual Heroes (Personal Interview, August 24, 2006). Heneghan's work, though, ultimately proved ineffective, stymied in part by a long-term personal rivalry with one of Wardynski's two deputies at OEMA.

As it had been previously, the project in the midst of its growth was plagued by multiple pressures, personal and institutional rivalries, and a lack of mutual understanding of the varying needs of game designers, government contractors, and military personnel. Reflecting on this, one former producer offered a retrospective analysis of the situation by late 2004:

The colonel's idea was fundamentally brilliant. It demonstrated a level of insight as to what the Army needed, and connected it to a social phenomenon that he was not familiar

with, and he put it together, and it was absa-fucking-lutely brilliant. Now, the execution was poor, and that was definitely his fault. He selected these two majors, and one of them was really capable and driven and really intense, and another was ... corrupt. And that's his fault! The colonel fucked up, and he really doesn't accept that he was flawed. He views the flaws as being in the civilians, who were ultimately responsible for implementing the application [...]. He selected academic people to execute [the project], which was a fundamental mismatch. He should have turned it over to a game development company. And he should have had a board that he could go to and ask, "should we be spending 3 million dollars [a year] on a game and 10 million dollars [a year] on its marketing campaign?" (Personal Interview, March 11, 2009)

### Contracting

With his retirement looming Wardynski realized that there was a need to ensure the long-term viability of the Army Game Project, and he knew that OEMA was not the answer. As a research institution at West Point, OEMA's mission was to put forth proposals and prototypes, which would be carried out by other entities; it was never intended to be the permanent home of the Army Game Project. With the goal of an eventual transition in mind, in 2005 OEMA began sharing project responsibilities with the Software Engineering Directorate (SED; see Figure 2.3) at Redstone Arsenal, next to Huntsville, Alabama—"Rocket City, USA." With one of the largest populations of Ph.D. holders per capita in the world, Redstone Arsenal housed a large number of research and development centers like SED, including NASA's Marshal Space Flight Center and the U.S. Army's Aviation and Missile Command. Well-known space programs (Gemini, Saturn,

Mercury) and Army weapons systems (e.g., Patriot and Javelin missiles; Apache, Chinook, and Black Hawk helicopters) are some of the many programs originating from Redstone Arsenal. Compared with the huge centers and programs at Redstone Arsenal the SED was a relatively small institution, and like the other companies involved in the project *America's Army* became its poster child.



**Figure 2.3: The SED's logo.**

The development of many government trainers based on the *America's Army* platform transitioned to the SED in 2005, with Virtual Heroes and other entities continuing in various capacities on projects, and the government project management of *America's Army* programs became centralized there, with OEMA maintaining ultimate control. At the highest level, the project managers of these programs were employees of the U.S. government, while other individuals working at the SED were employees of a hodgepodge of large military contracting companies such as Northrop Grumman, SAIC (Science Applications International Corporation), and Lockheed-Martin. Michael Bodé ([Dev]Bode), who was an employee of Northrop Grumman, worked within the SED as a project manager for various *America's Army* Basic Skills Trainers. He specified how the hierarchy of contracting was

an important cultural thing. There's government and there's contractors, and a subset of that is whether or not you are a "prime" or a "team member." Management is always

government. There is a high echelon that has to be government-civilian, and underneath that they fill in with the “prime” and then underneath the prime they may have some “team members.” [...] It is very much a cultural thing, where if you are not government, the government people will treat you differently. It’s like being in a club. It’s partly because they are trained like that, and educated that they can communicate certain things to contractors, and can’t do certain things. [A government employee] technically can’t ride in my car or any other contractor’s because that can be construed as giving him a favor. But I can ride in his car. So when we go to lunch, I can’t treat him. He can treat me. Weird stuff [that] can really impact your relationship with those people. (Personal Interview, November 14, 2008)

As one of the top ten U.S. Department of Defense contractors, SAIC was the “prime” contractor for the Army Game Project, enabling money to pass from the government to the “team member” (DCS) and down the line to the employees (AAPA). I was told by Bodé that at each stage the overhead for a game developer’s salary would be multiplied by each contracting institutional level, so that DCS would, for example, be paid around \$100,000 by SAIC to manage a game developer making \$50,000. SAIC would, in turn, be paid \$150,000 by the government for that employee. Although SAIC (ranked at number 266 in the Fortune 500 and with over \$10 billion in annual revenue in 2009)<sup>23</sup> was the holder of the prime contract for *America’s Army* with the U.S. government, it had very little presence in the day-to-day activities of most parts of the AGP, and zero presence at the game studio. (Many developers did not realize that their direct employer, DCS, was paid by SAIC, which was paid by the government.) This arrangement was a reoccurring problem from the point of view of the California development studio. Bodé went on to explain that

DCS, they are a “team member.” They are a part of the organization, but at the same time they are on the outskirts in the contracting sense. They are not SAIC, so they are not prime, and so they are kind of looked down upon by SAIC employees. They’re not government, so, you know [...]. That’s actually part of the problem with this group and how they are operated out [in California]. They are a contracting group, and on the low end of the totem pole in that regard. (Mike Bodé, Personal Interview, November 14, 2008)

As Chad said, “It has always felt like we’re being held at a distance.”

When the SED first came on board the project, *America’s Army* developers had hoped that some of the management issues caused by this relationship would be mitigated, along with issues relating to workload and timeline expectations. Erich Iveans recalled how

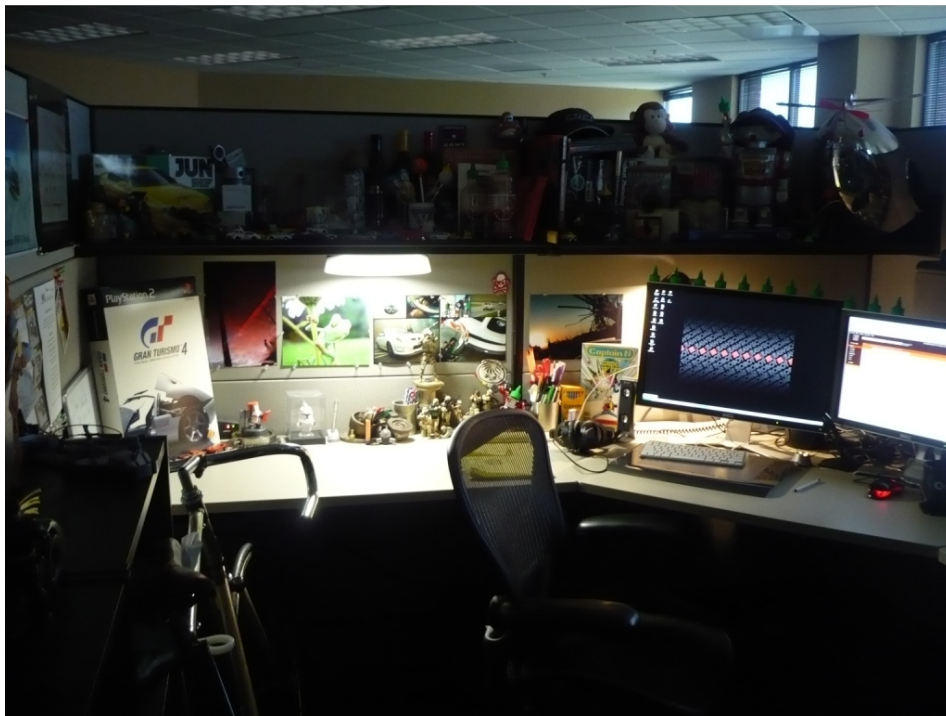
the first interaction that we ever had with the SED was when we were still down at [Ft. Ord] in Monterrey. They came out, and the first half of the day we explained to them our woes. Just demand after demand that we couldn’t meet and still produce the game. And the SED director [Frank Blackwell] was sitting at the conference table and was saying, “I find this hard to believe, that’s just not possible.” The second half of the day, major Wilson shows up [from OEMA], and he goes, “The AUSA [Association of the U.S. Army] meetings are coming up, and I’ve promised everyone that you are going to make a video about sergeant Smith,” this guy who was posthumously awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor for his combat actions. “Not only are you going to make this video of that action in the game, we’re going to do it at this resolution for projecting it on three wide screens. It’s due in two months—let’s go!” We could not have asked for a better

example of how messed up things were. So at the end of that day, Frank Blackwell said to us, “I need to go to colonel Wardynski and talk to him, because I’ve figured out the problem, and the problem is him.” (Personal Interview, October 31, 2008)

The developers continued releasing new updates for the game on a regular basis, and were “successful at pulling off those miracle moments to keep us going,” such as producing the in-game film about sergeant Smith while also working on the game they were hired to make, but they were never “successful at setting reasonable expectations” for their managers (Iveans, Personal Interview, October 31, 2008). In a move that quite possibly saved the studio from complete implosion, the AAPA changed locations once again in 2006 to Emeryville, a small city sandwiched between Berkeley, Oakland, and the San Francisco Bay. Most of the small development team was happy to make the move north to a more urban and cosmopolitan center, and the move deliberately sought to take advantage of closer contacts with the electronic entertainment industry by bringing the office into the cultural fold of Silicon Valley and San Francisco. A variety of digital entertainment companies such as Pixar (makers of *Toy Story*, *Ratatouille*, *WALL-E*, etc.) and Electronic Arts’ Maxis studio (developers of *The Sims*, *Spore*) were in close proximity to the AAPA. Developers liked to remark that they shared a Starbucks with video game industry celebrity Will Wright, who would regularly be seen during coffee breaks and who once came to visit the studio.

The Emeryville studio (see Figure 2.4) was where I found my fieldwork home within the Army Game Project, and I first visited there briefly in September, 2006 after my initial visit to West Point. They had just put out a major release, *America’s Army: Overmatch* (version 2.7), a high point in the game’s development that was nevertheless described as being “a goddamn

miracle” (Personal Interview, October 22, 2008). By that point, the developers “had a precedent, we knew what the users wanted, we had kind of an organizational structure and everything was flowing much more systematically from the boots-on-the-ground perspective.” (Personal Interview, October 8, 2008). New designers fresh from graduating from the nearby Ex’pression College for Digital Arts made an easy transition to work at the studio, which was deliberately stationed to be in close proximity to the school, and an intern program was set up between the two organizations.



**Figure 2.4: An artist's desk at the AAPA in Emeryville. Photograph by the author, March 2009**

These factors, combined with the fact that the development team had finally arranged an office to their specifications that felt like home, contributed to a greater sense of normalcy as a transition was made towards the production of *America's Army 3* starting in 2007. Other AGP initiatives materialized in 2007 as well. The Virtual Army Experience, which I describe in great detail in Chapter 5, was one major project that the SED, Ignited, Zombie, and the AAPA

produced collaboratively. Additional commercial industry partnerships like an *America's Army* arcade game<sup>24</sup> and a cell phone game,<sup>25</sup> both published in 2007, resulted in products that made the franchise's claims to authenticity and realism absurd (see Figure 2.5). Ubisoft's *America's Army: True Soldiers* flop was also published in 2007. When they worked out as anticipated, these arrangements were win-win situations for both institutions that provided free advertisement opportunities to the Army while the commercial licensing organization obtained the ability to create an "official" Army game to sell for profit. Control over content, though, had always been an important issue that the Army, and specifically Wardynski, had been loath to relinquish. The dubious quality of these games—both in playability and in the desired representation of the Army—led to a more cautious approach in terms of future electronic entertainment industry relationships.



**Figure 2.5. *America's Army* arcade game, published by Global VR, and *America's Army: Special Operations*, a cell phone game published by Gameloft.**

Other non-commercial industry partnerships to use the *America's Army* platform involved a very successful project now used by the Walter Reed Army Medical Center involving a driving simulation for wounded soldiers using prosthetics or needing assistance in acclimating to the civilian world.<sup>26</sup> Starting with this development in 2008, an Army soldier could potentially go through recruitment, training, and post-trauma therapy using the *America's Army* platform, thus meshing the life cycle of the game software with that of the soldier. Collaboration with the non-profit organization Project Lead the Way, also starting in 2008, gave the organization use of the platform for teaching middle and high school students physics through virtual simulation experiments.<sup>27</sup> The most recent major collaboration, which could herald a future direction of the project, was the creation of *Moonbase Alpha* (2010), a “first person explorer” game developed by Virtual Heroes, NASA Learning Technologies, and the SED using the *America's Army* platform. The free game—winner of the 2010 Serious Games Showcase and Challenge “Government” category—simulates moon life in a near-future scenario, and, like *America's Army*, encourages teamwork between its players.

### *America's Army 3*

New updates to *America's Army: Special Forces*, released in November of 2003 (version 2.0), were being developed and released up until April of 2009 (version 2.8.5)—an astonishing development and release cycle of five and a half years for a single game that is highly unusual in an industry full of games that have a life span of several months to a few years at most. During this span of time military first-person shooters—a genre of games that the original *America's Army* had helped define and build—became increasingly more popular through successful games like those in the *Call of Duty*, *Medal of Honor*, *Conflict*, *SOCOM*, and *Battlefield* series. Though

*America's Army* maintained a core group of dedicated players—many of whom communicated regularly with the developers in the game's online forums—the pull of a free game became less pronounced as the game's graphical technology and style of gameplay was unable to keep pace with the industry. The rate of registered users of the game dropped considerably as newer products became more appealing to video gamers. Developers told me that the play style deliberately encouraged in *America's Army* also influenced who continued playing since “one of the core goals [of *America's Army* is] that a well-coordinated team should always be able to beat a more individually talented, random group of people” (Personal Interview, November 24, 2008). A discernibly older group of gamers played *America's Army*, which as some developers described it was a “thinking man's tactical shooter” that did not require as much “twitch skill” as the newer, more individualistically competitive games.

Part of the reason for this longevity in development despite the gradual obsolescence of the game for potential players was that the development of *America's Army 3* did not progress as smoothly as anticipated. There was a lack of leadership and vision in terms of what the finished product should be, and the lead designer who had worked on the team for many years contributed to the standstill by refusing to delegate responsibility to other designers. Steve, a level designer, avowed that “we didn't come at 3.0 the right way, and [...] we suffered a lot from design direction that initially really poisoned a lot of our efforts” (Personal Interview, October 22, 2008). Wardynski and the SED waited impatiently through 2007 and early 2008 for progress towards a finished product that never materialized. Eventually, Michael Bodé, from the SED, was sent from Alabama to California in the spring of 2008 to become the co-executive producer with Phillip Bossant. “In [Wardynski's] eyes, Phillip had failed,” a developer confided, “and I

can't completely disagree with that" (Personal Interview, November 1, 2008). Yet at the same time, Steve indicated that

it felt like there was shit going on up in the lofty perches of the Army side that was buffeting us around in ways that we didn't necessarily fully understand or even get exposed to [...]. The requirements coming down, it was weird. It wasn't insane; we're used to insane stuff. We're used to things like "put 200 vehicles in the game!" It would be stuff like, "It's really important that we create meaningful learning experience moments, profound moments for the user, [that arise from] consequences to their actions in the game." Really kinda high concept things. They were tasks that would require somebody like [an anthropologist] to design a study to get any meaningful data. Somebody would have to have a graduate degree to go in and figure out [...] the context of the human experience you were creating, and you'd have to have some pretty sophisticated data analysis going on [...]. Either the people asking for it had simply no understanding of the real magnitude of what they are asking, or—more troubling—they did and getting good data was less important than getting some data that they could point to.

A more hierarchical chain of command that placed the SED as the mediator between OEMA and the developers gradually became implemented that prevented significant communication between the game producers in California and OEMA. This contrast with the earlier years of development was due to the centralizing force of the SED, which came to direct more of the requirements in the development of the game. People speculated that after Wardynski's expected retirement in 2010 the SED would become the permanent home for *America's Army*, a prospect which, according to some inadvertently sent emails that I was

shown, had always been the ultimate goal of the Directorate's leaders. To this end, "when the SED sent Bodé, he came with instructions to clean house on management. He didn't do it because he realized how important some people were to the project" (Iveans, Personal Interview, October 31, 2008). Wardynski, however, wanted a "price for failure" in the delay of *America's Army 3*. Recounting the plot of a movie that told the story of a mutinous Civil War unit that was forestalled by the execution of its leaders, he stepped in and fired Bossant, a studio favorite, along with another long-time producer in the summer of 2008. Another experienced and well-liked designer quit following this.

It was soon after these events that I began, in September 2008, full-time ethnographic research funded by the National Science Foundation, a factor that significantly aided the legitimization of my project to government and military personnel at OEMA, the SED, and elsewhere. When I began open-ended interviews, a large portion of what people wanted to talk about involved what was perceived by the developers as being "just a huge clusterfuck of project management" (Personal Interview, November 1, 2008) that was only intensified by the firings. One person discussed how "It doesn't even matter when we say no" to "unrealistic demands. It is crazy land" (Personal Interview, November 1, 2008). Steve was

really grateful for these challenges but at the same time it feels like we are really being thrown into the deep end [...]. You have these crazy requirements that are difficult to meet coming at you from people who are intractable and on whom you have no leverage. You got moving targets, and that's all just part of the job. Working in constraints fundamentally makes you do better work, so I'm into that. [But] the wriggle room you have is so small and the creativity you have got to bring to the problem is so considerable. And you have to solve all the problems at once: What is going to meet the

requirements of the Army; actually reflect legitimately useful information about the MOS [Military Occupational Specialty of soldiers]; use real equipment; be something that we can create the art for in the time we have; [and] on top of that, have a roadmap for all of this stuff to roll out over the next five years to where any given thing we are making doesn't just fuck everything that came before it with some fundamental change. And to do that with only six dudes on staff who can program, [who already have] no time.

(Personal Interview, October 22, 2008)

When I later visited the SED I realized that workers there experienced parallel pressures but very different conditions that were not conducive to the management and development of a video game. No electronic devices from off-base were allowed in the buildings—no cell phones, USB devices, cameras, iPods, voice recorders, and definitely no laptops.<sup>28</sup> Such security conditions were a strain for everyone involved, especially the project managers,<sup>29</sup> one of whom described her work to me as being in a state that is “always in panic mode” due to the multiple pressures and demands from both above and below. During a visit with another SED project manager, he told me that he had received 48 emails over the course of my single hour visiting his office (Fieldnotes, January 6, 2009). These factors could perhaps partially explain a series of SED purchasing oversights in 2008 for critical middleware licenses necessary for the California team to progress in their development (e.g., Perforce revision control software, Adobe Flash, and Beast lighting software for games), which caused game development to come to a near standstill at several points and created further tension when the blame for such delays was placed on the Emeryville team.

The relationship between the game developers and their management at SED and OEMA was sometimes explained in indigenous terms by the developers, who would say that these

conflicts, at the core, arose from cultural differences. “Every time we try to bring in common sense the government fucks it up with their weird justifications or rules that don’t make any sense to our culture,” one developer told me in frustration (Personal Interview, November 24, 2008). Another former developer reflected on his experiences in a similar way, writing that “there was a magic couple of years there where two totally alien cultures came together to do something cool.”<sup>30</sup> Though it is most likely too simplistic of an explanation, the language of cultural difference does highlight that *America’s Army* is far more than the sum of what the Army says it is—e.g., a video game “designed, developed, and deployed by the U.S. Army.” As an example *par excellence* of the “military entertainment complex,” the history of *America’s Army* reveals a contingent history of relationships that is indeed very much complex. The power of the concept of the “complex” (e.g., “military industrial complex”) is in its ability to obfuscate multifaceted processes, by making it appear as if the reality of convoluted negotiations, rivalries, and collaborations is actually smooth, logical, homogeneous, and damn near omnipotent. The idea of “the network,” I would argue, achieves a similar result of affording more power to a phenomenon than it deserves.

I went in search of Hardt and Negri’s network, but it proved largely elusive. Instead, what I found was a hodgepodge of military, government, commercial, and contracting institutions, factional and personal rivalries, a long history of disgruntled workers, and a lack of understanding due to “cultural barriers/differences.” Although institutions in the AGP did ultimately have to cooperate with one another to a certain extent, there was an intense amount of competition between organizations over product content, funding, and reputation. Underlying all of this competition was a fundamentally business-driven motivation of institutional self-preservation, especially for those institutions that relied heavily or exclusively on AGP funding

in order to operate. Although a horizontal, deterritorialized, and virtual network of production did exist to a certain extent, as an Army-sponsored project the AGP was essentially a hierarchically-organized endeavor—a feudal society existing within a democratic one, as several developers liked to say. On the ground and inside its institutions, the picture of the AGP was much more nuanced and factional than the seamless and idealized networked production model described by Hardt and Negri. While Wardynski's own metrics appear to point towards the fact that *America's Army* has been successful in helping the Army recruit and hold on to talented soldiers, my experiences and the history of *America's Army* point to a contrasting story of success and failure in the recruitment and management of game developers and the project itself.

### III. The Art of Persuasion and the Science of Manpower

#### Talent Management

*“The dynamics of neoliberalism have destroyed the bourgeoisie and replaced it with two distinct and opposing classes: the cognitariat on the one hand ... and the managerial class on the other, whose only competence is in competitiveness.”*

—Bifo Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody* (2009a:52)

*“OEMA’s charter is to build the Army of the future. It’s about recruiting talent, assessing talent, deploying talent, and retaining talent.”*

—Major Mike Marty, *America’s Army* Chief Operations Officer (Personal Interview, May 21, 2009)

Over the course of my research on the Army Game Project within its constituent institutions from 2006 to 2009, it had become obvious to me that despite the continual inter-institutional conflicts that often threatened the overall viability of the project at multiple points in its history, the structure of the AGP was eminently embedded in the logics of market analysis and neoliberal business principles. As an economic and policy-focused research organization within the Department of Social Sciences at West Point, OEMA (The Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis) was an interdisciplinary institution that hosted a variety of researchers with advanced degrees from prestigious universities (e.g., Harvard M.B.A. and M.P.P. degrees; MIT economics Ph.D.; RAND policy analysis Ph.D.; Penn State history M.A.) who often are also

mid- to senior-level commissioned officers (major, lieutenant colonel, colonel) in the Army and professors at West Point.

The office's traditional work was to provide analysis and recommendations to the Army for a wide range of issues by building innovative projects to study and address systemic problems that the Army faces in its organizational structure. Wardynski, for example, describes his dissertation in policy analysis that he wrote at RAND as "expand[ing] the context within which the Army thinks about Soldier compensation [beyond the] terms of Soldier pay and allowance [in order to] evaluate compensation at the household level to understand how Army stationing practices undermine household income and increase the direct cost of manning the Army."<sup>31</sup> OEMA, under his supervision, proposed the Officer Career Incentive Program, which worked to ensure that officers could be placed in an Army occupation of their choice and attend graduate school in exchange for additional years of service.<sup>32</sup> Other initiatives on which OEMA worked include putting together a highly effective program for tracking post-Cold War nuclear weapons stocks (Chaplin and Ruby 2005:214) and various studies on the demographics and interests of West Point cadets, such as how many of them play *America's Army* in relation to other college-aged adults.

One study by OEMA, *Towards a U.S. Army Officer Corps Strategy for Success: A Proposed Human Capital Model Focused upon Talent*, argues that a "talent-focused strategy" for recruiting officers is imperative since, due to a dearth in supply of mid-career officers, "there are increasing and accelerating signs that [the] Officer Corps will be unequal to future demands unless substantive changes are made in its management" (Wardynski, et al. 2009:3). This emphasis on "talent" accentuates a military need and desire to harness cognitive laborers who demonstrate

intelligence [and] aptitudes for rapid learning and adaptation. Talented officers ... discern quickly patterns of activity within new situations, and ... leverage these innate aptitudes to become expert in the competencies to which they are drawn. These may range from deep technical skills to broad conceptual or intuitive abilities, all of which the Army requires. (Wardynski, et al. 2009:15)

In conjunction with this published assessment, Wardynski supervised the creation of a “talent management system” for officers that would place “the right leader, in the right position, at the right time.”<sup>33</sup>

An underlying issue, however, is in “accessing, developing, and employing talented people [whose] intellectual agility allows them to master diverse competencies demanded now and in the future. Such a strategy ... will move the Army beyond personnel management to talent management” (Wardynski, et al. 2009:vi). This published study is separate from the Army Game Project, but the fact that it originated from the same institution and director underscores how the need for “talented” Army laborers could be addressed in part through novel recruitment solutions like *America’s Army*. At its core, *America’s Army* is an initiative for moving towards the management of talented potential soldiers, as it actively engages a demographic of young men who have access to computers and basic competencies that are most valued by the working cognitariat.<sup>34</sup>

In this chapter I show how *America’s Army* and OEMA implemented a variety of persuasive tactics on multiple levels, such as the market logics of manpower (and biopower) and rhetorical deployments surrounding the issue of video game violence, to make the case that the game and its franchise was a legitimate use of government funds. I argue that these tactics exemplify a military desire to draw upon the skills of the cognitariat; it is a biopolitical tool for

militarizing, recruiting, and managing “talent.” I further demonstrate in each of the interview sections below a clear understanding on the part of the AGP that solid messaging for the *America’s Army* franchise was necessary in order to carefully navigate the often murky political waters of Army recruitment funding, military propaganda, and video game violence.

Wardynski’s explanations of the AGP are not only informational in showing these persuasive tactics of the AGP, but are also demonstrative of his own persuasive power; his personality was so forceful that in my conversations with him I regularly felt compelled to believe his explanations indisputable, and this was a common feeling among employees working in the AGP. Because Wardynski’s words capture a part of the sheer persuasive faculty that he commanded and sought to infuse into the game, I include his explanations of the AGP at length in this chapter.

*Market Logics: The Business of Recruitment and Game Development*

*“The Army Game Project employs an enterprise approach spanning outreach, recruiting, training, education, information operations and experimentation to deliver vivid, high-impact multiuse solutions that: redress systemic market failures that raise the cost of Army recruiting; achieve economies to scale across multiple user communities through reuse of project assets; [and] improve quality and accelerate innovation.”*

—Casey Wardynski, “Army Game Project Results Overview” (2009:1)

By providing a relatively unthreatening game space to younger male video gamers to play at being in the Army, OEMA sought to tap into the array of other hugely successful

military-themed combat games in the commercial market.<sup>35</sup> But whereas these commercial military games sought to gain a market share among the demographic of teenage to thirty-something males through increasingly sensational, cinematic, and technophilic combat gaming scenarios, the purpose of *America's Army* hinged on gaining headway within a separate market—that of the market for talented future military recruits. Because the target demographic for both of these markets was essentially the same, creating a video game developed and produced by the U.S. Army was a logical opportunity to leverage a preexisting native demand for military games by co-opting messages about the Army that were already in circulation in the electronic entertainment industry.

In seeking to find more about this market rationale underlying all of the AGP initiatives that OEMA has undertaken, I interviewed colonel Wardynski in May, 2009, near the end of my period of formal fieldwork.<sup>36</sup> I had previously encountered Wardynski when we had met in other contexts at the Game Developers Conference, Redstone Arsenal, the Emeryville studio, and at the VAE, but I wanted to get his authoritative voice in regards to several lingering questions that I still had. His approach to markets evidenced a strategic policy on par with elaborate strategies of troop deployment that went straight to the issue of increasing demand among “kids” (his terminology) to join the Army. In the heart of West Point, I sat down in his modest office, which faced the Hudson River and exhibited books such as *The Leadership Secrets of Colin Powell*, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, *Changing the Game: How Video Games are Transforming the Future of Business*, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, *Going to the Mines to Look for Diamonds: Experimenting with Military Recruiting Stations in Malls*; and movies such as *Gettysburg*, *Braveheart*, *Wall Street*, *Trading Places*, *Boiler Room*, *Stripes* (a professed favorite of his), and *We Were Soldiers*. Professor Wardynski

started by explaining that “we [at OEMA] assume that markets are pretty efficient and we know that government isn’t. So if you can make government behave more like markets, maybe you would be better off.”

Robertson Allen: So more of a kind of business model?

Casey Wardynski: Right. So if we were looking to see where to put our ROTC programs, well, what’s the hardest thing to do in terms of getting an ROTC cadet? Is it training, or is it getting them interested in ROTC? My thinking is [that] the hardest part is getting talented people interested—building demand. So if building demand is the hard part, the question is really a function of two things: What schools do they want to go to and at those schools what could we do to make them interested in ROTC?

RA: It’s pretty specific to the school and the place.

CW: Yeah, and so given that we want crackerjack people, what schools are they interested in? Because if we’re at the wrong school, we’re out of luck no matter what we do. So that’s a whole different question from what the Army asks. Right now, the Army is asking, how much do we get out of our ROTC battalions at the other campuses? Well, if you’re at the wrong campuses, you’re never going [to solve your underlying problems] with that analysis. You have to ask a whole different kind of question: Of the people that want to go into the military, where do they want to go to school?... So we built the Army a framework for how to deal with these questions globally. We asked, of the people who come into the Army directly who have a college degree, where do they come from? And of people who are applying to West Point from all over the United States, where else did they apply? And you find out that it’s really a whole different set of schools.

RA: Where are they?

CW: The Pennsylvania schools [Penn State and U Penn] are at the top of their league. And a lot of schools [that have ROTC] aren't even on the list. That's a question about markets—where does the market say we should be, versus where are we? So with game technology, the question would be that we don't really understand all the attributes of games all that well. We know there's goodness there, but we don't know what the ingredients are and in what ratios. But there are things that we do know. We know they move fast [in the market]. We know that they are extremely interesting to the same sort of people in the military—young males. For example, we created a Facebook page for the new launch of *Americas Army 3* about two or three days ago. Ninety-four percent of the people who are fans of our Facebook page are male. That's pretty good information right there—we're in the right market.

RA: Two days and you already know that.

CW: Yep, I think we have about 2,600 fans now. Ninety four percent are male. Thirty percent are 13-17, twenty-one percent are 18-24, and twenty-three percent are 25-34. The vast majority are under age 34. OK, that's good. So there's native interest there and we're in the right spot for this game technology thing. And the kind of game we're making, it's not chutes and ladders, it's a first-person [shooter] game. So that's how you narrow in the genre. And the next thing to ask is what you can get from this game. They evolve very quickly and are pretty much at the cutting edge all the time. The industry is over there, moving at light speed—better, faster, quicker, more players, more immersion, more intuitive. All of these are the attributes of good games, and when you look at the Army, where are we going? We run on [game] engines that nobody has ever even heard of. We run on engines that were economic failures.<sup>37</sup>

RA: So during the course of the Army Game Project over about the last 10 years, what would you say are the biggest successes and missteps that have happened?

CW: I'd say the big successes are, number one, we're still here [*both laugh*]. Number two, there have been a lot of efforts to mimic that haven't succeeded,<sup>38</sup> which points to the fact that this isn't easy. Now, many of those efforts were doomed from design; they hadn't thought through the key ingredients: is there native demand? We didn't have to create demand; it was already there. Where's the demand for the Navy game? I don't see any.

RA: That's one of the worst games I've ever played, I have to admit.

CW: So the Navy gets it in their head to have a game [*Strike and Retrieve*] but where's the native demand for things that look like the Navy in a game? There's very little demand [for] a submarine game or an airplane game that involves being a pilot or a commander. Do they hire for those jobs? No. So how do you make the jobs the Navy is hiring for be interesting in games? Well, it doesn't seem like anybody has been able to figure it out yet. Is it likely that the military is going to figure it out if the game industry can't figure it out? No. So what do they come up with? A fish game. All the 10 people who have played it have discovered [that], but the Navy can check the logs that they have a game. Is there an Air Force game? Not really. Do they need one? Probably not. Is there evidence of existing demand? Pretty thin. Microsoft Flight Simulator ...

RA: It's an older crowd of people who play flight simulators.

CW: Exactly, so even if there is demand, is it the demand [that they want]? They're in the wrong part of the curve. The next question would be, if you're going to do it, do you have the wherewithal to do it right? Because if you do it wrong, there's no point in doing it. There are enough alternatives for kids with games that just because your game is free doesn't mean that

the kid is going to come play it. So if you don't do a high quality product, in my mind you might as well not do anything because you are probably going to end up hurting yourself more than helping yourself. The fact that we could do a top quality product, being that we are in the government, to me is very surprising. Which is unfortunate, but it's because of our procurement systems. They move at dead slow speed [and are] optimized for doing business with very large companies that have a high threshold for pain in terms of being paid late and having lots of rules and regulations.

RA: So how difficult is it to operate as if there is a market within an organization that doesn't see it that way?

CW: It's hard, because we're constrained by government procurement and contract rules.

We're constrained by governmental thought processes, which see a year as fast or two years as fast; whereas in the game industry a year or two years is pretty slow. So the frame of reference is entirely different. That cultural shift is really tough. And the word "game" is involved. For the first seven years [I was doing this project], using the word "game" meant "toy," which is kind of crazy because the Army invented war games....

The key idea of *America's Army* was that there was a market failure that was hurting the Army's ability to recruit kids. Part of it is because of the recruiters, part of it is because of the Army, and part of it is because of the way kids receive and process information about the Army. And the things that the Army has been doing demand no proof that they should continue being done. For example, there's no question that we need recruiters. Nobody ever asks that question. Well, I question it; I'm not sure we need recruiters. I don't understand why we need a military guy to go recruit a kid to be in the military. You don't have an IBM guy go out and recruit a kid to work at IBM; you have head-hunters and people to go to

college fairs who know IBM. You might have a few recruiters, but really they are human resource people who are more in the screening role than the recruiting role. Now, I can see the Army having screeners to verify that these kids would be a good match, just like IBM would do, but we have reverse-screeners: Instead of trying to keep out the bad fits, we're trying to force everyone in that could possibly fit and then trying to see if we could get them to be a good fit after the fact. Well, in WWII that might have made sense, but in the information age it doesn't. We don't need that many kids, really, and the kids that we do need we want them to be a good fit because they are volunteers. If they're not a good fit, they are going to cost a fortune, they are going to be unhappy, and it doesn't fit well with the market model. So I question the fact that we need recruiters. Could we do it virtually by getting kids interested in the Army, by test-driving, by virtually being a part of it? By having them visit bases, do Junior ROTC? I think we can do a lot more of that, but the fact that we need recruiters is not questioned.

RA: How is that received by Army recruitment?

CW: Not well. It's slow to adapt because it's a risk-adverse business. And I can understand that because if they miss their objectives, they're the ones who are going to be in the hot seat. It's hard to crack that nut. It grows its own feedstock, so recruiters who like it stay and become recruiter-recruiters. That process that they grew up in is a process that they believe in and are going to perpetuate.

RA: It becomes completely institutionalized.

CW: Completely institutionalized, whether it fits the circumstances anymore or not. So the Army does recruiting events ... and the Army will have a report about how many "events" they did this weekend and what they got. I'll be like, well ok, [*America's Army*] had 100,000

events this weekend, because every mission in *America's Army* is an "event." They are just virtual, and they cost us a nickel. People forget that "return on investment" (ROI) has a numerator and a denominator. They always think of the numerator as fixed and the denominator as fixed, but if you drive your cost out of the equation, now you're in a world of disruptive technology that puts the other guys out of business because it doesn't have to get you much. [We] challenge a lot of rules of thumb in the Army about why we are doing business the way that we do. Is there another way to do it that is cheaper and gets the same effects? Or a way that is cheaper and gets lower effects, but when you do the math you're still farther ahead? Or a way that is cheaper and gets you better effects?

RA: Has that been the rationale around the project since its inception?

CW: Right, that the costs are so fundamentally different. *America's Army* costs \$4 million a year to build, and hosting online is about another \$2.5 million, and the rest is whatever you want to do with it for marketing and events.<sup>39</sup> A normal game would have \$10 to \$40 million [devoted to marketing], depending on the game, and it would be a big deal. We don't have to have that kind of money. We're virtual, so we don't need shelf space, but it would be nice to have a little money so we could be up front and center on places like Steam [store.steampowered.com] or Fileplanet [www.fileplanet.com] so that kids who aren't familiar with the product could at least see that it's there and try it for free.

But we face a lot of questions, like what is the ROI for *America's Army*? OK, we get X number of hundred million man-hours of play. So how does that equate to anything the Army normally thinks about? The normal marketing model is that, first, you want to make people aware that you have a product. Awareness is measured in terms of impressions, how many people saw it. So let's say a million people saw an ad on TV, a million impressions. How

long did they see it? Thirty seconds for a million people—what is that? That’s about eight thousand hours of viewer time. Did they pay attention? Maybe. Maybe they use Tevo, or went to get coffee or coke. Whose attention? Is it grandma, or is it Billy who is 19? We don’t know. What were the demographics of the TV show’s viewers you ran the ad on? Well, they generally are this, but who knows. So you try and compare a million game hours of *America’s Army* to that. A million hours of *America’s Army* are worth a hell of a lot more because: a) they didn’t Tevo it; b) it’s focused attention; and c) we’re way beyond the “did you know there’s an Army?” part. In *America’s Army*, you’re part of the Army. So we can’t even have a reasonable, sane discussion about comparing *America’s Army* with the number of “impressions.”



**Figure 3.1: A combination of “legacy” and novel recruiting efforts. As of 2011, the U.S. Army’s NASCAR program costs approximately \$7 million annually, significantly more than the annual costs for developing and maintaining *America’s Army*.<sup>40</sup>**

All the literature on persuasive technology and behavioral economics supports our approach (see Wardynski 2009), but the legacy [recruiting] system is very difficult to defeat (see Figure 3.1). There are a lot of jobs, a lot of money tied up in it. I think their budget this year for the legacy recruiting stuff was \$167 million; we're in the range of \$4 million. [But if] you look at where firms are putting their money into marketing, TV is not it. TV is dying, print is dying, radio is dying, and online is what's growing. Why does the Army value TV so much? I have no idea. It's a one way communication method that is extremely general in nature.

At the first principles level, I would question if anything the Army is doing is right. [The Army gets] away with what we do because we have an unlimited budget apparently. Or at least when we get in trouble and the country needs us, the budget pretty much becomes unlimited, right? Just because we can do that doesn't make it right. Now when the Army throws those resources at it, it may succeed in the recruiting mission, but may not have done itself any long-term favors because the people that were brought in may not really have any idea of what they are doing.

Wardynski's comments point towards a continual strategizing by OEMA in regards to both recruitment policies and inter-institutional Army politics. In its market-oriented push towards efficiency, OEMA challenged many of the more institutionalized recruitment and simulation practices of the Army. In our informal conversations, Wardynski often spoke negatively of rival organizations such as PEO-STRI (Program Executive Office for Simulation and Instrumentation), which in 2008 won a competition against other military organizations, including the Army Game Project, to produce the official Army training simulation for enlisted soldiers.<sup>41</sup> Such institutions, he maintained, were an endemic Army problem in their

complacency, bloated budgets, and low quality products and procedures. Through his zeal, Wardynski did create enemies and admirers—sometimes in the same person among several people I communicated with. (“These nitwits at PEO-STRI hate me,” he later said.) But the end goal of his uncompromising efforts was increasing efficiency and the quality of recruited soldiers while decreasing unnecessary expenditures and procedures. These goals are often quite forgotten or unrealized in press reports and online comments that sensationalize the fact that the U.S. Army makes a video game “on the taxpayer’s bill.”<sup>42</sup>

### *Persuasive Tactics: Education through Entertainment*

#### *Design Criteria*

- *Soldiers Developed as Aspirational Figures*
- *Use of Force is a Means to an Objective – it is NOT the Objective*
- *Players Always Assume the Role of a “Good Guy”*
- *Adherence to Rules of Engagement, Ethos and Army Values Drives Success and Player Progression*
- *The Game will Convey Expert Information Only With Regard to “Public Goods.” It will Show How Soldiers Train, Where They Train, Live & Operate, the Types of Units they Operate In and the Types of Technologies they Use. It will NOT Convey Expert Information on How they Operate.*
- *Final Game Must Achieve a Teen Rating*

—Text from a PowerPoint slide disseminated to *America’s Army 3* designers by Casey Wardynski (2007)

Though there was native demand for a game like *America’s Army* within the target demographic group for Army recruitment, there are significant differences between the game and typical commercial shooters, at least in regards to the overall design and goals. The criteria listed above point to some of the main elements that distinguish *America’s Army* from the vast

majority of commercially available military-themed video games. “Serious games” and “advergames” like *America’s Army*, which have a specific purpose and message to impart, seek to persuade, much like propaganda.<sup>43</sup> But whereas propaganda in the traditional sense of the term denotes a one-way messaging configuration from media producer to media consumer, contemporary media, including video games, incorporate a feedback loop that involves the media user within a more interactive and immersive messaging environment.

As a way to influence user interpretations of *America’s Army*, the Army Game Project used a rhetorical strategy by continually reiterating that it produced the authoritative message about the U.S. Army—that all of the other messages out there in the entertainment business do not “get it right” because “nobody gets the Army like the Army.”<sup>44</sup> Hollywood-sounding explosions, for example, are digitally faked in most other games, while three-quarters of the audio samples from *America’s Army 3* were recorded on-site at locations such as firing ranges; Army rules of engagement are often ignored in games and films not produced by the Army; and the U.S. Army is presented as something other than merely the “good guy.” All of these are ways in which entertainment studios “get it wrong,” and these negative or inaccurate messages, according to Wardynski, contributed to “human biases in decision making” about joining the Army. The Army Game Project sought to change this kind of messaging in entertainment media by being very explicit about the kinds of rules in-game soldiers are required to follow, how they operate as a team, and how violence is (theoretically) used as a means to an end and not as an end in itself. “The real rub,” Wardynski told me, is that there is

always the dichotomy between entertainment and the purpose of the game. We understand that entertainment serves a role here; it’s the motivating factor that draws the game into pop culture. If the game wasn’t fun to play and entertaining and all of those things, nobody would

play it. But the United States Army is not in the entertainment business. There is a reason that we are using entertainment as a vehicle to educate. Well, if there's no education there, there's no point ... because the fundamental reason we're using entertainment is to get into pop culture and overcome these human biases in decision making to get at some of the goodness that B.J. Fogg at Stanford talks about in his work on persuasive technology (2003).

The neat thing about games is that you don't have to wait five years [for the educating]. We can compress time and get to the inputs and outputs of decision making and see why the Army cares about integrity. It's not because mommy said it was a good idea but because that guy's life actually depends on me knowing what the hell I'm doing. The deeper things you're trying to bring across is that there are a lot of games with guns, but there's only one Army game because it isn't just guys with guns; it's guys with sanction, and that sanction has a set of expectations surrounding it which are the values. They are the Army's values, but we didn't make them up. We know what America expects of us and they are a list of basic things that cordon behavior into an area of acceptability [which most Americans are] going to be pretty comfortable with. That is an Army. That's the key idea that we're trying to put across.

RA: In other games like *Call of Duty* ...

CW: Yeah, you don't have that. That's not their purpose. They're an entertainment tool.

RA: I heard somewhere, and I've always liked this phrase, that *America's Army* is what the Army wants itself to be (Lawson, et al 2007).

CW: Yes, we're not perfect either as an Army, but this is a model of how we hope we behave. It's actually a model of how we hope our recruiters think about the problem, because we got to be very frank and open and honest about the Army. It doesn't do any good to hide the warts and the difficult parts from kids—the combat and all of that. We were in discussion

with a congressional staffer about three weeks ago on this topic, and it was a pretty pointed discussion. And at one point she said, “Nobody dies in your game.” They were accusing us of glossing over that, and I told her,

Wait a minute. On one hand you’re saying that the violence bothers you. And on the other hand you’re saying that the glossing over of the consequences of the use of force and the fact that people get hurt [bothers you]. Well, we’re not operating in a vacuum. There’s a whole range of information that kids have about the Army besides the Army game. They know they can get blown up. They know they’re going to combat and all of that. What they don’t know is what it is like to be a member of one of our teams and how we operate. They don’t know about the values and what they mean, really. They don’t know how we get them ready. And anyway, you can get hurt in the game. You can get killed in the game.

“Yeah, but there’s not a lot of blood,” she said. So I’m like, “Well, how much would be enough?” Kids get it. They get the drift. They know what it’s like when they get in here. We’re going a long way from where the Army used to be with posters and TV and commercials where nobody had a gun.

*Negotiating Rhetorics: Video Game Violence and “A Puff of Blood”*

*“The Virtual Army Experience is unethical.”*

—*America’s Army* game developer, to the author (Fieldnotes, June 17, 2009)

*“If someone asks you about the Army training kids to fight and kill, just say, ‘We’re not here to talk about that’ or ‘That’s not my area of expertise.’ ‘No comment’ is not a good response.”*

—Public relations training session for *America’s Army* designers attending the Game Developers Conference (Fieldnotes, March 2009)

It was a fine line that the Army toed in regards to objective degrees and subjective interpretations of violence in video games, and this was often the most controversial element of *America’s Army* and its applications like the VAE. The Army sought to mitigate these issues by following the rubric for game ratings established by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB), which indicated that “Teen” rated games such as *America’s Army* should have no post-mortem manipulation of bodies, no graphic amounts of blood, and no dismemberment. By further implementing Army rules of engagement (ROE) that penalized the extralegal executions of secured enemy combatants, the game pushed in-game behavior towards sanctioned uses of force. Wardynski was adamant, however, that the possibility for misusing military violence should still be available in the game, as long as the player was held accountable for the consequences of their actions. It is possible, for example, to shoot the obnoxious drill sergeant in basic training, but the player is immediately placed in a prison cell in Ft. Leavenworth. Disarmed and secured enemy combatants can be killed—“double tapped”—in *America’s Army 3* (a popular tactic among some of the game’s developers), but for this action the player loses “honor” points, which contribute to advancement and status in the game. Having several combat infractions also results in military imprisonment.

With these and other specific elements in the game design of *America’s Army* and its applications, the visual representational level of violence is significantly lower than in other

military-themed first-person shooters. A “puff of blood”<sup>45</sup> is the only visual indexing of corporal injury in the game. But the aura of moral panic surrounding video games and violence has played a large part in how the game has been received by both antiwar protesters and congressional lawmakers. Periodic media coverage that makes causal connections between video games and violent crime, despite evidence otherwise,<sup>46</sup> has also held the medium responsible for a whole list of social ills. These include addiction, depression, antisocial behavior, violence, racism, sexism, and improper parenting, among other things. Because of this history, Wardynski and the AGP took pains to distance *America’s Army* and related venues like the VAE from negative discourses of “violent” video games.

RA: So what would you say to someone who says that the Virtual Army Experience (VAE) glorifies violence? That has been a trope in press articles all the time.<sup>47</sup>

CW: “The Army’s not a game. It glorifies violence.”

RA: “War is not a game.”<sup>48</sup>

CW: I think the way I’d approach that would be, first, why the VAE? Why not Strength in Action Zone, or air shows, or just recruiters? I think the reason we’re talking about the VAE is because it interests kids, the 17-20 year bunch. They find it fascinating and the other stuff they couldn’t be more bored by. So it’s ok if the other stuff is a waste of money, but what we’re doing is actually effective. Now, are we glorifying war? I don’t know, I’ll tell you what we’re doing and you figure it out. [The VAE is] a half-hour story, and who is going to write a book with no climax? What’s the point of the story—the climax is usually the point. You lead up to it, you got it, and then you explain why it was important to the book. The climax of our story as a soldier is that we spend most of our lives preparing for stuff most of us hope is never going to happen, called combat.<sup>49</sup> But if it does, that’s the point. If there was

never a chance of combat, would the United States have an Army? No. They'd have a fire department or a police department, but we wouldn't have an Army. We do something different. So the point of the military is combat—either preventing it, deterring it, or if worse comes to worse, fighting it. That's the climax of being a soldier. Everything we do prepares you for that so that we can do what this book here [*points to U.S. Code volumes on his bookshelf*] says we are supposed to do. Title 10, US Code gives us our mission: "The U.S. Army is designed to fight and win the nation's wars on land." That's our only function, according to that book. We have other jobs, but that's our function. So, you told us to do that in law, that's what we organize ourselves to do, but we're supposed to keep that a secret from the kids? That's asinine, right?

We're going to fight and win the nation's wars on land: that is the climax of the story of the U.S. Army, but we're not going to mention it. That makes no sense to me. So if we do mention it, what's the context? Is that all that you do? How do you get ready to do that, and after you come back, what do you learn from it? The reason we have a climax is that it paints the picture of why we have basic training, why it's hard, why mommy and daddy can't come, why we have discipline and values and teams and all that junk because when you're in combat there's no time to figure it out. Everybody's life is dependent on you knowing your job and being disciplined enough for them to count on you, not to shoot at everything on God's green earth, but just the bad guys, to watch your zone and trust that your buddy is watching his. So the climax, if you leave it out of the VAE, what's the point of everything? It's hard to tell a story about these different occupations—here's what they do and how they operate together, here's how we get them ready. And here's a guy who has really been to combat and here's how what you just saw is related to what you've just seen to add the

human touch. That's the VAE. If I'm leaving out the climax of the story to me that is disingenuous. We're not glorifying anything; we're giving you the whole damn book. You make up your own mind if you think it's glorious or not. Most of us don't think it is. It's worth doing because this country's worth defending, and there are bad people out there—a lot of 'em—that don't like our way of life. We didn't choose to go to any particular war, you sent us. When you send us, we like to be ready and we like to win, because we assume you sent us to win.

And this woman, this damn woman, she said something about one of our Real Heroes guys as I was explaining this to her, and she said, “When your Real Hero survived that action he was in,” and I said,

Whoa, he didn't *survive* that. We don't send soldiers to the battlefield to survive. We send them to *win*. We send them to *dominate*. You don't send the U.S. Army in harm's way just to get by. If you send us for that, you're sending the wrong crew. So you're missing the point again. That book says that you told us to win. We're not leaving that part out. We're going organized to win.

She's in the Defense Armed Services Committee and she didn't understand the first thing about why we have an Army apparently.

Wardynski's discernible vitriol over such “misinformed” interpretations of the Virtual Army Experience that do not conform to the official Army messages being imparted at the VAE led me to probe further about his thoughts regarding the then current political situation of the VAE. In 2009, Dennis Kucinich<sup>50</sup> proposed defunding the VAE to congress, using the justification that “the VAE shields participants from the realities of killing while glorifying the taking of human life in a thinly veiled attempt to recruit new soldiers. Making matters worse, if a

child wants to take part in the simulation, the Army collects his or her contact information, as well as an assessment of the child's performance in the simulator." Kucinich further argued that the funds for the traveling simulation, which ran nearly \$10 million in 2007 (significantly more than *America's Army*), could be better spent during the economic downturn.<sup>51</sup> The proposal created a small media sensation, but Wardynski diffused the situation by redirecting attention and responsibility for the age-appropriateness of militarized violence in the game and simulation to the U.S. Congress. In Wardynski's words,

We discussed the project with [Kucinich]. He took a look at what we are doing, and on the way out ... he said, "I'd just like you to look at the age appropriateness of it." And I said,

Well, we did. In fact, we looked to Congress for guidance and we found it in the form of your agreement with the ESRB on how to rate games. We rate the VAE in the same way that the ESRB established for games. And *America's Army* serves as the underlying technology, so that's how we arrived at our conclusion. So if Congress would like to give us different guidance, we're in receive mode, but we did look at it, and we continue to look at it, and we're very careful about what we put in here.

We're not using this for entertainment, but we do use entertainment as a vehicle to engage interest. The purpose is education. It's not glorification or anything else; it's education. And you're going to know after you walk out of the VAE as well as you could know it if this is something that I would want to do, or is this about as far away from anything that I would want to do as it could be? And if it is, it's served its purpose, because you know you need to do something else. That's the volunteer Army. We think it's a good system. So he visited for about 45 minutes with us and seemed eminently reasonable, paid close attention, talked to all of our guys. Interacted with everything that we had there. I thought it was a pretty neat

experience, frankly. I was pleasantly surprised. And other members of Congress come and visit—staffers—and I think they understood what we are trying to do, which is to speak to young folks in a way that they find relevant and are comfortable with and present the Army in ways that haven't been presented before and give them a far more comprehensive picture of it than you could with just commercials and posters [...]. We have thought this through pretty carefully—that doesn't mean we can't improve it, but we've been at it for a number of years trying to make sure what we're doing makes sense given the Army's mission and our country [...].

RA: What do you see the future of *America's Army* being 5 years from now, 3 years from now?

CW: Well, this project can go away at a minute's notice. Part of the problem with competing with the bureaucracy and institutions is that it's hard to institutionalize. And part of the risk of becoming institutionalized is that you become part of the problem. So for senior leaders we brief, there are things called "Programs of Record" and PEO-STRI is a Program of Record. They are there come fair days and bad days; they've got a budget. In the business operating mind they get a little less hungry and less lean. To draw it out on a blackboard, innovation kind of goes algorithmic—increasingly you're on the flat part of the curve. So many senior leaders aren't crazy about programs of record. *America's Army* isn't a program of record. It is funded out of the Secretary of the Army's recruiting initiative. It is one of his initiatives and has been since day one. It could be zeroed out at any point if it's not performing, and it can grow if it is. It is growing usually because there has always been an advocate for it at the senior level of the Army [...].

Now [in 2009] recruiting is getting easy; money is getting tight. So it's a dangerous time [for the project]. Could we reconstitute *America's Army*? If the project ended up reaching a point where economic resources weren't viable anymore, I'd probably recommend just closing the project. I don't think the Army could ever reconstitute it, frankly. We had a unique set of circumstances that let us do what we did [...]. This office is really here to help the Army identify innovations, get them far enough to demonstrate their viability and utility, and turn them over [...]. Relevancy to compete in pop culture really is what drives this whole project, from contracting to design, to technologies that we use. When you get disconnected from that, you're going to fall back into the normal way that the Army does business, which is going to be years and years before you change anything. But such is the life.

As Wardynski's comments show, there was persuasive work being done on multiple levels within the Army Game Project, and the future of the AGP depended on such work. Though the game and franchise had as its primary goal the persuasion of players and users to enlist in the Army, Wardynski and the AGP devoted significant work towards other efforts. Convincing the U.S. government that the game and its constituent products were worthwhile and ethical was an equally important task for Wardynski in securing funding. As a project that received limited funding due to its status as not being a "Program of Record," the AGP did not have the institutional security of more conservative recruitment programs. And because it directly challenged the institutionalized techniques of Army recruitment—while also attempting to fend off competitors from within the military-industrial contracting sector that threatened the territorial claims the project had on Army simulation training and soldier education—the AGP did create political rivalries. Wardynski fought these institutional structures head-on through his own persuasive aptitude and formidable self-styled "Godfather" disposition (see Chapter 7),

creating allies where it was possible and (often ruthlessly) cutting out underperformers—with a penchant for firing employees and contractors, which does not seem to have abated since his retirement in 2010 and subsequent employment as the Superintendent of Huntsville City Schools.<sup>52</sup>

Other persuasive fronts that the AGP consistently fought were in disassociating the project from negative scapegoating discourses that connected video games with increased individual aggression and violent behavior. Anti-war organizations sometimes incorporated this discourse in their protests when *America's Army* was addressed specifically, though many took greater issue with the direct military connection to recruitment through the game.<sup>53</sup> At moments, there were palpable push-backs against the game from multiple organizations and groups. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), for example, wrote in a 2008 report on U.S. military recruitment practices that “by exposing children younger than 17 to military recruitment, the United States military violates the terms of the Optional Protocol” to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was ratified by the U.S. Senate (2008:3). *America's Army* is mentioned in this report as one of many recruitment methods that, according to the ACLU, target youth under 17 for military recruitment. Other interventions and protests periodically positioned *America's Army* as a symbol of military recruitment for an unpopular and unjust war. Joseph DeLappe's *Dead In Iraq* protest/memorial,<sup>54</sup> which recorded in-game videos of DeLappe typing the names of deceased veterans in the *America's Army* chat log, and his subsequent “America's Diplomat” webpage,<sup>55</sup> which modeled the design of the *America's Army* webpage to advertise a fictional game for the U.S. Foreign Service, were among some of the better organized and publicized online interventions.

Despite these instances, which challenge the official messages of *America's Army* in creative and compelling ways, for the most part the game itself avoided controversy during its 10 year history, and was relegated in mainstream news media to coverage focusing on the novelty of the Army as a game developer. (The VAE and AEC, as I explore in Chapter 5, were met with more organized opposition, perhaps because they were both in physical, publicly accessible locations.) The multiple strategies of persuasion articulated in this chapter, which were directed at a variety of stakeholders and institutions, were constantly geared towards the end goal of harnessing new cognitive talent to ensure the future viability of the Army, and specifically the Army officer corps. Wardynski focused his efforts on persuading governmental and institutional entities about the feasibility of the project, and marketing and public relations experts directed their energies towards convincing the public of the ethical foundation of the game. At the same time, the game itself worked to persuade its users to enlist, or at the very least move towards accepting the Army as a positive institution shaping American society. I turn to investigating some of the specific techniques *America's Army* uses to achieve this effect in the next chapter.

#### IV. The Idioms of *America's Army*

*“We are now subjected to a new super-structure of war fantasy in which the targets of warfare and the enemies of public safety are as malleable and as arbitrary as a dream image.”*

—Allen Feldman, “Deterritorialized Wars of Public Safety” (2004)

The scenarios of military war games are for the most part fictional, but as the previous chapters indicate the underlying purpose of *America's Army* is very real. As government adaptations of *America's Army* software are being used to train soldiers for specific job-related combat skills, the public video game's goal is, in the words of one Army officer, “filling seats for basic training” by tapping into an already militarized gaming population (Fieldnotes, April 7, 2009; see also Allen 2009). Regardless of whether the game is effective at achieving this recruitment goal, *America's Army*, as a device of biopower that aims to distribute and normalize the institutional logic of the military among civil society (see Allen 2011; Hardt and Negri 2000:22–24), influenced how non-enlisted individuals think about the Army. In other words, the game's civilian designers, its players, the friends and family of these individuals, and even anthropologists who study the game—all have an increased potential to be persuaded through the game to accept the prioritization of military needs and militarized narratives in the United States as a commonsensical, unquestioned fact (Lutz 2009). For these reasons, the game presents a window into how the Army views itself and how it is working to spread its cultural imaginary outwards through public relations campaigns, technological spectacle, appeals to masculinity and patriotism, and many other rhetorical deployments. In this chapter, I argue that one type of these deployments—the figure of the mythic, “unreal” enemy—works to enable both media users and

soldiers to participate in a kind of ritual, virtual subjugation of the constantly morphing and elusive enemies of the U.S. Army.

*The Unreal Enemy of America's Army*

*“There is no teacher but the enemy. No one but the enemy will tell you what the enemy is going to do. No one but the enemy will ever teach you how to destroy and conquer. Only the enemy shows you where you are weak. Only the enemy tells you where he is strong.”*

—Mazer Rackham, *Ender's Game* (Card 1991:184)

*“The toughest part of my journey was finding the enemy.”*

—James Der Derian, *Virtuous War* (2000:98)

With its array of military and commercial connections, *America's Army* has been situated in a particularly interesting location in this new conceptualization of war through video games. The generic enemies in the game are not entirely new, and their behaviors and appearances follow established genre-specific conventions for first-person shooters. The game, for example, uses the Unreal game engine, one of the most popular video game engines for first-person shooters.<sup>56</sup> Giving designers a tool to shape the physics within an environment, visually render data, define the behavior of artificial intelligence, and store system files (among many other things), game engines are the backbone on which everything else in a game is layered. *America's Army* was one of the first games to use the Unreal Engine 2, and its designers attributed part of its early success in 2002 to its presentation of the engine's then cutting-edge graphics, which

were made available to gamers for free. A plethora of successful console and PC games such as *Gears of War*, *BioShock*, and *Mass Effect* use the Unreal Engine 3, as does *America's Army 3* (AA3), released in June 2009 on the penultimate day of my fieldwork among the game's developers (see Chapter 6).

As an allusion to the Unreal Engine, I use the term “unreal” to describe the type of enemy appearing in the game and in the examples explored throughout this chapter. This enemy resides within the uneasy, liminal space established by the double entendre in this section's title, “the unreal enemy of *America's Army*.” (This phrase can be read a variety of ways, all of which are correct. “Unreal” can refer to the engine, or the adjective, or simultaneously both; “America's Army” can refer to the game, or the military institution, or both.) By using the word “unreal” I do not mean to connote the negation, opposite, or nonexistence of the “real.” The unreal enemy is not so much the mirror or opposite of a “real” enemy but rather the means through which the real enemy is configured and understood (Baudrillard 1994; Eco 1986).

Although it has become cliché to invoke Baudrillard and the hyperreal in game studies—as Kline et al. say, “finding examples of Baudrillard's hyperreality in the world of video and computer games is like shooting fish in a barrel” (2003:70)—such appeals generally equate the simulation of the computer game with the cultural simulation with which Baudrillard is concerned. This is not necessarily an accurate characterization, and Baudrillard's idea of cultural simulation is particularly important because the unreal enemy is not confined to *America's Army* or the realm of video games, but rather acts (as all games do) within processes of cultural production that are much broader than any game. A plethora of assemblages, some of which are explored below, constitute an unreal enemy, which prefigures a corporeal enemy. This is what Baudrillard calls “the precession of simulacra,” in which the unreal enemy precedes, and

perhaps aids in the realization and creation of, the actual enemy. In other words, “how we prepare for future enemies might just help to invent them” (Der Derian 2001:108), especially since counterinsurgency operations conducted for seemingly imperialistic ends typically only lead to the appearance of more insurgents over time (Network of Concerned Anthropologists 2009).



**Figure 4.1: Examples of enemy and U.S. Army Soldiers in earlier versions of *America's Army*.<sup>57</sup>**

Like a soldier's prosthetic enhancements of body armor, night vision goggles, and networked communication, the unreal enemy is also an enhancement of the Army soldier (or the civilian playing as the soldier) and not his opposite.<sup>58</sup> This enemy, if he is an “other,” is an internalized other that cannot exist without the presence of the American soldier as well. This is illustrated in the game by the fact that no player can play as an enemy of the United States. Although there are usually two teams of players fighting against one another—one assaulting while the other defends, typically—the point of view of every human player is that of an American soldier. This design in the game, called the “swapping paradigm” by its developers, means that two players on different teams appear to themselves as U.S. soldiers but to one

another as enemies. Every human player sees the human and computer opponents as opposing enemy forces who, in the earlier versions of the game, were often veiled in ski masks or other useful apparatuses erasing racial indication (see Figure 4.1). In *America's Army 3*, this kind of enemy masking was done away with and both enemy and American soldiers featured the same assortment of faces (see Figure 4.2). The stipulation that U.S. soldiers can never be a target in the world of *America's Army* is reinforced by the rules of engagement (ROE), which punish players for friendly (and often very unfriendly) fire in the game by removing “honor” points, a factor that can affect a player’s level of prestige, access to servers, and the selection of more desirable weapons and leadership positions in the game.<sup>59</sup> The erasure of a differentiating enemy race was deliberate, for it aided in the construction of an anonymous enemy who was potentially anywhere and applicable to any situation. In an interview, during the early stages of my fieldwork in 2006, Sergeant Ryder (pseudonym), an Army recruiter and an avid *America's Army* player, made this connection explicitly:



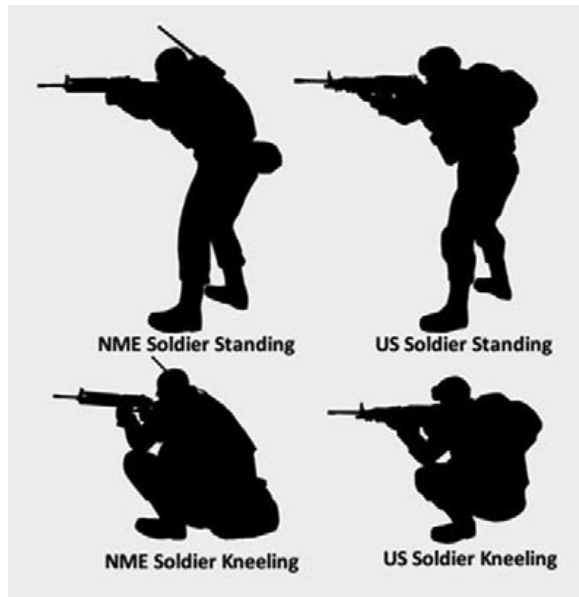
**Figure 4.2: Enemy and U.S. Army Soldier comparison in *America's Army 3*.**

The game teaches you not to shoot at the friendlies. It emphasizes fighting terrorists, not communists or certain nationalities. You don't see their features, so you can't be

biased or prejudiced towards any race or group of people. Nothing about the game creates a desire to kill or racist attitudes. It is designed for teamwork and positive attitudes, not negative ones like killing and racism. (Personal Interview, August 8, 2006)

Designers of the game indeed made this erasure of race a deliberate part of the game's design, but it also served other practical purposes regarding the game's playability. An artist, Zeke, indicated that this practice was

definitely on purpose. For one, it's for the reasons that we're talking about [regarding race and nationality]. Two, it's kind of a double plus in our favor because it also gives the enemy a distinguished look from friend. So when you are playing a game like this where it's not always clear—black and white—who you should be shooting at from far away, if there's not distinct things on the character, it's going to be hard. I can only imagine that it's probably like that [in actual combat], if you're not always in contact with where your teammates are in a real battle.... But that's one of those things where gameplay-wise, we have to make it fun since if it's too hard people are not going to want to play. So things like using ski masks or some crazy weird camo just to make them stand out helps a lot in just distinguishing the enemy (see Figure 4.3), plus there are no implications there. At least that's the goal. I think that all war games get flack from time to time. This one just probably gets more because of the Army. (Personal Interview, November 21, 2007)



**Figure 4.3: Comparison of NME (enemy) and U.S. Soldier silhouettes in *America's Army***

**3.**

Even though the faces of enemies are clearly visible in the new *America's Army 3*, there are minimal indicators of enemy ethnicity. The variety of geographical markers presented in the game over the years presupposes an enemy not from one specific region. The environments of the game, such as a snowy wilderness, swamps and farms reminiscent of the Deep South, abandoned eastern European cities, and central Asian terrains which have, in some cases, been modeled directly from landscapes in Afghanistan (Halter 2006:xiv), attest to the universal applicability of this type of enemy that can be of any ethnicity and located in any setting (see Figures 4.4 & 4.5).



**Figure 4.4: A reference photo and in-game image of the “Ranch” level in AA3.**

This enemy is in stark contrast to similar games of the first-person shooter genre, such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* or *Conflict: Desert Storm*. Rather than externalizing the enemy as, for example, a Russian or an Iraqi “other,” the terrains and enemies of *America’s Army* imply that the enemy could very well be located internally, within the U.S.



**Figure 4.5: A reference photo of the San Martín bridge in Toledo, Spain, and its application in the “Bridge” level of AA3.**

Zeke further discussed how linguistic and cultural considerations also play a significant factor in the game’s appearance, verifying that

making an enemy—that’s really hard to do without making a lot of people really upset and pissed off considering it’s the Army game [...]. There’s never been a directive; nobody’s ever come to me in my office and said things like, “No, you can’t put Arabic

lettering on this door.’’ I have been told not to use English letters and I’ve heard references to not using things that make those kinds of implications, but that’s also a personal thing—I just don’t do that. But it’s definitely been said a lot of times in our reviews. And on the flip side of that too, like on U.S. soil stuff, one of the objects I made had lettering in it. It had a made-up brand on it, but I remember in our art review the producers said, ‘‘You know, we don’t want to use U.S. lettering.’’ We actually have our own made up language. So, for example, a bus that I was working on had ‘‘City Transit’’ written on the side. After talking with the producers about not having U.S or English lettering or any kind of recognizable language, I have to go to [another person] who made a whole pseudo-algorithm for changing things like the letter ‘‘L’’ to this, ‘‘Th’’ combinations to that. It’s really neat to actually see the difference, making up a phrase or word and then giving it to him to change it to some crazy other language that is made up. (Personal Interview, November 21, 2007)

The release of *America’s Army 3* featured such imaginary languages and geographies even more prominently through the creation of a fictional nation, Czervenia (see below). In this vaguely eastern European country, the unreal enemy of *America’s Army* became more fully articulated even as it borrowed from a myriad of preexisting geographical landscapes, histories, languages, weapons, and architectures worldwide (see Figures 4.4 & 4.5). A game designer, Samuel, explained how he cobbled together Czervenian, the new fictional nation’s language, through online translation technologies:

[The Army] wanted to get away from Iraq and all of that. They wanted to create a political situation that didn’t exist [...]. So basically we took Croatian and Slovenian and eastern European languages that have a Russian influence and combined it with

the grammatical structure of Spanish [...]. I pull up babelfish.com and dictionary.com and a few other translation websites, and I put a word in there and try to create interesting sounding words out of Spanish and Slovenian usually, or sometimes Czech. Basically I create something that sounds cool and flows well, and if I create a sentence I say the sentence a few times in a ridiculous eastern European accent. If it sounds kinda cool, ok, we use that. (Personal Interview, October 15, 2008)

This construction of an anonymous but proximal enemy, complete with its own ambiguous language, is entirely in keeping with war simulation and tactical training exercises of the U.S. Army. The use of abstract enemies for training has a long tradition in military simulation practices (Der Derian 2001; Lenoir and Lowood 2005). Such types of enemies enable training to take place against a generic enemy for the purposes of teaching military tactics and doctrine. They also typically attempt to avoid the general stereotyping of a particular American enemy. In anthropologist Catherine Lutz's book *Homefront*, such exercises are examined as connecting points between the symbiotic histories of Fayetteville, North Carolina, and adjacent Ft. Bragg and Pope Air Force Base (2001:87–130). Lutz examines the impact of large-scale simulation exercises that often take place off-base and with the collaboration of civilians. These live simulations, which envision in great socioeconomic and cultural detail a territory called “Pineland,” are further described by Anna Simons (1997), also a military anthropologist.<sup>60</sup> Both Lutz and Simons describe how local civilian populations aid in these war simulations by role playing as guerrillas or citizens of Pineland. Much like the way in which the languages, landscapes, and enemies of *America's Army* are modeled from generalized locations, Pineland is intentionally a vague but recognizable place, mirroring the surroundings of Fayetteville and constructing a “mythic” model of the enemy and the world:

Any military simulation attempts to draw an objective model of the world and its potential situations. But because it involves peering into the void of the future and the blurry shapes of the present, it must also be mythic: It has to draw on culturally tutored imagination, fears, and wishes. To look at ... war games, then, is to see certain American anxieties played out as if to tame them. (Lutz 2001:87)

My limited experiences with war simulations outside of video games are more humorous, although no less serious, than those described by Lutz. When taking an introductory Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) course in military science at the University of Washington as part of my preliminary fieldwork, I participated with my fellow classmates in several similar exercises of imagination that enable cadets to hone their abilities to effectively communicate the roles of combat units to all divisional levels in a standardized OPORD (operational order) format. My classmates, when given an open-ended option to create a scenario to practice the OPORD format of communication, envisioned an enemy of pecan-stealing squirrels with high morale, extra sharp teeth and claws, tails that stung like scorpions, and rabies. Virtual combat with the squirrels extended from campus into the fraternity houses, and the cadets, armed with Axe body spray,<sup>61</sup> peanuts, and a new secret drug that would enable them to jump into the trees, eventually subdued the animals.

Although Lutz asserts that such "ludic moments" of "war game spectatorship" have "redefine[d] the role of the citizen from one who questions and acts to one who observes and is entertained by the state and by power itself" (2001:107, 109), the unreal enemy, as an enemy formed through public engagement with biopower, is an enemy that is by definition enacted and performed and not one that is merely experienced by passive observers. The medium of the

video game demands this kind of cybernetic performativity, and the Army encourages it in ways that reach beyond the game.

### *Playing the Hero*

*“[The Army has] less elbow to elbow contact with the average citizens of America. Because of that, there are fewer opportunities for the Army to sell itself. You can’t do that in a 30 second commercial. You’ve got to provide them with a virtual world where they can rub elbows with soldiers and with the Army instead of having other people tell them what the Army is.”*

—Major Mike Marty, *America’s Army* Chief Operations Officer (Personal Interview, May 21, 2009)

The unreal enemy is an enemy with minimal cultural, linguistic, or ethnic indicators and therefore one which is simultaneously anonymous yet potentially anyone. Everywhere and nowhere at once, the unreal enemy is a tabula rasa on which any enemy can be extrapolated. For Lutz, this type of “unreality in which war games swim ... has posed special challenges to the separation between foreign and domestic use of force and has potentially allowed cultural slippage between home and enemy” (Lutz 2001:103–04). As I have sought to illustrate from a sampling of examples above, I have found this slippage to be very visible at particular moments during the course of my fieldwork—when I play *America’s Army* as a U.S. soldier fighting enemies in landscapes that appear uncannily similar to the surroundings of my home of East Tennessee; when I sit among a class of ROTC cadets who imagine the campus of the University of Washington and its surroundings as a backdrop for wars against pecan-stealing squirrels;

when I speak with the designers of *America's Army* about the careful attention they must give to erase identifiable cultural backgrounds from their enemies; and when I read about the mapping of the nation of Pineland onto the preexisting geographies of Fayetteville. This slippage is the stuff of the unreal and it is apparent in many of the public appearances and practices of the Army Game Project as well.

In bringing its message to the public, the Army Game Project has been accumulating a history of live staged performances, the first of which occurred in 2002 at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), where *America's Army* burst into the gaming world with much critical acclaim. At the 2002 E3, Army soldiers rappelled from Black Hawk helicopters down the side of the Los Angeles Convention Center to storm the building (Halter 2006:vii–xi). Later E3 Army appearances included a daily morning staging of Golden Knights Army specialist parachutists jumping 2,500 feet from a Chinook helicopter into a parking lot near the expo, followed by evening shows in which Special Forces soldiers used a converted auto dealership to stage a mission taken from the game with “real equipment, weapons, and uniforms” (Larkin 2005). Other early public exposures to *America's Army* at expositions such as the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts further emphasized the fidelity between in-game elements and actual Army weapons and practices through exhibits that combined virtual and physical environments in intriguing ways (Chapman, 2004; Davis & Bossant, 2004; Henry Lowood, Personal Interview, November 13, 2008). Similar types of domestic invasions were implemented in the Virtual Army Experience, which was “deployed” to large public events across the United States, and the now closed Army Experience Center in Philadelphia, a 2-year completed pilot project in Army recruitment via new media, community outreach, and the “soft sell” (See Chapter 5; Allen 2009; Army Game Project 2007; Jauregui 2009).



**Figure 4.6: One of the “Real Heroes” of America’s Army, SFC Gerald Wolford, in graphic, plastic, and photographic representation.<sup>62</sup>**

These performed domestic invasions bypass much of the “virtual” and “real” binary often encountered in popular and academic discussions about video games and call into question

the utility of such categories. The Army itself encourages an indistinction between the “real” and the “virtual,” supplying an in-game “Virtual Recruiting Station” that players can visit to learn more about “Real Heroes” who are upheld as model soldiers, chosen to represent an ideal of achievement, an individual whose service is a model (see Figure 4.6). Such visits potentially provide visitors with a wealth of information on specific Military Occupational Specialties (MOS), uniform decorations, and individual biographies of enlisted soldiers. In contrast to the abstract, unreal enemy in *America’s Army*, players are encouraged to connect with these Real Heroes and are rewarded with bonus “honor points” for visiting the Virtual Recruiting Station. The 3-inch plastic figurines depicting each Real Hero are used as promotional merchandise to be given away at events, and several of the actual Real Heroes toured the country with the Virtual Army Experience, making public appearances at air shows, NASCAR races, state fairs, and other large public events (see Chapter 5).

One could say that the “real hero” in the game is not only the individual Real Hero—represented through a convergence of media and upheld as a model for future achievement—but also the player/participant/potential enlistee, and both have singular identities that are far from being abstract. The Real Hero, in other words, is the individual, and he stands in opposition to the abstraction of the unreal enemy. Although *America’s Army* is not a role-playing game (RPG) as it is typically defined in most taxonomies of video games, the game attempts to encourage people to emulate the Real Heroes as “aspirational figures” (Wardynski 2007) and its developers have consciously sought to incorporate more role-playing elements into both the online games and the two console versions of the game, *America’s Army: Rise of a Soldier* and *America’s Army: True Soldiers*. Plans for another *America’s Army* game, subtitled *Soldiers*, that was to be more exclusively focused on role-playing a career path in the Army, were discontinued

in the early stages of the project, but the desire on the part of the developers to include role-playing elements within the game has influenced later versions and spin-offs such as the Virtual Army Experience and the Army Experience Center.

In the context of the game, the “true soldiers” and “real heroes” are the players, and perhaps in this ambiguity between soldier and player the efficacy of the game as a public relations tool is the most profound and obvious. Individual players, for example, are periodically upheld by the Army Game Project as model citizens, as was the case when an *America’s Army* player provided medical aid at a car accident. He credited the basic medical training that all players of *America’s Army* must sit through to play the game—a 15-minute lecture in a virtual classroom—as being crucial to his ability to care for the victim of the car crash. Colonel Wardynski called this player a “true hero,” adding, “we are pleased to have played a role in providing the lifesaving training that he employed so successfully at the scene” (Army Game Project 2008). As Sergeant Ryder told me in an interview, “everything is realistic in the game because it was designed entirely by the Army. Even the medic is real life.”<sup>63</sup>

Enlisted soldiers, though, are the ones who are ultimately presented as being the “true soldiers” and the “real heroes.” The *America’s Army* website periodically publishes articles that feature biographical information about the Real Heroes—including personal photos of their families, detailed information of badges and awards that each Real Hero has received, and video interview footage. Stories of combat experience are the predominant characteristic of these biographies. In one such description, a Real Hero’s experience of being fired upon by an Iraqi combatant is revisited in an interview article published on the website:

“At this time,” he says, “the vehicle got hit by the second RPG [rocket propelled grenade] . . . .” Just as the attacker readied another RPG, he was spotted by the

Americans. Wolford observes the attacker, “He must have thought he was bulletproof. He knelt down in the middle of the road, and dropped another round in it. We engaged him, and we didn’t have to worry about that RPG anymore.”<sup>64</sup>

These accounts by the Real Heroes, which attempt to define and interpret the gaming experience, enable a valorization of the figure of the Army soldier that is not merely unidirectional, but enacted and cybernetic—as is any game. The correspondence between the acronyms for “rocket propelled grenade” and “role-playing game” is, of course, a coincidence, but this aptly captures the conflation between techno-military and gamer jargon in the military entertainment complex, divulging how both are used and abbreviated as a technology of war; from the point of view of biopower, both kinds of RPGs are, in a sense, weapons.

Just as the Real Heroes are useful to the Army in enabling players to emulate and envision themselves in the position of the “true soldier” and the “real hero,” the unreal enemy is a useful way for the military to envision its targets. The flexibility of this enemy enables its application to any situation, and with a new modular brigade-level conception of Army organization expressed in the plan for “Army Transformation,” responsive flexibility and versatility in unit deployment is emphasized above all else (Steele, 2001). In contrast to *Conflict: Desert Storm* and other military-themed shooters, with enemies from a specific location in space and time, *America’s Army* provides little in the way of conceptualizing the enemy within temporal or spatial fields. The unreal enemy of *America’s Army* is a return to enemy abstraction; it is an abstraction, however, that is not based on computing limitations or aesthetic choices in design (cf. Wolf, 2003), but one that is more pervasive and encompassing of both in- and out-of-game contexts. Nameless, elusive, and always just around the corner, the unreal enemy is not confined to any singular game or moment. He influences and precedes the production of real

enemies of the United States Army. The example of Czervenia in the next section illustrates this process in greater detail.

*Czervenia: Games without Tears, Wars without Frontiers*

*“If looks could kill they probably will / In games without frontiers, war without tears.”*

—Peter Gabriel, “Games Without Frontiers” (1980)

*“Seeing and foreseeing therefore tend to merge so closely that the actual can no longer be distinguished from the potential.”*

—Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema* (1989:3)

In 2009, with the release of *America’s Army 3 (AA3)*, a new evolution in the figure of the unreal enemy of the U.S. Army emerged. Players who downloaded AA3 were brought into a scenario in which a fictional but vaguely Eastern European island resort nation, the Democratic Republic of the Ostregals, was invaded without provocation by its northern nationalist neighbor, Czervenia (see Figure 4.7). In the scenario, the Army deployed troops to resolve the situation at the request of both the Ostregal government and the United Nations.<sup>65</sup>



**Figure 4.7: A political map of the Czervenian region.**

The details of this back story were collaboratively crafted and imagined by a variety of Army Game Project employees, including Emeryville game developers and writers, OEMA staff, and SED government software engineers. The Emeryville developers with whom I spent the most time during my fieldwork considered Czervenian soldier and civilian points of view: landscapes, architecture, languages, and even Czervenian weapons were all carefully invented to coincide with Czervenian customs and norms. Artists started talking about a “cultural palette” of colors common in Czervenia and the Ostregals. Using Google image searches, they found

structures and cities in Spain, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and other countries that fit their image of Czervenian geography. Eastern European vocabularies and Spanish grammar were combined to create a Czervenian language, and war-torn settings in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere became references for battlefield environments in the game. (Although an artist told me that he “[did]n’t want to get into Googling ‘war zones’ because you get a lot of messed up imagery. But there’s definitely a look to war zones.”) Developers explained to me that these kinds of extrapolations from the actual world were deliberately appropriated in ways that reflect their referent only obliquely. Direct references to Iraq and Afghanistan were avoided in this game world, and in order to create a political situation that could never exist, a new and vaguely Eastern European theater of conflict was created.

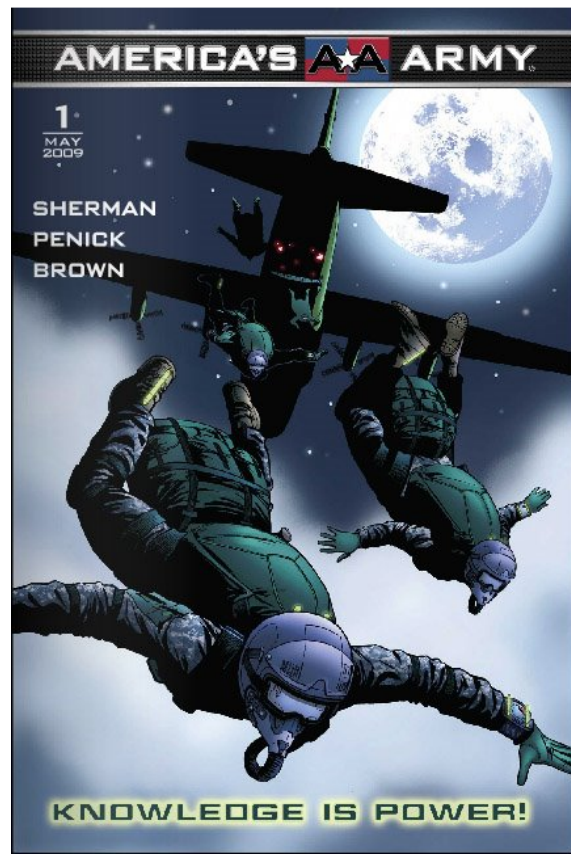
As I discussed in the previous section, earlier versions of *America’s Army* contained anonymous enemies that were commonly veiled in ski masks, had no obvious political agenda, were from no specific location in the world, and were of no apparent religion (Allen 2011). Although the Czervenian enemy was more specific in its regional and political allusions, with much borrowing from Nazi Germany, one developer explained to me that for public relations purposes “the Czervenians couldn’t be racial supremacists because we’re using the same [variety of character] heads on U.S. soldiers. We couldn’t mention religious conflict either. That was a very specific thing [that the Army told us not to do].”

The Czervenian enemy seems to point towards a desire to idealize former conflicts at the expense of acknowledging the grim realities of American counterinsurgency campaigns in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Army required that the Czervenian conflict, unlike actual counterinsurgency conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, have as an enemy a conventional, hierarchically organized, and uniformed modern military that was fully capable of combating the

U.S. military toe-to-toe. In other words, the Czervenian enemy bears little resemblance to his real-life insurgent cousins. Instead, like other romanticizations of past conflicts between the U.S. Army and conventional militaries—for example, History channel documentaries on WWII, *Band of Brothers*, and *Saving Private Ryan*—the Czervenian conflict plays into a well-established media genre that represents a heroic conflict against a definable enemy with a set ideology, location, and political agenda. It represents the Army fighting a just and virtuous war. “I wanted the scenario to be that the Army was going to war,” a game developer told me, “and, for once, they were going to war for the right reasons: to protect people and do justice and stop slaughter.... It’s an idealized version of what the Army wants itself to be and what politicians want the Army to be used for.”

Although the current U.S. military counterinsurgency strategy is not focused on conflicts between nation-states and standing armies (U.S. Department of the Army 2007), an American romantic desire for a just war against a definable enemy that is being fought “for the right reasons” is arguably strong (Der Derian 2001). As a powerful and clearly aggressive enemy, Czervenia draws upon this nostalgic tendency to look backwards for a just war that never existed, but it also evokes the potentialities of future conflicts by playing into American anxieties over the rising international economic, diplomatic, and military power of long-standing rival and former enemy nations, namely China and Russia. This is perhaps the reason that, despite careful efforts to distance Czervenia from any real-world nation, Czervenia appeared to materialize when Russia invaded Georgia in August of 2008. Many of the game’s developers and its Army administrators were on edge since it was, in their eyes, uncanny how much Czervenia resembled Russia and how the Democratic Republic of the Ostregals resembled Georgia. “It’s almost the exact same scenario,” one person told me. There was genuine concern that the unreal abstraction

of Czervenia could morph into something tangible with real international political implications once the game was released. When I started full-time fieldwork in 2008 with *America's Army* game developers the same month as the invasion, the Czervenian enemy had become almost completely articulated in both the game and the *America's Army Graphic Novel* (see Figure 4.8), although both were months away from being released. A developer reassured some Army visitors to the studio that “the Ostregals are NOT Georgia, although we are probably going to get folks who say things like, ‘Those mountains look like the Caucasus!’” In an effort to further distance the game from the Georgian conflict and ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, specific imagery that could be interpreted as pointing towards these real-world scenarios—such as missiles that were “too Soviet-looking”—were removed or altered at the request of Wardynski during a visit to the studios.



**Figure 4.8:** The front cover of the first issue of the *America's Army Graphic Novel*.

Curiously, *ARMA 2* (2009), a commercially-produced and military-themed competitor game to *America's Army 3*, presented a different type of mythic enemy that embraces these very same real world events. Marketing itself as containing a storyline “which blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction,” *ARMA 2* immersed the player in a scenario where a breakaway communist faction seizes control of a region within the fictional Caucasus “post-Soviet” nation of Chenarus (lit., “Black Russia”). Without hiding any allusions to South Ossetia, in the game world of *ARMA 2* much of the conflict takes place in a region dubbed South Zagoria. Predictably, the “pro-Western” government of Chenarus calls upon NATO for aid, and the U.S. military comes to fight the commies. But *ARMA 2*'s connection to the U.S. military and NATO lies in more than merely the plot of the game: *ARMA 2*'s software sibling is *VBS 2* (*Virtual Battlespace 2*), a program that presents tailored versions of the game for contract to worldwide armed forces and paramilitary organizations to use in large-scale training simulation exercises. Considering that their developer, Bohemia Interactive, has held contracts for *VBS 2* with NATO and branches of the armed forces in several Western nations (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, The Netherlands, the U.K., and also the U.S. Army and Marine Corps), the Russian enemy of the U.S. Army is uncannily close in *ARMA 2*.<sup>66</sup>

By the time both games were released in June 2009, the Georgian conflict had become largely forgotten in the 24-hour, amnesiac news cycle. But, true to Baudrillard (1994), the simulacra of the video game conflicts continued to exist in their own right. The Chenarussian enemy, deliberately crafted to resemble the Russian-backed South Ossetian government, problematically rewrote the history of the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia to involve the American military in a combat-oriented role. This Russian, now also terrorist, enemy was reintroduced to popular culture in November of 2009, when the hugely successful commercial

game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* was released, complete with a mission in which players, as undercover agents, witness (and have the opportunity to participate in) a massive slaughter of civilians at a fictional Russian airport. Sales were augmented, rather than hampered, by news of this controversial level. The subsequent release of *Call of Duty: Black Ops* in late 2010 showed a continued evolution of enemy representations, repackaged and rebranded to fit contemporary desires for immersive virtual consumption of war. With first-day record sales that far outstrip the movie *Titanic* (with 5.6 million copies of the game sold in the first 24 hours), *Call of Duty: Black Ops* revisits U.S. counterinsurgencies in Cuba and Vietnam while also playing upon the recurring figure of the Soviet/Russian enemy.

Czervenia, though so carefully constructed *not* to resemble a specific enemy in order to avoid the political “othering” so obvious in these commercial games, was shown to have a similar, albeit unwelcomed, potential to be conjured into a particular, real-world foe despite the best efforts of its designers. Comparable situations occurred earlier in the history of *America’s Army* during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, when some players of the game came to feel the simultaneous resemblance and disparity between the mythical and the actual enemies of the U.S. Army (Li 2003). As the case with *ARMA 2*, other *America’s Army* media campaigns have deliberately played upon this simultaneous juxtaposition between representational fidelity and narrative disjunction (Allen 2009, 2011). This uncanny sense of interconnectedness led Walker, a game developer who had been using a made-up pejorative while playing against Czervenians<sup>67</sup> to hesitate and jokingly ask me during one of our countless play-test sessions in the development office, “Is it racist to use a slur against a fictional enemy that you invented?”

The imagination, creation, and maintenance of these mythic, unreal enemies through war games, simulations, and recruitment campaigns like *America’s Army* is a cycle of continual

production that occurs through various, and sometimes contradictory, narratives. The contrasting examples between the unreal enemy and Real Hero figures and between Czervenia and representations of explicitly Russian/Soviet enemies in contemporary military-themed commercial games show that these hyperreal enemies selectively draw upon past and current experiences to affect how the U.S. military defines, envisions, and engenders nascent enemies. These definitions, as examples above show, are not absolute: the ambiguity of the “insurgent” enemy, like the floating signifier of these mythic enemies, contributes to an overall conception of an enemy that

is no longer concrete and localizable but has now become something fleeting and ungraspable, like a snake in the imperial paradise. The enemy is unknown and unseen and yet ever present, something like a hostile aura. The face of the enemy appears in the haze of the future and serves to prop up legitimation where legitimation has declined. This enemy is in fact not merely elusive but completely abstract. (Hardt and Negri 2004:30–31)

Like many video games, the ones discussed here present the opportunity to ritually subjugate this mythical, abstract enemy at both the individual and the collective institutional levels. For some, including me, this ritual element of gameplay is therapeutic, imparting a sense of agency and control over an environment when much of the external world is chaotic and seemingly without order. This is one reason why, unlike many social scientists it seems, I do not view military-themed video games as categorically “bad.” Henry Jenkins writes that “we use games to work through the intense anxieties surrounding modern warfare, to bring it at least momentarily under our symbolic control” (2003). But this sense of control and order imparted by gaming and simulation also has the potential to become delusional when in the hands of

institutions of power, especially the military. When this happens, the sense of control conveyed through ritual and the hyperreal tends to morph into a belief that the world itself is controllable, and nothing could be further from reality.

## V. Igniting the Soft Sell: Virtual Recruitment for Actual War

*“The committee commends the Army for investing in new technological approaches to increase awareness and knowledge of the military among recruitment-age youth. The Army Experience Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and its transportable counterpart, the Virtual Army Experience, are examples of technological projects that hold great potential to reshape recruiting techniques and conduct recruiting operations on a more cost effective basis. The committee believes this type of investment is essential if the Army intends to keep pace with societal changes regarding the subjects that capture the attention of young people and methods young people use to gather information and socially interact.... The committee understands that during periods when recruiting is relatively easy, investment in experimental programs draws increased scrutiny. The committee urges the Army to continue to use these tools and to invest in other related projects to maximize their immediate value, and learn more about how the Army may further adapt technology to harness the power of the information age to support the recruiting mission.”*

—U.S. Congress, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010 (318)

While the previous chapter dealt explicitly with the game *America’s Army* and its position relative to similar military-themed games, here I turn to broader applications of the game in the contexts of explicit public recruitment endeavors that have garnered national attention and media coverage. I explore two programs, the Virtual Army Experience and the Army Experience Center, both implemented by the marketing company Ignited, and provide detailed descriptions of these venues and conversations with individuals from each. I frame this

chapter by adopting a polemical stance that may be regarded as unnecessary among an audience of anthropologists. It is, nevertheless, an approach that I feel is still useful in making a point about the priorities of ethnography to a wider audience of academics and non-academics. As for most anthropologists, it was crucial for me to approach the topic of military recruitment, politically laden as it is, as empathetically as possible in order to understand the actors' varying positions. I had both methodological and epistemological reasons for doing so, due to the array of individual and institutional positions within the "military entertainment complex." I did not want to further ossify this term and its derivative, "militainment," by creating an artificial whole that disregards "emic" and indigenous explanations of practices such as military recruitment through virtual technologies.

This approach—nearly common sense to most anthropologists—nevertheless remains important for me to explicitly articulate since several academic publications and documentary films on military-themed and -funded games have tended to refuse a sense of agency besides the possibility of outright dissent to those involved in the production and consumption of militarized media. Instead, some have positioned the military gamer and military game developer as a passive subject who uncritically accepts the array of messages in military-themed games (e.g., Huntzman 2000; Stahl 2007, 2010, 2011). While I do not deny the utility of critiques of state power as exercised through entertainment and propaganda and have found Stahl's video *Militainment, Inc.* (2007) an invaluable tool in educating undergraduate students about the connections between war, media, and entertainment, in this chapter I argue that approaches to the Army Game Project and militarized gaming that tend to couch complex issues in terms of polarities (dissent–acceptance; media activist–media dupe), overlook more nuanced and

thoughtful critical reflection that is already present among those who actually engage with and produce such media on a daily basis.

Stahl, in particular, demonstrates an approach that is plagued by an overreliance on secondary news sources (which too often are themselves based on information regurgitated by news media through military and institutional public relations press releases) to describe games and products, and not through any personal involvement or connections (2010).<sup>68</sup> Cumulatively, this type of armchair academic approach<sup>69</sup> to criticizing military game culture—one that seemingly lacks much effort to understand games from a player’s perspective or from the perspective of individuals who produce and market them—misses a great deal of complexity that is important to understand if militarization, as I argue in this dissertation, occurs on a biopolitical level that encompasses all parts of society, including those that are intimately subjective and personal. Perhaps my penchant for thoroughly enjoying (while sometimes simultaneously being disturbed by) militarized violence in my games affects how I approach an academic mentality that does not seem to understand or try to address the pleasures and problematics of militarization on a personal level, but rather opts to critically distance those processes of militarization from the subjectivities of the researcher and those researched.

Most of the voices I highlight in this chapter do not show the artistic dissent against militarized media that is glorified in works such as *Militainment, Inc.* (Stahl 2010) and *Returning Fire: Interventions in Video Game Culture* (Stahl 2011). Indeed, these people actively contribute through their work to the militarization of popular culture. But the complexities of ethnographic experience have made it imperative for me to include the thoughtful yet ambiguous voices I have found over the course of my research that complicate the common knee-jerk “for or against”

political mentality that often emerges among liberal academics and individuals when polarizing issues such as military recruitment are discussed.

As I will show below, divergent individual and institutional interpretations regarding the meanings of Army Game Project products are apparent among its employees. An early ethnographer of the player communities of *America's Army*, Zhan Li, draws on similar cases in his master's thesis, which demonstrates how *America's Army* players do not behave as mere passive subjects uncritically accepting the messages the Army wishes to project through the game (2003:133–37; see also Kline, et al 2003). Instead, groups of players continually reinscribe the game and franchise with new meanings that are divergent from, but not necessarily contradictory to, the official Army message.

*Indianapolis: The Virtual Army Experience*

*“We are in the business of making our clients part of the cultural dialogue and the collective unconsciousness.”*

—Informational business blurb formerly posted at Ignited's website, [ignitedusa.com](http://ignitedusa.com)

Among brown, arid mountains, a scene repeats itself ceaselessly: reports tell us that “a well-armed genocidal faction in the city of Nradreg has surrounded a group of humanitarian aid workers and refugees who face starvation and imminent attack. This enemy faction has rejected all diplomatic efforts to negotiate safe passage of relief supplies. As part of international relief efforts, a combined U.S. Army air, sea, and ground task force has been ordered to use appropriate force to reach the remote compound.”<sup>70</sup> Helicopters swoop, missiles fly, and after

intense fighting, a convoy of troops arrives with supplies. The unnamed enemy lies defeated. But as if caught in a time warp, minutes later, this Sisyphian scene begins anew.

Although the above plot may sound hazily familiar, this is not a news story. It is not the summary of a movie; nor is it the plot of what most people would think of as a video game. It is, rather, the backdrop of the cinematic action inside the Virtual Army Experience (VAE). The VAE was one development in the Army's push to market itself in a new, positive light, and it is unabashedly an aid to Army recruitment. It was launched in January 2007 and its peak of activity occurred during the 2007 and 2008 tours, when a minimum of three simulators would tour nationwide for up to 8 months each year. Following the economic crisis beginning in 2008, when recruitment became easier due to individual financial hardships and military budgets shrank slightly, the VAE scaled down to a single month tour in 2010. This "mobile mission simulator" was open to the public at locations across the United States, presenting a kinetically engaging battle scenario to individuals who visit large public events (see Figure 5.1). These events were often air shows featuring well-known military show teams such as the U.S. Army's Golden Knights, the Navy's Blue Angels, and the Air Force's Thunderbirds. The VAE also visited NASCAR races,<sup>71</sup> as well as fairs, theme parks, and other festivals.



**Figure 5.1: An exterior view of the VAE Alpha at the Indianapolis Air Show. Photograph by the author, August 2008.**

The VAE was one of my first stops after securing NSF funding for full-time dissertation research. To prepare, I initially spoke with Mark Long, then CEO of Seattle-based Zombie Studios, one of the contracting developers of the VAE along with the *America's Army* studio in Emeryville and the producer Ignited. He described how the VAE integrates virtual reality with physical elements:

It has kinetic hammers that, when an explosion goes off, rock the Humvee (see Figure 5.2). And gas action weighted recoil mechanisms on the weapons. So you get this kinetic integration. You know, when you're trying to physically control the muzzle climb on a weapon, shooting in a simulation allows you to suspend disbelief more. Suddenly that physical integration into the virtual environment takes you in and creates a greater sense of presence, which is really cool. And then there are air cannons and audio, the whole thing. So it's a lot of fun. They have two of these systems and they bring them around to

air shows and NASCAR, and men that are there—young men and women—they can give their email address and then go through and try it, and a recruiter can follow up to see if there's any interest. You know, you don't really decide to join the Army because you went through VAE. But you get to try something cool with your friends for about five minutes and you give up your email address for it, so it seems like a fair deal. (Personal Interview, September 28, 2007)



**Figure 5.2: A Mock-up, life-size Humvee inside the VAE, shown during and after a simulation. Photographs by the author, August 2008.**

It took a year of waiting for funding, but finally I was able to proceed to get a taste of this experience firsthand, to see whether or not it really is a “fair deal.” VAE project management at the SED in Alabama had connected me to the on-site director of the traveling exhibition, which was making a prolonged stay in Indiana during the Indiana State Fair and the Indianapolis Air Show. As I blearily stood in the Atlanta airport after a grueling red-eye, a soldier in the Army National Guard limped to the front of the line, with everyone's sleepy eyes on the back of his head. He was in full uniform with a pack on his shoulder, and wore a neck brace and used a cane to walk. I wondered whether this returning injured soldier was perhaps a darker face of this multimedia Janus.

In the account below, I describe a typical experience of the VAE, which I composited over the course of 2½ weeks of attendance at the venue. I would typically attend one or two full VAE sequences each day, and hang around the venue at other times for several hours, talking with participants and, when they came to know me and become used to my presence, interviewing and chatting with employees and soldiers there. The purgatory of nearly two weeks of mostly outdoor fieldwork in hot Midwestern summer weather was well worth the efforts. The interviews only came after a week, and the Alpha VAE later at the Indianapolis Air Show was well worth the wait in terms of witnessing its media appeal (see Figure 5.3).



**Figure 5.3: Real Heroes Tommy Rieman and John Adams being interviewed at the VAE by CNN correspondent Susan Roesgen for *The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer*. Photograph by the author, August 2008.**

*A Virtual Test Drive*

*“Young American GIs advancing to dangerous battlefield positions used the most eloquent expression: ‘We’re off to the movies.’”*

—Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema* (1989:48)

At the same time when Russia was invading Georgia and the 2008 Beijing Olympics were being broadcasted worldwide, the VAE was at the Indiana State Fair among the General Motors and Saturn tents, a trailer promoting biofuels, and the fairground’s 4-H building. The physical shell of the VAE was part tractor trailer, part inflatable building, and it was visible across most of the fairground. Huge fans in the back of the structure had to constantly be kept blowing, lest the entire thing collapse. The VAE came in four sizes, each named according to Army unit designations: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and Delta. These configurations traveled across the country, predominantly to events in more populous areas of the country that have traditionally served as a base for Army recruitment, such as the South, the Midwest, and the Southwest. Alpha was the largest configuration (holding 35–40 people) and Delta the smallest (accommodating only about 5 people at a time), but Bravo and Charlie (which held between 15 and 20 people each) were the most typical versions, each collapsing to fit within three full-size tractor trailers. Alpha was essentially a combination of Bravo and Charlie, and when these two configurations came together at events such as the Indianapolis Air Show, a huge interior space was fashioned.

As an Army Game Project public relations press release described it, within the Alpha structure, the VAE

provides participants with a virtual test drive of the United States Army. The core of the 9,750-square-foot VAE is the *America's Army* computer game, rendered with state-of-the-art Army training simulation technology to create a life-size, networked virtual world. The VAE highlights key Soldier occupations, Army technologies, operating environments and missions, within a fast-paced, action-packed, information-rich experience that immerses visitors in the world of Soldiering. Participants employ teamwork, rules of engagement, leadership and high-tech equipment as they take part in a virtual U.S. Army mission. (Army Game Project 2008)

Such press releases emphasized the virtual reality part of the Virtual Army Experience, but in fact most visitors spent a significant amount of the time outside the actual simulation. The wait outside was often as short as 20 minutes, but was reportedly as long as 4 hours, with the typical length of time spent inside the VAE being 30 to 40 minutes. To occupy the time during the wait, Army recruiters and drill sergeants stood around, ready to chat with people about the Army or give away Army T-shirts, hats, and copies of the *America's Army* Xbox video game to people who do enough push-ups (see Figure 5.4).



**Figure 5.4: Drill sergeants provide entertainment for visitors waiting in line outside the VAE by challenging them with push-ups for Army gear. Photograph by the author, August 2008.**

A representative from the Army-sponsored Top Fuel dragster racing team was there as well, taking complimentary photos of anyone who wished to have their picture taken with the car. This was a popular option for kids who could not enter the VAE, as the posted minimum age was 13 years old.<sup>72</sup> Near the building, videos explained the fourfold process of registering, obtaining the mission briefing, playing the simulation, and participating in the after-action review. Video

teasers for the VAE, such as the one linked here, played on large screens on top of the trailers (see Video 5.1):

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JU19Bsw-rss&feature=player\\_embedded#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JU19Bsw-rss&feature=player_embedded#!)

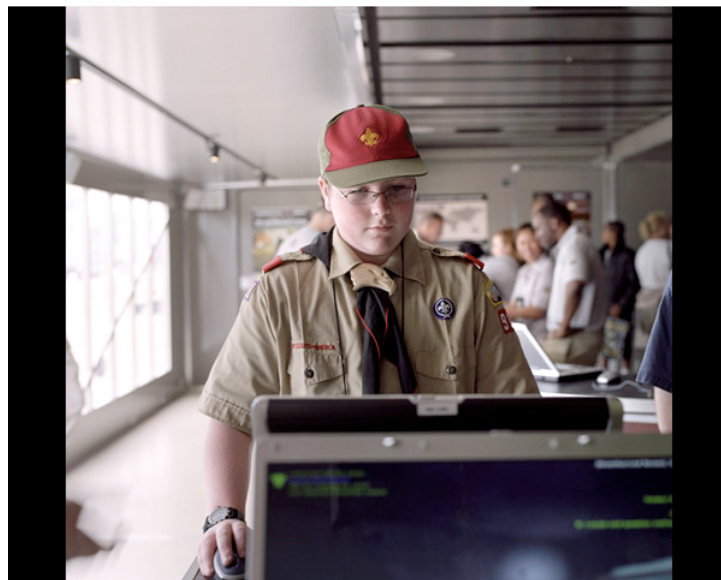
**Video 5.1: Video teaser for the VAE.**

Finally, visitors were able to walk up a short set of stairs and enter the air-conditioned registration lobby, where they were greeted by several locally-hired college-aged women standing behind a counter with computers (see Video 5.2). They asked everyone a series of required questions: Are you interested in learning about the Army? Have you or your family ever served in a branch of the military? They also collected more basic information from individuals, such as their address, telephone number, e-mail, and level of education. They took each visitor's photo and presented them with a Virtual Army Experience ID card (see Figure 5.5), which fit inside a neck wallet equipped with an RFID sensor that tracked each person's movement within the VAE. All of this information was collated by a subcontractor, Fish Software, to produce a large database of demographic information that aided in producing knowledge about the effectiveness of particular displays within the VAE and the efficiency of venues in garnering a population of potential recruits. Information was also transferred to local recruiters, as I personally discovered when a Seattle-based Army recruiter later followed up, cold calling to leave me a phone message two days after I truthfully indicated at registration that I was "interested in learning more about the Army."



**Figure 5.5: My Virtual Army Experience and Army Experience Center ID cards. Photograph by the author.**

As people waited for everyone in their group to finish with the 10 minute process of registration, visitors were able to kill some time by playing *America's Army* at computer stations in the center of the room. For most, this was their first time to play the game, and most of the time visitors spend playing is devoted simply to learning the basic interface of the controllers. (see Figure 5.6).



**Figure 5.6: “The army reveals itself to be a keen reader of American adolescent emotions and passions, and employs this understanding through a brilliantly designed and bloodless simulation of the thrill of the fight.” Photograph and caption by Christopher Sims.<sup>73</sup>**

Once everyone in the group was registered, a man introduced himself to the group as a subject matter expert (SME). He invited everyone to stand in line as a group and quickly explained the weapon systems simulated inside the VAE, such as the Black Hawk helicopter and Humvees mounted with CROWS (Common Remotely Operated Weapons System), which use controller interfaces similar to old school video game joysticks.<sup>74</sup> The SME told the group that he served in the Army—he may have deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan—and that if anyone had questions about the VAE or the Army to ask him at any time. He then opened a door leading to the interior of the VAE and a huge, dark space filled with life-size mock-ups of Humvees and a Black Hawk helicopter. Before people could take their seats inside these vehicles, however, the SME directed everyone to watch a 5-minute video in which the group—now referred to as a “squad”—was briefed on the upcoming mission. In this video, a colonel and several officers described the scenario Nradreg’s humanitarian plight, using the official-sounding, euphemistically unintelligible jargon of the military while conveying the seriousness of situation through tone and dramatic music. At the end of the video, the SME showed the squad a map of the area that displayed critical points of the mission. He then instructed people how to identify civilians, told everyone not to shoot at them, and directed the squad to take a seat in one of the vehicles (see Video 5.2).

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rAEtv7UtX0&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rAEtv7UtX0&feature=player_embedded)  
**Video 5.2: America's Army Real Hero SGT Tommy Rieman gives a video tour of the VAE.**

Unlike roller coasters or motion simulations, there was no overall consensus among visitors about which seat or vehicle is best for the experience. Shooting from the Black Hawk helicopter, as opposed to the Humvee, was objectively more difficult. Sometimes SMEs tried to preempt complaints about the Black Hawk being too hard by framing it as “target practice

challenge” in their briefings beforehand. This “are you good enough?” kind of framing typically encouraged younger men to sit in the Black Hawk mock-up. Guns, properly weighted and convincingly real, were mounted to the vehicles (see Figure 5.2), and the M249 SAW turret guns at the tops of the Humvees tended to be popular. After standing in line for over half an hour, though, many chose instead to sit in the Humvees. And this was fine with everyone too. I contend that part of the micro-level biopolitical purposes of the VAE was to introduce the Army’s technologies and weapons systems to the general public so that civilians would, for instance, be able to make a more informed decision as to which part of a Humvee is more appropriate for them to ride in.

After the SME started the simulation, squad members were able to fire the air rifles mounted on the vehicles. At this point, there were no targets, and a montage of scenes accompanied by heavy metal music appeared on the three large screens in front of each vehicle. This sequence showed missiles launching, Army helicopters starting their run to the battlefield, and HALO parachutists making their jump. Finally, the montage changed to an aerial view that swooped down to the squad’s position, and the camera flew into the virtual Humvee, bringing everyone to a first-person perspective as if they were viewing the action from inside their vehicle. Although there was no actual driver, the vehicle started moving on-screen, accompanied by a physical rumbling from the vehicle that simulated movement. The screens showed civilians running away; although the SME told visitors not to shoot at them, some (sometimes including me) usually did anyway, often out of boredom. The virtual civilians, however, did not react in any way and kept on running. Sometimes if visitors persisted in shooting at civilians, the SME threatened to remove them from the simulation.

But onscreen several men with guns ran out, crouched in the middle of the road, and started firing their weapons in what appeared to be the direction of the vehicles. The squad swiftly took them out, but an enemy jeep drove up soon after. After taking just a few bullets, the jeep exploded, creating a vibration felt from the seat of the Humvee. After a few minutes of this, people began to realize that there was nothing the enemy could do that could hurt their virtual selves—that they were a spectator to the action rather than an active agent in a game. At least, this was my feeling once I realized I was not playing a game with the potential to lose, but was instead fighting a pushover enemy that was going to let me win no matter what. Still, I felt it was fun to shoot the enemies in this cinematic target practice. The 7 minutes went by swiftly, ending with the convoy crossing a bridge and arriving at the refugee camp, thus completing the objective of the mission. Some squad members, including me, would try to shoot the refugees and aid workers, but as nothing happened we sadly realized that our weapons were no longer effective. One visitor, blogging on the technology news Web site CNET, described a similar experience of the simulation:

I had fun during the intense but short experience. It felt surprisingly real, with the gun and Humvee shaking and rocking wildly as I shot at terrorists on a huge screen.

Unfortunately, it didn't really present the same level of risk most video games offer. As far as I could tell, nobody in the simulation died or got hurt. Sure, bullets flew and bombs exploded, but nobody lost a life and had to respawn, or any other of the typical game conventions you'd expect from an FPS [first-person-shooter] or a light-gun game. It was like I was playing through an Army mission in god mode.<sup>75</sup> (Greenwald 2007)

Although some may find the idea of shooting at virtual civilians or terrorists appalling, I contend that most people did not do it out of spite or as a result of any “corrupting” influence of

video games. Rather, visitors shot at civilians to test the limits of believability in this virtual environment, to push back against and reappropriate in some small way the scripted heroic narrative so thoroughly entrenched and blatantly present at the VAE. The act of shooting at civilians was the most powerful and common mode of speaking back to authority I witnessed inside the VAE. The inability of civilians—or, for that matter, players—to die was disappointing; it punched through the logic of the claim I often heard during my time at the VAE that “this is as close to realistic combat as you can get outside of going to war” (Fieldnotes, August 2008).

“This is what I call the reality level of that good ol’ TV show *The A-Team*,” John Grant, a Philadelphia member of the activist group Veterans for Peace, told me,

where they’d go out on these special missions and it’s like, “Brrrrummmm!  
Brmbmrmbmrmbmr, brrrrrrrrrrrrbrmbmrmbmr. Powpow.” Boooooombs! and  
guuuuuns! and bullets and people flying. Nobody even gets a hangnail, and at the end  
they’re smoking cigars. Everybody’s happy and there’s not a mark on them. They’re all  
as handsome as they were before. That’s exactly the problem: there are no consequences.  
(Personal Interview, May 22, 2009)

As the simulation ended, the SME directed everyone to exit the VAE structure to a small tent, where he conducted an After Action Review in which he showed the squad images he claimed were taken during the game. But these images never varied, nor did the essence of the SME’s review, which conveyed to the squad that they did a good job but needed to work more on communicating with other members in their vehicles. At this point, the SME had the group watch another video, this one about an actual Army soldier awarded a medal (see Video 5.3). The video explained the activities of this individual’s heroic efforts in the face of combat, calling him a “Real Hero” (see Chapter 4). The actual Real Hero then entered the tent as the SME

introduced him to the group. The Real Hero told the group more about his experiences in the Army, handed out a Real Heroes action figure made in his likeness to a member of the group (often to the youngest looking visitor or to an individual who indicated at registration that he or she would be interested in joining the Army), and made himself available to sign autographs or chat about the Army. The SME directed people to remove their neck wallets but to keep their VAE ID cards, and as visitors returned their wallets, they were given a copy of the *America's Army* PC game attached to a VAE lanyard. The visitors walked away to the rest of the state fair, perhaps going to the 4-H building or the dog show nearby.

[http://www.americasarmy.com/flash/vidplayer.php?videoUrl=/flash/rh\\_videos/rieman\\_1.swf&KeepThis=true&TB\\_iframe=true&height=425&width=650](http://www.americasarmy.com/flash/vidplayer.php?videoUrl=/flash/rh_videos/rieman_1.swf&KeepThis=true&TB_iframe=true&height=425&width=650)

**Video 5.3: A video explaining the combat actions of Real Hero SGT Tommy Rieman.**

### *Virtual Armies and Actual Real Heroes*

*“[The military’s] TV wallpaper of ads during sports programming, its entrenchment in the schools, as well as air shows, and friendly Hollywood fare have shaped a culture of normalcy and celebration of, first, the military’s people, and, quite secondarily, its purposes.”*

—Catherine Lutz, *Homefront* (2001:168)

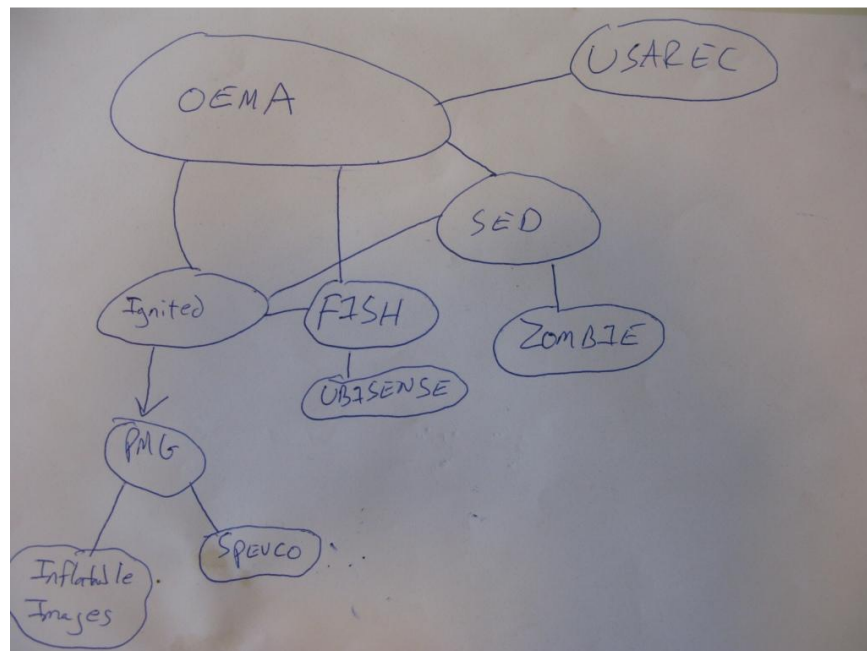
Although the VAE takes its name from the technology of virtual reality, when considering the population of visitors to the VAE, another sense of the word *virtual*—that is, a connotation of potential—is also germane (Deleuze 2002). The visitors to the VAE were a force not yet mobilized, and the VAE served as a conduit in actualizing the potential of this labor pool. Fish Software, the contracting company responsible for gathering data on visitors and

disseminating them to relevant entities like recruitment offices and OEMA, was forthright about this function of the VAE, explaining that

Though the VAE will garner much attention for being a realistic and compelling war simulator, the purpose of it is clear—to collect actionable information that allows the Army to recruit more effectively. Every aspect of the experience is geared toward delivering positive messages about the Army and collecting information that can be leveraged post-event. (Fish Software 2007:3)

The development, construction, presentation, and postpresentation aspects of the VAE involved a constellation of part-time, temporary, and full-time laborers. These too were a virtual army in the sense that they were not a part of the U.S. Army proper but nevertheless fulfilled many of the functions of the Army.<sup>76</sup> This virtual army was composed of SMEs, technicians, tour directors, public relations representatives (all employees of Ignited), female staff at registration and checkout (hired on a temporary basis through local modeling agencies), drivers (employees of Performance Marketing Group), and representatives from Fish Software, the Army-sponsored Top Fuel dragster racing team, and McCann Erikson (the marketing agency responsible for the “Army Strong” campaign). In addition to this virtual army of contractors, enlisted Army recruiters, the Real Heroes, and drill sergeants were all involved in the VAE media campaign. These individuals, especially men who toured with the VAE consistently, tended to speak of their work in terms of the military in a similar way that the developers of *America’s Army* spoke about their work (see Chapter 6). “You know,” one employee told me, “anytime you’re on the road it’s just like the Band of Brothers in the sense that you go through the worst things on Earth. I mean, obviously we’re not in Iraq, but stuff will break and somehow we always make it work. I like that camaraderie” (Charlie, Personal Interview, August 15, 2008).

This virtual army existed to support the continual flow of visitors and the occasional media or VIP visit to the VAE. Although this breakdown admittedly falls into the trap of categorizing individuals based on the type of work they do, it is nevertheless useful in beginning to think about the sheer variety of activities, motivations, interests, organizations, and logistics involved in putting on a production such as the VAE. A step back from this local level of actors reveals even more layers of organizations connected to the VAE. Zombie Studios, the *America's Army* design studios, the SED at Redstone Arsenal, and OEMA are only the most central organizations in a complex array of institutions that had a hand in the production and implementation of the VAE (see Figure 5.7).



**Figure 5.7: An Ignited VAE employee's hastily drawn cognitive map of the relationships between some of the military, governmental, contracting, and subcontracting organizations that work together to produce the VAE.**

The VAE could not be reduced to a singular kind of experience or a pithy description of what it did or was; rather, it communicated a variety of messages through different channels and episodes, and it did so not simply with a unidirectional form of information dissemination, as in

the traditional understanding of propaganda (see also Li 2003). The experiences of each visitor, of course, varied depending on the individuals present, the venue at which the VAE is presented, the size and configuration of the VAE, and an infinite number of other factors, but the Army predictably sought to frame the experience in a highly scripted manner that communicated positive messages to participants, especially teenagers, about the career opportunities available in the Army. It did this not only through multiple videos, but also through use of *America's Army*, the VAE simulation, and multiple recruiters, drill sergeants, Real Heroes, and SMEs. As an individual working at the VAE explained, this effort to humanize the Army was very intentional because

traditional media marketing efforts for the Army—they have always come off as being sort of half-assed and really goofy. You see television commercials and the things that they really hype up are things like “honor” and “duty” and stuff, and it falls flat I think. It’s just images and audio.... [The VAE] really puts a human face on things whereas on a TV commercial nine times out of ten you are seeing actors and it's really insincere, really uninteresting, and really unengaging. Even in *America's Army* you can go into a Virtual Recruiting Center to meet the Real Heroes [simulated in the game] and learn about their stories. They’re real people, but so much of Army advertising is not even virtual, but artificial. (Personal Interview, August 15, 2008)



**Figure 5.8: Real Heroes Tommy Rieman and John Adams sign free copies of the *America's Army* video game that are given to visitors as they exit. Photograph by the author, August 2008.**

The Real Heroes in particular were at the center of the *America's Army* campaign to place a human face on the Army, whether virtual (as in the game) or actual (see Figure 5.8). Most of the time, at least one of these individuals was present at the VAE. The combat stories of each Real Hero are highlighted at the *America's Army* Web site,<sup>77</sup> and these were shown to visitors at the VAE when a specific Real Hero is present. Carefully chosen as representatives

who present a realistic career goal for prospective recruits (with six enlisted noncommissioned officers and two commissioned officers), the Real Heroes were portrayed as ordinary soldiers who, through training in the Army, became enabled to do heroic deeds. As one Real Hero put it, “none of us were trying to be heroes, we were just there doing our job.”<sup>78</sup> Another states, “I don’t see myself as a hero, I just see myself as Tommy Rieman, doing my job. I think everybody has the same quality, but they just have to find it” (see Video 3).

SMEs also played an active role in personalizing the Army at the VAE and were central to interpreting the VAE to visitors in a way that maximized the number of people leaving with a favorable impression of the Army. Some SMEs cracked jokes and kept their explanations upbeat, while others chose to focus on describing their own experiences and career trajectories that enlistment in the Army allowed. One SME, for example, informed visitors about his deployments and return, but chose to tell visitors mostly about his subsequent pursuit of a college degree with Army support. SMEs said their job was to “educate, promote, and entertain the public,” and they conceptualized their work as both performer and educator. “I think I’m a little bit of each,” one SME told me,

because I like making people smile and have a good time because that’s what this is about. It’s not about trying to impress people or make them think they’re in the Army. I like to entertain them, because the Army isn’t that bad. A lot of people are like—oh, if I join the military I’m going to get shot at and all this kind of stuff, but no, it depends on what job you do. I try to educate people and [tell them], “No, you could be a satellite technician, and do three or four years, get out, make over a hundred grand a year with your military education and experience.” So, educate. And then, I might crack a few

jokes ... and just try to make good laughs and have a good time. (Personal Interview, August 12, 2008)

These men were all former enlistees in the Army, and many worked as contract employees at the VAE between stints of active duty in the Army. As such, the SMEs themselves blurred the lines between the soldier and civilian. To explain this, one VAE Ignited employee rhetorically asked,

What is the product that the VAE wants to punch out? On one level you have the game that we give away, but at the end of the day, it's all about recruiting. What's the product, though? The Real Heroes are sort of the cream of the crop; they are the ultimate product. But I think on a larger scale you have to look at the Subject Matter Experts. I think that those guys who were just regular folks in the Army—some did combat, some didn't—I think that those are the real products. Those guys are literally “products” of the Army. (Personal Interview, August 15, 2008)

Although the VAE was a marketing effort to sell a real experience of joining and being in the U.S. Army, there were a plethora of products—both literal and metaphorical—that shaped a visitor's experience at the VAE. The SMEs, recruiters, and Real Heroes (all products of the Army) helped create a militarized, highly masculine experience that guests were able to take home with them after their visit (see Kline, et al 2003:247–68; Enloe 2000). Items given to visitors (ID cards, key chains, action figures, T-shirts, hats, and video games) were some of these take-home products, as were the intangible memories of the experience. Additionally, people who fit the right demographic and who indicated an interest in the Army also took home with them the prospect of being contacted in the near future by a recruiter.

The Real Heroes and SMEs were ultimately ways of challenging and seeking to change the “cog in a wheel” image of the Army as an organization that has little place for the individual in its day-to-day operations. Like the U.S. Army’s former official and contradictory failure of a slogan, “Army of One,” the Real Heroes and SMEs sought to portray to civilians (and potential recruits) that the Army was composed of a multitude of individuals, not a mass of soldiers. “Empower yourself, defend freedom” is a phrase that appears on many Army Game Project products (see Video 5.1), and the Real Heroes and SMEs embody this discourse of individual empowerment within the total institution of the Army,<sup>79</sup> as George W. Bush’s tribute to Tommy Rieman in the president’s 2007 State of the Union speech underscored (see Figure 5.9).<sup>80</sup>



**Figure 5.9: Tommy Rieman, with former first lady Laura Bush, honored at George W. Bush’s 2007 State of the Union address.**

In this effort to personalize the Army through the individual figures of the Real Heroes, websites, blogs, personal photos, bios, and videos all play a part in this multimedia public relations project.<sup>81</sup> And yet, beneath the persona of the public figure of the Real Heroes, there exists a more ambiguous human figure. In my interview with Real Hero Tommy Rieman, this became readily apparent in his account, especially in his description of post-deployment adjustment and post-traumatic stress (PTS) experiences. Like his public persona, Rieman’s

personal narrative of enlistment in the Army is also one of overcoming adversity and becoming individually empowered within an institutional setting, yet it contains within it elements that are consciously omitted from the highly sanitized and polished public Real Hero narrative. Notably, no Real Hero has any visual physical index of injury, as this would be counterproductive to what the VAE and the Real Heroes program seek to accomplish. Though Real Heroes like Rieman have personal injuries that have left them physically handicapped and psychologically traumatized none of this backstory is part of the media personality of the Real Hero.

At the Indianapolis Air Show, I sat down with Rieman at a desk behind the driver's seat of one of the VAE tractor trailers. As I was explaining the waiver of consent and human subjects protocol to him, he began staring me down deadpan, looking for all the world like he was ready to fight me. Flustered, I inquisitively raised my eyebrow, and he broke into a smile, saying, "Just kidding."

Robertson Allen: So, you're the head of the Real Heroes program, is that right?

Tommy Rieman: Yeah, I'm the Real Heroes program coordinator, the manager. So I go out and look for new Real Heroes, I maintain their schedule, and I get 'em set up for events and stuff. And I take them through the steps of becoming an action figure and the video game process, making sure their speeches are up to par and that they are media trained. So it's an interesting, great, cool, fun process and I think they selected me just because I'd been through the process, I'd been the most used Real Hero, and I had the most experience [...].

RA: What's been your history in the Army?

TR: Well, I joined the Army in '99 when I was 17. I had mom and dad's consent. I graduated high school in June and I left July 7th, 1999. And I've been in the Army almost 10 years now. I went in through infantry, went to airborne school, went to Ft. Bragg, was at Ft. Bragg

for a couple of years, went to Kosovo. I had a pretty good time there, and I liked it, but I needed a change of pace. The 82<sup>nd</sup> was very fast-paced and there's always something going on. So I said, "Send me to Germany." They looked at my history and everything and said, "Hey, we're going to put you in a specialized unit called LRS ["lurse"]. So, rock on. It's Long Range Reconnaissance [sic] Surveillance, is what LRS is. It's a pretty high-speed unit that would fall under special operations. They put us under MI, which is military intelligence [...].

So then we deployed to Iraq. We went there from August of '02 and I didn't leave until December of '03. I was medevac'd [medical evacuated] December 4<sup>th</sup> out of Iraq. Before I was hurt, I was on orders for selection to go to Special Forces [...] so that kinda messed my window up. But I got home faster, I got back to Ft. Bragg. And my wife was staying in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. So I went back to Ft. Bragg and went through a whole ... process. I was there with the 504<sup>th</sup> infantry, a parachute regiment. And I was going to get out of the Army just because, you know, I was tired of this, I needed a break. I wanted to join my wife and have a life, settle down. A general, a division commander for the 82<sup>nd</sup>, he said, "Son, there's no fuckin' way you should get out of the Army. It would be crazy. You've done so many great things—what can I do for you?" And I said, "Not a fuckin' thing, sir." Just like that. And he goes, "Well, are you bitter?" And I said, "Well, a little bit." I say, "Sir, it's going to take an act of God for me to stay in the Army." And he goes, "What if I get you assigned to the Pentagon being security for the Secretary of Defense?" I said, "OK—where do I sign?" Just like that. So two days later, he had paperwork, I signed and reenlisted, and went up to the Pentagon.

Two weeks before I get there, I get this call [...] and she's like, "We're really excited

about you coming to the office and stuff.” I was like, “Yeah, I’m pretty excited to protect the Secretary.” And she goes, “Protect the Secretary? It’s not a hazardous job or anything. Our Secretary is fine.” Apparently, this G-1 Sergeant Major position slot was already full, so instead of going to the Secretary of Defense, they just put me into another slot at the Pentagon, and it just happened to be Personnel. Which, for an infantry grunt [...] is pretty rough to adjust to, but once I got a hold of everything, it opened up my mind [...]. It didn’t make sense because none of it makes sense—it’s all fuckin’ stupid—but it became a lot more clear about how the Army operates, and where it gets in its binds.

So I [...] got out of the Army—active duty—in ‘07 and joined the National Guard. I wanted to be completely away from the Army just to see if I could do a civilian job, but I loved the job. I was working with *America’s Army* while I was in active duty, but active duty wouldn’t release me to go do all of these great things [with *America’s Army* and the VAE]. So I got out, and met up with the Virginia National Guard since they were the closest infantry unit. And here I am today.

RA: So you mentioned earlier that your experiences in the Army left you kinda feeling bitter. Could you talk a little more about ...

TR: Yeah, there was a really bad time. Unfortunately, the Army can make the same mistakes. And it’s just like any Fortune 500 company, you know, it’s a huge powerhouse, an organization. 1.5 million employees, scattered all over the world. I mean, we’re really damn good at what we do, but unfortunately people slip through the cracks and things happen. Things aren’t set up, and we don’t learn from our mistakes. When I was wounded, there wasn’t any wounded warrior program set up. There weren’t any psychologists talking to you about war, and when I came back I was completely fucked up mentally. I got back, and I was

on orders to go to Ft. Bragg. The problem was, I physically didn't have a copy of my orders on me [...].

You know, I was fuckin' strapped down to a cot, and flown all the way back to fuckin' Walter Reed, and Walter Reed down to Ft. Bragg. And when I showed up, I saw my wife, went home for the weekend, and came back on Monday. Sure enough, you know, I have a great weekend, I'm so excited, I'm like, "Hell yeah, this is how we roll." They give us a fuckin' weekend off, I get recovery leave, they give me plenty of medication and shit for the weekend. And I show up on Monday, and I swear to God it was like I had three dicks on my forehead, cause nobody would fuckin' help me because I didn't have a piece of paper. Basically they said, "Who the fuck are you? Where are you from? If you don't have orders, we can't help you." So I went through some of the worst processes in my life.

I couldn't get medical treatment, which is insane. I went to the hospital Inspector General. If you have any issues on anything, he investigates it and makes sure it goes the right way. I told him, I don't have orders, my unit's in Iraq, and I don't have any contact numbers. You know, I came over here strapped to a fuckin' bed. Get me some fuckin' medical treatment. I need to talk to somebody. Well, he says, "We can, but we can't document it." I was like, "What the fuck do you mean? I don't have a copy of my orders. Isn't there a system around where you can pull this shit up? It's 2003, come on." And sure enough, they couldn't. So I'd go see a doctor, and they'd give me medications, but it was very limited. And the treatment I was getting, I had to do it at certain times. Really fuckin' rough. Really pissed me off. So while we're going through that, I'm still getting paid for being in Iraq. So I went to the finance offices, and I tried to stop them from paying me, tax free, from being in Iraq [...] and they said, "We can't help you, you don't have orders." And

I was like, “You know, I’m trying to stop you guys from paying me too much.” “Sorry, I can’t help you.” That’s what I got.

I dealt with this shit for months. I didn’t have a psychologist to talk to. It was the hardest time in my life, becoming sensitive again, because you’re totally sterile over there. You lose feelings and emotions to a point. You become numb to certain things. The slightest things when I came back would scare me, and I didn’t know how to communicate with my wife. She went through a life changing event by running the household and taking care of everything and living with the stress of not having me there. And then, I was there. And how do you explain it to one another to let them understand? You have to really, really communicate and you have to do it well. And me and her did not communicate well at all. So. We’d say things, and they’d be the same thing, but we would say it in such different ways that ...

RA: It just misses?

TR: Yeah. That was the hardest part, just reintegrating myself back into civilian life. And I didn’t have a unit to report to, so everyday I’d just sit at my house and be with my family and live with that every night. You have nightmares, you wake up sweating, you’re screaming, you’re crying, you’re.... And you find yourself waking up in the bathtub, or outside. And I’d be freaking out, locking the doors, paranoid as fuck. And we’d be out, you know, at Wal-Mart and all of these people and you’d just want to fuckin’ explode on somebody. There’s a bag in the road, and you swerve, or.... I remember one night distinctly—we were driving back into our neighborhood and there was a lake, and somebody had let off some serious fireworks, and I was driving. You know, we got hit with IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) in Iraq. I was driving and those fireworks went off, and I swerved off, and the front

tire got stuck in the lake, and I got out and ran out of the fuckin' vehicle and dove into the woods. And my wife just sat there and looked at me like I was the craziest mother fucker on the planet. It took me a minute to step back and say, "Holy shit!" So reintegrating just wasn't easy.

Once we got several months down the road, my unit got back from Iraq and I was able to contact them. They sent me my orders, and I went in and checked in [...]. I came in and introduced myself and whatever. They treat me like shit: "Where the fuck have you been? Why are you so fat?" I gained 65 pounds after I got back. You know, nobody was taking care of me, I was fucked up, I couldn't go out and exercise, and I didn't have any motivation. I thought that the Army had forgotten about me, that they didn't give a shit about me, and that was really hard for me to take. So I went through this whole process, they treated me like shit, and I was in a replacement detachment for a month before they put me into a unit, and once I got to my unit, it was the same thing over again. It was, "Who the fuck are you? Where have you been? Why are you a fat piece of shit?" You know, and I'd tell them my story: "Hey, I was in this, this." They didn't give a fuck. They thought I was lying because I didn't have paperwork to prove it. I was at Ft. Bragg in December and January and it wasn't until August when shit got straight. When that Silver Star and Purple Heart showed up in the mail, things fuckin' changed. People were like lickin' my nuts after that because they couldn't believe that I was telling the truth the whole time, that it wasn't a lie, that the paperwork was there. It was a really, really tough process to take because it felt, like I said, like I was abandoned. And I hated that because I love the Army, absolutely love it.

RA: And in between the time—was it just a matter of the paperwork going through?

TR: Paperwork, a lack of sense. The Army sticks to their rules, and they're a fuckin' asshole

about their rules. If it's common sense approachable, but a not so common issue, people lock up and don't know what to do. They say, "Hell I'm a soldier, that's the rules." No, hold on. I understand rules are guidelines, but let's take a look at this. We're soldiers, we're people, let's take care of each other.

RA: There's a human ...

TR: Right, and they don't think like that. You know, everybody has needs and I have a family. I have to take care of them, provide for them. And we need to be treated pretty good for what we do. And we lose focus of that when everybody's treated like a number. The Army needs a little more TLC in how to handle individuals—yeah, we're a team but there are individuals too. We need to take care of them and specialize in their needs, and we suck at it. We're terrible at taking care of our own people, terrible.

RA: Did you know that you were going to get the Purple Heart and the Silver Star before it showed up?

TR: I had no clue. [long pause] I didn't think I did anything special. That night runs in my head at least three times a day still. And I didn't think I did a fuckin' thing, and I was nominated by everybody on my team. So they think I did something, so obviously I did. But I couldn't have done it without them. I was of a mindset of, "Hey I did my fuckin' job," so I was happy. So why was I treated like shit? You know, I just fuckin' spent 18 months over in this goddamn bitch and you're going to treat me like shit—what the fuck? And it left a really bad imprint on my wife and my family. My mom and dad and everybody related to me. Once they started treating me better, that's when I was about to get out of the Army. And then they talked to me and I stayed in. So ...

RA: Yeah. Do you feel like a lot of people have those same kinds of experiences? Kind of

falling through the cracks?

TR: It's got a hell of a lot better. See, because there are different things in place. Like when you come back it's mandatory that you talk to a shrink, and it should be. You know, you need time. It's going to take time. This is the most life changing event that you'll ever experience. You know, some people go over there and live on a compound and never leave it. And they might get a mortar attack on the coast—and that's like saying that there's a mortar attack in Indianapolis [about 20 miles away]—and you might have heard it, but now you're petrified. Some people have different levels of PTSD too. Some people, if they stay on that base and they heard that, they're fucked up. I went through some pretty fuckin' severe things, and I was fucked up. You gotta have time. You need—there are certain things that need to be in order and the Army is doing a really damn good job of that *now* of making sure that happens. And sure there are guys falling through the cracks here and there—and that just comes down to an individual's leadership.

RA: So after these experiences that you've had, what made you decide to be a representative for the Army—a kind of a spokesperson for the Army?

TR: Because after all the bullshit that I went through, and how bad it sucked, for some reason I still loved it. Yeah, I've been through some of the worst fuckin' situations in my life. Some of the worst fuckin' times. Sittin' in a LRS hideshow for seven fuckin' days, you can't move, your buddy's holding your MRE (Meal Ready to Eat) bag so you can shit in it because you can't move cause you're stuck in this fuckin' hole. Cold as shit, feet wet, almost getting hypothermia—but it was the greatest time in my life. Why is that? You know, it's like the shittiest times in your life tell the best stories, and it's always fun, but each time it's like, “How shitty can we get?” You get excited about it [...]. So much shit has happened to me

and I still love the Army, so if all that can happen to me and I can love it, it's fuckin' great. And I want to change people's lives. The Army will.

You know, I grew up in Independence, Kentucky. There wasn't shit going on. I was headed towards trouble; I was going down the wrong path. My grades weren't there, I wanted to play college football, but I was kind of sub-par, a little guy. You know, there were some places I could have played at, but for some reason the Army kept calling me in my mind. The recruiters did a damn good job. They start early, and they should because just like anything else, you want to imprint that in their minds, get them thinking. We're not brainwashing anyfuckinbody and people that say that are fuckin' ignorant. If we were, we would control everybody's iPod and we would sing cadences on everybody's iPod all the time. But that imprint left a good footprint in my mind towards the Army. And what the Army has structurally done for me as a man, and showed me the ways of life—and also *showed* me life. You know, I'm having fun. People make fun, say we're "livin' the dream," but really I am. There's not a job on this planet I'd rather have than what I do right now—just because it's so much fun, I'm a representative of the Army, I get to do great things, and I get paid. My family's taken care of, and I get great benefits.

It's a great package. I mean if you look at the Army from top to bottom, there's nothing else in the world that offers what the Army is. Everybody sees what's in the media, the negativity, but it's so much bigger. If you can just put it past yourself—it's not about you, it's about you serving your fuckin' country and looking to your brother left and right and serving with them. If your son goes and joins the Army—if you have a son—I guarantee that you would feel guilty that you never did. This is why I do it. I serve because of my kids. I want to be able to say that I served, so he doesn't if he doesn't want to. Or, I go fight this battle so he

doesn't have to and he's safe. There's such a bigger package that the Army has. And it's pride when you wear this uniform.



Figure 5.10: Tommy Rieman's Real Hero action figure.

Rieman's story of institutional neglect, disillusionment, and devotion is contradictory, yet it is a personally meaningful life narrative. It demonstrates how, even while working as a fully-committed and patriotic representative of the U.S. Army, criticism and thoughtful reflection may occur, albeit in ways that ultimately reinforce the institutional authority of the military. It also demonstrates how the Real Hero and the real Tommy Rieman were very much different personas

that, when contrasted, reveal a process of “heroification” that turns “flesh-and-blood individuals into pious, perfect creatures without conflicts, pain, credibility, or human interest” (Loewen 2007:11). It is precisely the “flesh-and-blood” human qualities of Rieman’s personal narrative that were omitted from his Real Hero character, which became sanitized as a plastic G.I. Joe type of action figure, devoid of personalities, injuries, and flaws (see Figure 5.10). This work of morphing a real human being into an “aspirational figure” (Wardynski 2007) maintains a well-documented tradition in high school American history textbooks, which typically “reduce heroes from dramatic men and women to melodramatic stick figures. Their inner struggles disappear and they become goody-goody, not merely good” (Loewen 2007:29). This, too is the work of militarization, for the highly scripted, half-truthful war narratives of the Real Heroes obscure and deflect attention away from the trauma that war inflicts upon soldiers and their families. As Rieman’s contrasting personal and Real Hero stories show, and as the war narratives present at the VAE demonstrate, there is a finely executed deployment of persuasive technologies at work here. The Army Experience Center, the stationary cousin of the Virtual Army Experience, brings these technologies together in an unparalleled manner to intermesh entertainment, education, business, recruitment, and public service.

*Philadelphia: The Army Experience Center*

*“Just as the corporation replaces the factory, perpetual training tends to replace the school, and continuous control to replace the examination. Which is the surest way of delivering the school over to the corporation.”*

—Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (1992:5, emphasis in original)

*“[Managing the AEC is] kind of like owning the first McDonald’s, or working at the first McDonald’s. You know it’s going to be an amazing thing, but you know some days are going to be really, really hard and other days are not.”*

—Al Flood, Ignited AEC director (Personal Interview, May 17, 2009)

*Al Flood: “How did our lunch line go today?”*

*Army recruiter: “We need more turkey, less ham, no wraps.”*

—discussion following the AEC-sponsored Asian/Pacific Islander Heritage Month Senior Leadership Forum (Fieldnotes, May 28, 2009)



**Figure 5.11: “Grab a bite.” An advertisement for the Army Experience Center in the Franklin Mills Mall, Philadelphia. Photograph by the author, May 2009.**

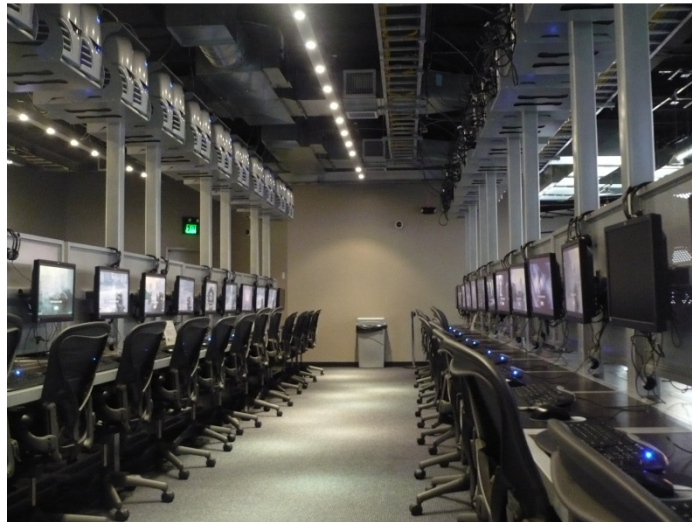
Ignited took its concept of the VAE and expanded it, in association with entities at the Pentagon,<sup>82</sup> to create the Army Experience Center (AEC), which sat at the far end of the winding Franklin Mills Mall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (see Figure 5.11), surrounded by an indoor skateboard park, a video game arcade, a Chinese restaurant, Banana Republic, and Victoria's Secret. Although the AEC was not a formal part of the Army Game Project and therefore not under the supervision of OEMA and Wardynski, it was closely connected due the fact that it was also managed by Ignited, and maintained many formal and informal relationships with AGP intuitions. As a related Pentagon-supervised program that used the same *America's Army* technology and VAE simulators, the AEC arguably generated more contention and coverage than either, with reports from CNN,<sup>83</sup> NBC,<sup>84</sup> and the *New York Times*,<sup>85</sup> as well as independent media organizations,<sup>86</sup> activist organizations,<sup>87</sup> and PBS (see Video 5.4). Public relations representatives from Ignited were generally happy with this wide exposure, claiming that "in the last two years we've maintained 97% positive to neutral coverage" (Personal Interview, February 23, 2009).

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/digitalnation/waging-war/a-new-generation/the-army-experience-center.html>

**Video 5.4: A PBS news report on the AEC.**

The AEC, like the VAE and *America's Army*, was designed to appeal primarily to teenage boys, yet the center had a vibe that was meant to be welcoming to anyone wishing know more about the Army, or anyone simply wishing to relax, watch TV, or play video games. As the AEC's director explained, "We're here to have the space for people to learn about the Army in their own way" (Personal Interview, May 17, 2009). Big screen televisions playing ESPN and other programs in closed-captioning were anchored to the ceilings, and plush sofas and chairs

were arranged behind a registration desk. Dispersed throughout the center were interactive booths for visitors to explore that highlighted various Army careers, salaries and salary projections, and global base locations. Civilian staff and Army recruiters typically kept a courteous distance from visitors unless they were approached, and dressed in casual uniforms—khaki pants with white and black Army polo shirts or jackets, color coded to distinguish soldiers from civilians. A small area displayed Army merchandise available for purchase. To one side was a classroom, with approximately 40 computers and seats, referred to as the “Tactical Operations Center” and visible through transparent glass walls.



**Figure 5.12: Gaming computers at the AEC. Photograph by the author, May 2009.**

Further back were four rows of seats with 60 additional computers (see Figure 5.12), in addition to 19 Xbox 360 consoles with plush seats along the wall. These were available for anyone over the age of 13 to walk in and use, on condition that they entered their personal contact information in a database at the front registration desk and provided proof of age and identity (games rated “Mature” on the ESRB scale were off limits to users under the age of 17). Once visitors did this, they were issued an official AEC card and number (see Figure 5.5), which

enabled information on individual users to be stored for statistical tracking and demographic analysis. In the very back of the center were Apache helicopter and Humvee simulators identical to those at the VAE and the Center's recruiting and management offices, also visible through glass windows.

With an abundance of glass windows in its interior and on all sides facing the mall corridors to visually represent "transparency," the AEC epitomized the military recruitment soft sell in perhaps its purest form to date. This two-year, \$13 million experimental pilot program, which lasted from August 2008 to July 2010, combined five Philadelphia-area recruiting stations into one. Forty recruiters were replaced with approximately 20 civilian staff and 22 recruiters who were handpicked by the Center's Pentagon project manager, Major Larry Dillard, from recruiting school. "It's an overall change in philosophy" in recruiting, according to Major Dillard, and while people at the Pentagon were quick to recognize the potential of the Center to revolutionize Army recruiting strategies, recruiters entrenched in the system of the hard sell and cold call were less willing to change (Personal Interview, May 28, 2009).

One of the primary reasons for locating the AEC in the Philadelphia area was because research had indicated that approximately one third of all Army recruits came from within a 50 nautical mile radius of an Army base. This, combined with the fact that the Army has traditionally garnered low recruiting numbers from urban areas, led to the consideration of sites in Baltimore, Albuquerque, Fresno, Chicago, and Philadelphia as possible locations for the AEC. The Franklin Mills Mall was eventually chosen for its access to public transportation as well as the ethnic and class diversity of its shoppers; locations like Philadelphia's King of Prussia Mall,

where “everyone is rich and preppy,” and other malls that “aren’t as nice” were ruled out (Major Larry Dillard, Personal Interview, May 28, 2009; Al Flood, Personal Interview, May 17, 2009).

**How did you hear about the Army Experience Center?**

- From a friend
- From an advertisement on a bus or subway
- On the Web
- From a Soldier / AEC staff member
- Shopping in the mall
- A postcard from the AEC
- At my high school
- An e-mail
- At a community/recreation center
- Other

If Other, please specify:

BACK    NEXT    CANCEL

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Now that you have been to the Army Experience Center, we want to get your opinion on the following areas. Using a scale from 1 to 5, please rank each area by checking the appropriate box. (1 = Really Dislike and 5 = Really Like)

	1	2	3	4	5	Haven't Tried it
Career Navigators	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Global Base Locator	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
PC games	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Xbox 360 games	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
America's Army game	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lounge Area / Cafe	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tactical Operations Center (TOC)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Black Hawk, Apache and HMMWV simulators	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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**Figure 5.13: Examples of a series of questions, designed by Wardynski’s Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA), that users of computers at the AEC were required to respond to. Photograph by the author, May 2009.**

Though recruiting was, by all measures, an end goal at the AEC, as a pilot project the Center, like the VAE, had obvious data collection goals in addition to an overarching goal of repositioning the Army as a “community-building” organization. The data collection portion of

the AEC's mission was often left unsaid or implied by its representatives, though it arguably constituted the most important part of the AEC's activities in terms of long-term viability measuring and budgeting for future AEC-like projects. Unless a person provided specific permission during registration, personal information was not used to contact individuals for the purposes of recruitment. Instead, information was collected as a way to demographically map the sets of interests that various groups of visitors brought to the AEC. Each time a visitor logged on to use a computer, they were presented with a set of questions (see Figure 5.13), "actionable information" to be analyzed for marketing and event planning at the AEC and for "learn[ing] more about how the Army may further adapt technology to harness the power of the information age to support the recruiting mission" (see opening chapter quote, U.S. Congress 2010:318).

The most commonly stated goal of the AEC by its representatives, however, was "community building" and a process of rebranding the Army image as a constructive, rather than destructive, social force that provides positive "opportunities" for individuals and groups (Jauregui 2009). Al Flood, the AEC's Ignited director, explained this by telling me that

our mission here is to make people in the area, number one, aware of their Army and in particular of the active duty Army. And also to really increase their awareness of the opportunities that exist in the Army. Career opportunities, educational opportunities [...]. If people walk in here and they leave, if nothing else, with having a better appreciation of what the Army does and for what the people in the Army do and the sacrifices they make—mission accomplished. (Personal Interview, May 17, 2009)

One of the most remarkable aspects of the AEC that I witnessed during my two weeks of participant observation in May, 2009 and continued engagement with the AEC through its email

updates was its capability to regularly organize community events that appealed to young adults. These included monthly movie nights for screening films (e.g., *Blackhawk Down*, *Twilight: New Moon*, *Terminator: Salvation*, *Avatar*); visits from professional athletes (e.g., Brad Lidge); regular video game tournaments for a variety of games (e.g., *Call of Duty: World at War*, *HALO 3 ODST*, *Madden NFL 10*); 3-on-3 basketball tournaments; a Christmas and a “Christmas in July” charity clothing drive; a Halloween *Thriller* dance party that was an attempt to break a national record for the most number of simultaneous *Thriller* dancers; and the sponsorship of Philadelphia School District-wide events such as the Asian/Pacific Islander Heritage Month Senior Leadership Forum (see Figure 5.14), and similar events during Black History Month in February and Women’s History Month in March. Beatrice Jauregui, another anthropologist who also conducted fieldwork at the AEC, writes that “hosting these types of events at the AEC works to represent the army as not only ‘giving back to the community’ in an almost charitable sense ... but also more generally as becoming permanently and intimately involved with community-building activities” (2009:13).



**Figure 5.14: The registration desk at the AEC, during the Asian/Pacific Islander Heritage Month Senior Leadership Forum, held at and sponsored by the AEC, May 28, 2009. Photograph by the author.**

Schools, in particular, were viewed as community partners, and management at the AEC actively worked to foster relationships with schools and teachers. “We’ve been here long enough that high schools and high school teachers now contact us to come here for class trips,” Flood declared, and reserving the AEC for school events was a streamlined process through the Center’s website. Transportation to and from the AEC, along with event planning, was arranged through the AEC’s events coordinator. Al Flood went on to describe how the AEC was

making a long-term effort to get partnerships with educational outreach organizations, community outreach organizations. For example, working with the Philadelphia School District, and working with a private non-profit [PHASE 4 Learning Center] that is running an alternative high school program. We’ve also tied in with a separate non-profit to—believe it or not—conduct high school-level culinary arts competitions to simply

showcase the high school students who are participating in these programs, because the high school students in these programs have a much higher than average retention rate compared to the rest of the Philadelphia School District. What it also allows us to do is to showcase their achievements and a path to a potential future career that they've already started on. But it also allows us the opportunity to bring in a member of the United States Army culinary arts team and say, "Hey, did you know that you could be a master chef in the Army?" "What? That's crazy!" "No it's not!" We have actual master chefs in the Army, so ultimately the message we send is, "Hey high school students, you're doing great—keep it up. Continue to do what you're doing. Make smart life decisions." The other message we send is that the Army is more than you think [...]. It is not the Army of your grandfather. It's not the Army of your uncle who served in Vietnam or even the First Gulf War. It's totally changed; the opportunities are greatly increased. (Personal Interview, May 17, 2009)

Emphasizing life opportunities, the AEC partnered with PHASE 4 Learning Center, the alternative high school referred to in the above excerpt, to provide a daily high-school degree program hosted within the Center's high-tech Tactical Operations Center. A large portion of the students present at the AEC during the day on weekdays were PHASE 4 high school students, 55% of whom were "referred from school districts where over forty-one percent of the students are from low income families."<sup>88</sup> In addition to providing a free general high school education, PHASE 4 offers programs to high school students such as MARCH2SUCCESS (M2S), an online technology that educates students in standardized test-taking skills for both state achievement tests and the military Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). Although Jauregui quoted an AEC staff member as declaring that no more than 5% of PHASE 4 students become

soldiers (2009:12), Heinz Endowments, a granting institution supporting PHASE 4, reports as a positive outcome of its funding that 10% of all graduating PHASE 4 students have plans to undertake military service.<sup>89</sup> After the AEC finished its two years of operation, Al Flood moved on to become the PHASE 4 Regional Vice President for the Philadelphia Area. (Wardynski, perhaps not coincidentally, also became the Superintendent of the Huntsville, AL City Schools after his retirement from the Army in June 2010.) Given these explicit military connections, along with Flood's career officer experience in the Army as a helicopter pilot, generals' aide, and ROTC instructor, it is difficult *not* to see the partnerships between the AEC and educational institutions as being an explicit conduit for guiding at-risk youth towards the military. Just as the distinction between the civilian and soldier is at least temporarily eroded and deemphasized at the AEC, the transition between these educational and soldier spheres is made easy and almost commonsensical by the institutional relationships that are fostered between the AEC, schools, and community organizations.

### *Protest and Propaganda*

*“We need to co-op and enlist the anti-recruiting movement to become a part of our movement.”*

—statement made during an Ignited brainstorming session for the Army Experience Center media outreach plans (Fieldnotes, April 16, 2009)

Whether the educational partnerships at the AEC are framed as life opportunities that transition individuals along a path of career success towards an optimistic future, or as relationships that exploit a class and racial system that provides few alternatives for employment

or advancement besides military service to lower class youth of color, they seem to be clear manifestations of what Deleuze describes in “Postscript on the Societies of Control” as being part of a system in which “the family, the school, the army, the factory are no longer the distinct analogical spaces” (1992:6). These kinds of disciplinary institutions no longer work to discipline only the subjects within them. Instead, they act in more diffuse ways, spreading and smoothing their disciplinary tendencies across the general population (Deleuze 1992; Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004). Simply put, militarization no longer happens only at the military base or on the battlefield (wherever that may be), but instead increasingly occurs across institutions and in less institutionalized settings such as state fairs, air shows, *Thriller* dance parties, and 3x3 basketball tournaments. This process of militarization subtly happens also in the very movements that explicitly and actively oppose both the VAE and the AEC. At both venues, protest organizations such as Veterans for Peace took on a militarized logic legitimizing the experiences of former soldiers as being a more valid basis upon which antiwar protest might be organized, thus recreating the figure of the soldier as a “paragon of citizenship” (Enloe 2000:18; see also Lutz 2001, 2002). In this particular way, the heavy involvement of Veterans for Peace in the protests at the VAE and AEC parallels the militarization of other activist movements (Enloe 2000:14-34). Tom, a VAE employee, spoke to this point when he said that

so much of society—American society specifically—is incredibly militarized, but we don’t see it. You can hang out and watch the history channel and that might not bother you, but it’s all basically war. You could write a whole thesis on sports and militarization in the United States, but for some reason [we don’t see it.] For example, the VAE goes to a lot of air shows, and air shows to me have always been military stuff, where you’re flexing your military muscle, you’re showing off these machines that are designed to

murder people, basically. And that's fine if you want to boil it down to that. But what's interesting is that at the Cleveland Air Show every year we have a group of protesters that is very anti-VAE. They're really confused, though, in the sense that they'll say that the air show is just "a celebration of American aviation," but what we're doing is so indicative of the militarization of American culture and how bad we're going down like Rome. They don't see it—it's like the forest from the trees thing. America is completely militarized in so many ways, but so is most of Western culture. It's so easy to find something like the VAE and put your thumb on it, but it's such a bigger societal issue than just the VAE [...]. I think with protesters like that, to go after something really big like this is the easy way out—to say that this is big and evil and it's going to hurt people. (Personal Interview, August 15, 2008)

As Tom's comments indicate, at the time of my fieldwork in Indianapolis, an impending protest at the Cleveland Air Show was a major topic of conversation among workers at the VAE, with the most vocal and negative reactions coming from the SMEs. "I've heard about the horror stories of protesters showing up," one told me, "but I really hope I don't have to deal with them. I wouldn't get angry with them, I wouldn't react. I'd let the media people deal with them, but I don't believe that people should protest this game" (Personal Interview, August 12, 2008).

Although some SMEs implied that protesters were unpatriotic, others were more even-handed, explaining to me that "protesters think this game is here to entice children and make it seem like killing is glamorous, but SMEs are here to make sure that it's not interpreted in that way" (Personal Interview, August 12, 2008).

A representative from Veterans for Peace, the group that organized protests against the VAE in Cleveland, said in a public statement that "massacring people on a screen I don't think is

good for young people. It gives a distorted message about what the Army is doing today.”

Another representative added, “We don’t want to come across as criticizing the Army. Many of us have seen combat and have been decorated. But this thing uses violence to seduce young people into enjoying a very false depiction of war” (O’Malley 2008; see Video 5.5). Veterans for Peace made headlines a few months later at another Army recruiting event using *America’s Army* when a representative stated that the use of video game technology to market to teenagers is “like giving candy to kids. It’s sort of like military pedophilia in a way, preying on our young people” (Kobely 2008). I would argue that such strong reactions are bound up in an array of issues that stretch beyond the strong antiwar stance of Veterans for Peace. They stem in part from a profound fear and misunderstanding of the emergent medium of video games, a fear that has historically accompanied the emergence of other new media such as television and radio (see Jenkins 2004, 2005).

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NG-B7tmq7o&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NG-B7tmq7o&feature=player_embedded)

**Video 5.5: A report on the VAE from Channel One news.**

These reactions, however, are grounded in legitimate concerns that become obfuscated through the scapegoating of video games as a medium. John Grant, a Vietnam veteran, journalist, and activist in the Philadelphia area with anti-AEC protest organizations such as Veterans for Peace, recognized this, and, echoing Gonzalo Frasca’s idea of “videogames of the oppressed” (2001) and games such as *Fatworld*,<sup>90</sup> proposed the idea of alternative games to act as antitheses to militarized games:

John Grant: My argument is that these pawns, these kids, need some alternative information.

A lot of people in the movement say “oh we’re going to go to the Army Experience Center

and we're going to shut it down, shut it down!" Well, I'm more realistic. It's an asymmetrical battle. I don't think we're going to shut it down, at least not today.

Robertson Allen:     What do you feel makes the Army Experience Center more insidious than a regular recruitment center?

JG:     Rather than the old classic recruitment center [...] in this case it's ratcheted up, it has reached another level. It's brand selling; it's Disney. It's selling militarism, the myth of militarism, the whole drive of militarism in the form of the brand of the Army. It's larger than just recruiting for the Army. It's, you know, next to Victoria's Secret in the mall. It's a part of culture. And you link it with entertainment, and it becomes something else. If we were as well funded ... we could set up shop next to the AEC something called the "Peace Experience Center." One game I [had an idea for] is a day in the life of a PTSD Iraq vet. He's going to school, and a cop gives him a ticket for his vehicle inspection being overdue—the "fleas of life," as Samuel Beckett called it, that everybody goes through. Some poor kid who's been sent to Iraq or Afghanistan and who is going through all these horrendous things—we know the whole history of posttraumatic stress and repeated tours—what's it like to go through a day [for him]? And a video game would be perfect ... the possibilities are endless about the game that you could do to educate a kid as to the realities of what it is like.

RA:     The military is actually making PTSD games for PTSD victims.<sup>91</sup>

JG:     They are? Interesting. Well, obviously, why not? It's like the psychiatrists they have in Iraq and in places—which is good, I'm not saying it is bad—but they're like the industrial psychologists on the line of a Ford plant or something. The point is to get you back on the

line [...], not to address all of the problems that you really have, which is part of being on that goddamn line in the first place.

As John Grant was telling me his reflections on PTSD and games, I kept thinking back to Tommy Rieman. What, I wondered, would these two individuals—who so clearly had firsthand understandings of the harsh realities of soldiering—have to say to one another? And what would Tom and John Grant, both of whom were dedicated readers of Noam Chomsky, talk about?<sup>92</sup> Tom’s interest in Chomsky’s writings on media, propaganda, and politics (e.g., Herman and Chomsky 2002) was one that created a lot of “cognitive dissonance” for him in his line of work. He spoke candidly about how he

was thinking about what Chomsky would think about something like [the VAE]. I think it’s almost arguable that if he were sitting here, he would say that my reaction to it now is exactly why it works so well—because it doesn’t bother me anymore. And that’s where propaganda actually works. That’s a big thing with Chomsky, that [the VAE] is propaganda, but so is that Chevy display over there. Propaganda used to not be a bad word until it got associated with Nazism. So propaganda is propaganda and the Army is just as much a corporation as any other entity out here—that’s why it is always at events like this [state fair.] You know, I had this super left-wing newspaper that I ran for a long time in college, and I never thought in a million years that I would be working for the Army in any capacity, let alone promoting it in this way. (Personal Interview, August 15, 2008)

Although “propaganda” and “recruitment tool” are explicitly avoided by the marketing team for *America’s Army* and the VAE (opting instead for the more euphemistic “messaging” about “opportunities”), employees readily acknowledge that their products could be interpreted

as being such, including even Wardynski (Chaplin and Ruby 2005:219). As one *America's Army* designer acknowledged, "one person's 'messaging,' of course, is another person's 'propaganda'" (Fieldnotes, October 28, 2008). Tom went on to explain to me that when he was in high school and heard about *America's Army*, he imagined

guys in an office manically planning out how they are going to get guys in the Army.

And after working with this and doing it for so long I don't think it's that at all. It's an honest, sincere effort to put people in the Army. It's not this sort of Orwellian, vindictive thing where they are just trying to trick people into joining the Army, which I think is something that is very easy for people to think. [...] In my experience, it's not like that.

(Personal Interview, August 15, 2008)

As I began to realize over the course of my research, Tom's reflexivity concerning his position within the Army Game Project is not as much of an abnormality as some might expect. Like those of Rieman and Grant, his was a complex position that cannot be summarized by pithy phrases or slogans. Such positions often become lost in the polarizing media reports and academic criticisms that pit the military against protesters and the processes of militarization against critical reflection of those processes. As the opening quote to this section might indicate, though, critical reflection sans outright opposition, such as that exhibited by Tom, might be precisely the goal of the soft sell.

### *Postscript on the Ironies of Recruitment*

My experiences doing fieldwork in these environments reveal that the deployment of video game technology for military recruitment purposes is not without ironic moments, such as

when Army recruiters encourage teenagers to play *Guitar Hero* to Rage Against the Machine's "Killing in the Name" on the Xbox360 out of the back of a Hummer parked in front of the VAE. (The original mantra that concludes the song—"fuck you, I won't do what you tell me"—censored for the game, is Zack de la Rocha's powerful and emotional response to institutionalized violence.) Indeed, much of the video game industry thrives and profits from the commoditization of irony, a new tactic of the soft sell. If anything, these moments indicate that the military's appropriation of games will continue to be a nexus point for continuing important conversations about the consumption of war and the role of virtual technologies in recruiting for actual war.

## VI. Virtual Soldiers: The Militarization of Cognitive Labor

### Red Phase: Post-Fordist Game Labor<sup>93</sup>

*“This is my opportunity for me to use you as a conduit to paint a picture of how it really goes down. If I get fired tomorrow, nobody’s going to know, unless you write about it [...]. I think that you could at least be a conduit to tell everybody else what kinds of challenges we really face here.”*

—*America’s Army* game designer, to the author, about his reasons for consenting to an interview (Personal Interview, October 21, 2008)

Near the beginning of my fieldwork, when I first came to the development studios in Emeryville, California, I was met by the game’s executive producer, Phillip Bossant. He showed me around the office which housed a 34 person workforce of electronic entertainment industry professionals.<sup>94</sup> After this brief tour, we gravitated towards the office kitchen, the intuitive choice for coffee and morning conversation. “Coffee is a big deal here. It fuels the team,” he told me. We were met in the kitchen by a group of four uniformed men—some in full U.S. Army fatigues, others wearing digitized camo pants with regular t-shirts. Naturally, I assumed that they were soldiers; it was the U.S. Army’s video game studio, after all, and they were dressed in Army gear. As conversation continued, I asked one of them how long he had been in the Army, adding that I did not know that actual soldiers worked on the video game. He laughed and said, “Oh, we’re civilians. We like to play at being in the Army.”

This statement stuck with me precisely because of its glibness and salience in achieving a blending between worlds that are typically talked about in contemporary American discourse as being oppositional and discrete from one another: the separate worlds of work and play, and

those of the soldier and the civilian. Of course, the actual boundaries between these spheres (if they exist at all) are porous and eroding, and they have been getting less visible for quite some time through multiple channels (Virno 2004). The Army Game Project achieves this blending by enlisting civilian players as *virtual soldiers*—not only in the popular sense that they are soldiers playing in a virtual or simulated environment, but also in the sense that they are potential soldiers (in other words, virtually soldiers) who might fight in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere in the future. The term “virtual soldiers” can be used interchangeably, sometimes to connote one or both of these meanings simultaneously as they are not mutually exclusive. But the latter meaning of *virtual* is especially salient given the fact that versions of *America’s Army* are also used in training enlisted soldiers for weapons familiarization and cultural awareness role-playing exercises (see Chapter 2). Actual enlistment or the aspiration and ability of an individual to do so are not the only determining factors that make a virtual soldier. Instead, it is the institutionalizing force of the Army acting upon individual subjectivities that enlists persons as virtual soldiers. In this way, a person who does not have even the slightest desire to join the military might nevertheless be a virtual soldier.

Like the mythic and unreal enemies of their creation (see Chapter 4), the designers of *America’s Army* underwent a parallel imperative to flexibly adapt their labor to the mythic narratives of war. Through their work and basic training experiences the video game designers became a kind of hybrid soldier-civilian, possessors of expert military knowledge who worked within a liminal space between so-called military and non-military spheres to translate this knowledge to video gamers and the larger public. In doing so, their labor produced not only a finished software product, but also projected an affective, militarized ethos for marketing and public relations. I show how this type of work—characterized by some as “affective labor,”

“immaterial labor” (Hardt and Negri 2004; Lazzarato 1996), or, as I prefer, “cognitive labor” (see Chapter 1; Berardi 2009a, 2009b)—was mobilized to soften the stark distinctions between the categories of the gaming civilian and the working soldier. I argue that this amalgamation of categories, which is central to the creation and maintenance of virtual soldiering, engages in a playful but serious liminality, which is arguably an effective vehicle of militarization; it is a post-Fordist magical construction that perpetuates war.

“Virtual games are exemplary media of Empire,” Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter write (2009:xxix), and *America’s Army* is arguably the most explicitly-connected gaming franchises to the enterprise of Empire ever to be created. Considerable attention has been devoted to the ways in which Empire (Hardt and Negri 2000) is built upon and defined by the labor of the cognitariat (Berardi 2009a, 2009b; Weeks 2011:69–71). For the cognitive laborers working within the post-Fordist video game industry—with its precarious cycles of unemployment, 80-hour weeks during “crunch time,” and indistinguishable intermeshing between work and leisure time—the seemingly oxymoronic concepts of “playbor” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009:23–27) and “flexploitation” (Gray 2004), though not in common use, would accurately describe everyday life.

This was the industry in which the game developers of *America’s Army* worked. They were, by and large, a group of individuals in pursuit of careers in game development or similar fields. As is often the case with soldiers who enlist in the U.S. military, it was principally economic and career advancement opportunities that led most *America’s Army* game developers to choose work for a military contractor. Although a few of them had experiences with the military through past enlistment or employment, for most developers their work was the first extended period of contact that they had ever had with a military organization. It was a young

group, with the vast majority of employees having less than five years of game development experience. Many were fresh graduates from Bay Area universities with degree programs in graphic arts, design, animation, and other software- and skills-related programs. Even by the standards of the demographically-skewed video game industry employment norms,<sup>95</sup> it was a bearded group of mostly 20- to 40-year old white male game developers.

Most of the developers were avid video gamers. Some typically stayed at the game development studio hours after the end of the work day in order to use the studio computers and facilities for their personal enjoyment. One person told me, “All of these new games come out and you need to go check ‘em out. For me, I feel like it’s a part of my research and development. But if I didn’t do this for a living, I would still [play games]” (Personal Interview, October 21, 2008). While sometimes they played as an individual activity, very often it was a collective, social enterprise of networked gaming that kept employees of *America’s Army* playing together, either at the studio’s computers or at their home computers.<sup>96</sup> Because such activities directly fed back into their development of the game, keeping them up-to-date about new games, news, technologies, and memes, these practices were encouraged by the game’s producers who sought to maintain the studio as a comfortable and stress-free space. During “crunch time,” an unspecified period prior to the game’s release when tasks compressed into smaller windows of time, many would forgo their gaming and would stay late to work at the studio, sometimes sleeping there. In these experiences, the game developers of *America’s Army* differed little from the rest of the game development industry.

White Phase: Recruiting the Designers

“What makes AA3 the most authentic military game ever? Developers actually go through Army basic training. See how they became Army Strong at Fort Jackson, SC and how their experiences make AA3 a game like no other in the world.”

—Public relations description of a teaser video for the game (*America’s Army 3* Marketing Asset Release Schedule, internal studio document, January 2009)

But the labor of *America’s Army* game designers went beyond the mere development of the game, and entered into a resocializing, institutionalizing, and militarized process that crafted them into virtual soldiers. This emerged in part as a result of the subject material of their game, as designers and artists necessarily had to be knowledgeable about the minute details of Army uniforms, weapons, and doctrine. As I describe below, efforts undertaken to include the team under the institutional umbrella of the Army further achieved this. Several developers also brought their past experiences and interests in the military to the development offices: Two were veterans of the U.S. armed forces, while several others were gun enthusiasts, volunteer participants in live simulation training exercises for Bay Area police forces, and, of course, enthusiastic players of games which were often military-themed. One developer even left the team to run a successful business designing military gear and reviewing new weapons for sale on the civilian market.<sup>97</sup> With these influences, the design team embodied a remarkable mix of militarized libertarian principles, coupled with a hefty dose of Berkeley liberalism, hipster irony, and a sardonic disdain for almost anything to do with the Republican Party, especially Sarah Palin.

In this work environment the developers adopted to varying degrees the subjectivities of soldiers. This was especially true in their thinking about their employment. The HBO mini-series *Generation Kill* (2008), based upon Evan Wright's book about his experiences as an embedded reporter with a marine unit during the 2003 invasion of Iraq (2004), was one of many shared narratives that shaped how several developers envisioned their work relations and relationships with outside institutions in terms of the military. Off-site managers at military bases in Alabama were compared to incompetent leaders in the film series, such as Captain America. Colonel Wardynski was the Godfather, another character in the series. And I, the anthropologist, was clearly in the position most analogous to Evan Wright: "I don't think of you as a spy anymore," an artist, Walker, told me after my first week in the office, "you're more like an embedded journalist, and that means we need to keep you alive." When I joined developers during countless in-studio playtests of their game, I came to understand that this sense of camaraderie also was brought about and sustained through the shared, and patently fun, experiences of virtual military combat in video games (see also Pearce 2009).

Later in an interview, Walker expanded his analogy between the development team and Army units, explaining to me that

this is an elite team. We are an elite squad of individuals. We have been chosen by the Army to make this game. That's a big deal and I think a lot of team members take that for granted.... There are 30 people on-site here and four people off-site. That's a tight squad; that's a platoon-sized unit. That's exactly what that is, a platoon-sized element, and [the producer] runs around like the platoon sergeant. We got a design squad, an art squad, and [the executive producer] is like the lieutenant.

For many Army game developers, their exposure to some of the specialized experiences of soldiers became a meaningful way for them to include themselves within the greater institution of the Army and identify with the situations of enlisted soldiers. Walker went as far as envisioning his work on the game, living in California away from many of his friends and family in Georgia, in terms of an extended deployment overseas.

This metaphor of the team as a military unit continually resurfaced to explain other situations and employment experiences throughout my time at the *America's Army* game development studios. But it was a metaphor that had some grounding in real experiences as well, for many on the development team had trained together as a military unit when the Army sent them to boot camp.

As it turned out, so many people were dressed in Army Combat Uniforms on my first day of fieldwork because about one third of the developers—one woman and twelve men—had freshly returned from a voluntary five day job-related excursion to Fort Jackson's Army Training Center.<sup>98</sup> Along with employees from other Army Game Project offices, they underwent five days of "mini Basic Combat Training," otherwise known as "mini BCT." During this short period of time, they endured many of the same ordeals of resocialization as new entries to boot camp—buzz cuts (for the men), obstacle courses, pushups, cafeteria lines, weapons training, and obnoxious drill sergeants. They were assigned to squads, slept in barracks, and were issued their own equipment and uniforms, complete with an *America's Army* arm patch. Describing it later, one participant claimed, "The first day was one of the worst days of my life" (see Figure 6.1).



**Figure 6.1: Civilian *America's Army* video game developers at Mini Basic Combat Training. Photograph by the Army Game Project<sup>99</sup>**

This ordeal had many purposes. At its core, it was intended to give the game developers an experiential taste of boot camp for the purposes of integrating their new familiarity with Army life into the video game. Many developers approached the event as an opportunity to build their professional skills as artists, sound technicians, level designers, programmers, and producers. Developers indicated that their mini BCT experiences aided in the creation of an introductory framing segment of *America's Army 3* involving a virtual boot camp where users learn how to play by navigating an obstacle course, completing weapons familiarization, and running through a live fire shoothouse. In this way, the developers' experiences at mini BCT came to be portrayed as a kind of half-way mark in a referential sequence pointing from the virtual boot

camp of the game, to the mini boot camp of the game developers, to the “true” boot camp of the enlisted Army soldier.<sup>100</sup>

In emphasizing this sequence of representational fidelity, press releases claimed the game as a “virtual test drive” of the Army and that it is “as close to being in the Army as you can get without enlisting.”<sup>101</sup> Tag lines for the game also revealed this rhetorical vice quite succinctly, declaring that “*America’s Army* is a game like no other, because of its detailed level of authenticity” and that the game, although mostly created by subcontracted civilian developers, was “Designed, Developed, and Deployed by the U.S. Army.”<sup>102</sup>

The Army was quick to advertize the fact that they had sent its game developers to boot camp, enlisting them as virtual soldiers. The mini BCT event was used for marketing to generate hype among video game players prior to the release of *America’s Army 3* in June of 2009. The *America’s Army* marketing agency put together a video<sup>103</sup> and photos of the event, taking on-site film recordings and interspersing it with retrospective interviews of developers and video game footage. Two game developers were asked to blog about their experiences at mini BCT, which they extensively describe in online forums at [americasarmy.com](http://americasarmy.com) (see Figure 6.2).<sup>104</sup> Short video blogs with various developers enabled fans to take behind-the-scenes looks at the work and offices of the development team. And, adhering to a promotional language of realism, a press release for *America’s Army 3* advertised how its developers became transfigured into the role of a soldier, implying that players can also undergo a similar transformation through the game:

Nobody knows military simulations like the world's premier land force, the United States Army. So, when the Army began making the *America’s Army* game to provide civilians with insights on Soldiering from the barracks to the battlefields, it sent its talented development team to experience Army training just as a new recruit would. The

developers crawled through obstacle courses, fired weapons, observed paratrooper instruction, and participated in a variety of training exercises with elite combat units, all so that you could virtually experience Soldiering in the most realistic way possible.<sup>105</sup>



**Figure 6.2: Image of an *America's Army* employee at mini BCT before and after a new recruit's buzz cut. Photograph by the Army Game Project.**

Despite the unexpected physical intensity of mini BCT, nearly all developers who attended the event remembered it as an occasion that contributed to their personal growth and understanding of the Army. One developer wrote on the *America's Army* online forums that he and other coworkers “were yelled at, chided, [and] pushed beyond our physical and mental limitations, but came out all the stronger for it in the end because we endured.”<sup>106</sup> After his return to the office, another developer told some colleagues, “It has changed me. I don’t know if for good or bad, but it has changed me.” Yet another described the experience as being really moving, even though it wasn’t the full blown experience. [It was] as much of a taste as you really can get without actually being in the Army. I would never have opted to do it, knowing what I know now [about how difficult it was], but I’m glad that I did. I wasn’t going to be the only person on the team that quit.

Often, these personal reasons for attending accompanied professional ones. This was the case with one producer (from another Army Game Project office) who stated that “the short answer as to why *I* want to go and do it is that I’m about to turn 40 and I’d really like to know if I can handle it.” He went on to articulate why he thought the Army sent the game developers, telling me that

they believe the more we know about what it takes to turn civilians into soldiers the better we will be able to depict that in the things that we build. I think also that the more we know about tactics, techniques, trainings, and procedures, the more lifelike we can build scenarios, and the more effective we can be.

As this producer implied, “turning civilians into soldiers” no longer happens solely in the institution of the military, but has become a process which happens during the everyday life of media consumers in the United States (Der Derian 2001; Hardt and Negri 2004). Nearly every American has become (in some cases unwilling or unwitting) consumers of war and participants in the national mediated narratives of war (Lutz 2009). “Soft sells” such as *America’s Army* further contribute to production of this militarized subjectivity by adding the dimension of interactivity and the veneer of agency through the medium of the game. By relying on user-generated interest and discovery of the Army through the game and other *America’s Army* material online, the messages of *America’s Army* (which might be dismissed as heavy-handed statist propaganda in other contexts) instead morph into impressions, which can be readily accepted. Such processes of subjectification that originate from institutions but operate as if they derive from individual motives exemplify how biopower capitalizes upon the ostensibly liberatory nature of social media, interactive entertainment, and networks of information sharing in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Berardi 2009a).

The marketing and media efforts of mini BCT capitalized upon the affective performance of the game developers as soldiers. This figure worked to translate and reconfigure military power to gamers, suggesting to players that they also can possess the knowledge and expertise that was imparted to the game developers by the Army—either by participating within the liminal space of the game, or better yet, enlisting and joining the Army. Through these diverse methods, both developers and players of *America's Army* became virtual soldiers.

*Blue Phase: Selfless Service during Crunch Time*

*“This industry is full of flakes.”*

—Colonel Casey Wardynski on the game development industry, during a visit to the *America's Army* Emeryville studio (Fieldnotes, September 24, 2008)

Following the developers' return to California, stories of mini BCT continued to periodically effervesce conversations, and the experience became one of many in the folklore of *America's Army* game development. For some, it was a high point in their employment at the studio, for in the year following mini BCT the team went through difficult times. There was a general lack of direction and vision—both internally and externally—as to what the new *America's Army 3* was supposed to be like. One root of these problems was a frustrating and convoluted system of military contracting and subcontracting which separated the development team from much Army institutional support (see Chapter 2). In an arrangement that was confusing at best, the team's offices near Berkeley communicated with a variety of other offices across the United States. In name, the development team worked for a private company. This

company was contracted to develop *America's Army* by another large private military contractor, SAIC, which was, in turn, contracted by the U.S. government. But there was minimal contact between the game developers and these private employers; instead, their customers, the U.S. Army and the U.S. government, oversaw the majority of project operations from offices in Alabama and at West Point.

This arrangement led to many difficulties. Nearly everyone in the office felt that the government management of the project from the Alabama offices was incompetent. The demands placed on them to perform their work, they felt, did not match the amount of monetary and institutional support which trickled down to the office after the prime contractor (SAIC) and the subcontractor (DCS) had taken a substantial portion of operational funding allocated to the development of the game (see Chapter 2). Often, they felt, the team became a scapegoat for problems which originated elsewhere. In one exchange during an interview with a developer named Benjamin, I asked what he felt about the project management outside of the team in regards to their understanding of the process of game development.

Benjamin: I don't think they have any idea. It doesn't seem uncommon, this sort of understanding as to what actually goes into producing this stuff. These people just don't understand how [games] are made.

Robertson Allen: Do you think they are like, "They just play all the time!"

B: "Yeah, they're just messing around!" They don't really understand what goes into it all and the nuts and bolts—how much work is actually required.

The development process, he told me, was seen as a kind of mystified, occult work from the perspective of these outsiders:

The end product is all this fun, all this cool stuff, so for them it's just this "magic" that happens behind the scenes and for them it must seem rad doing it because playing the product is fun. I don't think they have any idea as to how tenuous everything still is.

Following a series of employment shakeups which eliminated most of the experienced members of the development team, they became demoralized and doubtful of their own job security. This created a considerable level of hostility towards project management, but also a closer level of camaraderie among team members. "No one is here out of loyalty to the product at this point," Benjamin went on to tell me,

Everyone who is still here after all of those firings took place is here out of loyalty to each other and to the people who got let go. We're not going to disgrace their efforts that they put in to trying to get this game out the door; we're not going to screw over each other by abandoning this project so that people don't have the credit to put on their resumes. (Personal Interview, October 7, 2008)

When this came to a head near the lowest point of the 2009 economic recession, Walker assessed the team's situation in terms of troop morale:

All of us—the team as a whole—would feel much, much better if we could see a year into the future. But that is a well-guarded secret. That is a problem, a *huge* problem. It is a problem with our management; it is a problem with the Army. It is a problem that will have to be solved if they want to continue to do this, because it is *horrible* for morale [...]. If they don't want people to continue to look for jobs all day long, then they need to make them feel like they are going to be taken care of in the future, and that is something that is *severely* lacking. (Personal Interview, October 21, 2008)

When it was useful to their purposes, members of the Army sought to militarize this discontent by continuing to project to the subcontracted development team a sense of inclusion within the larger organization of the Army. In a team meeting, a visiting senior officer sought to encourage the overworked and understaffed office as they entered “crunch time” a few months prior to the release of *America’s Army 3*. Speaking to them as if they were soldiers and framing their work in terms of “selfless service,” one of the seven core Army values, he told them,

Thank you for putting up with the drama ... but you can’t quit, because you represent an organization that doesn’t quit. This country wouldn’t be here if the organization that you represent had a quitter’s attitude. I don’t care who pays you, you work for the Army.

You’re going to have to be like the Special Forces and do more with less. You have the Special Forces mentality.... Everybody wanted to have a piece of the bad guy after 9/11.

You guys are serving the war effort in a huge way.

While the senior officer’s ploy did not appear to work in terms of motivating the designers, his words were not visibly dismissed for their reliance on cheap platitudes and patriotic appeals. The developers took pride in their work, and most were pleased to be creating something both non-commercial and for the Army. For this reason, and despite their disagreements with individuals at the project management level, the office’s orientation in regards to “big Army” at the institutional level was a positive one. But the pressing needs of job security, more competitive salaries, and better benefits—in addition to receiving much-needed resources to ensure the timely release of *America’s Army 3*—were on the minds of nearly everyone at the time. When these issues were mentioned to the officer, he dismissed them, telling the team, “That’s not a big problem, I think.” But some developers persisted, petitioning to him, “We’ve lost talent, and can’t attract talent because we can’t pay competitively. We want to

continue to work for the project, but [management] has screwed us.” Choosing not to take into account these realities, the officer instead interpreted this as a threat and asked the team, “Is this a ‘let’s have a walkout’ kind of problem?”

In eliding the fact that the game developers were laborers by implying that they were developing the game purely for patriotic reasons to help “get a piece of the bad guy,” the senior officer recreated the situation of many soldiers who join the military for primarily economic reasons but nevertheless feel compelled to speak of their enlistment in terms of national service. The language of selfless service mystifies the economic reasons underlying employment in the military and by military contractors. Andrew Bickford writes that “if we think of the U.S. military as a labor market, and its soldiers as workers, these are people who find themselves in coercive and exploitative situations [that] can compel soldiers to fight and soldier on; it is a form of labor rationalization ... that ultimately does little for the soldier” (2009:151). His description of soldier labor applies to that of the game developers’ work as well, for these virtual soldiers were essentially asked to continue projecting the affective qualities of a soldier by pushing on through crunch time in the service of their nation.

Graduation: i.e., Layoffs

*“They should make us a shirt that says, ‘I made a video game and all I got was this shirt.’”*

—*America’s Army* developer, after receiving an *America’s Army 3* shirt from SED representatives from Alabama who came to Emeryville to announce studio-wide layoffs (Fieldnotes, June 17, 2009)

*“It will be interesting to see what you write about this.”*

—Mike Bodé, *America’s Army 3* executive producer, to the author (Fieldnotes, June 17, 2009)

*“Just so you know, all of this is off the record.”*

—Major Mike Marty, *America’s Army 3* Chief Operating Officer, to the author (Fieldnotes, June 17, 2009)<sup>107</sup>

Crunch time abruptly ended on June 17, 2009, when the completed *America’s Army 3* was released to the public for free download (see Figure 6.3). At the end of the workday, the developers went to their favorite Emeryville bar for a celebration. The next morning, they came to their offices to find the usually dark studio brightly lit and their computers locked. On that day, all but a handful of employees were laid off without prior warning and the Emeryville development office was shut down. Referring to the move as a “consolidation,” a representative from the SED told reporters that the layoffs “will allow us to gain efficiencies between our public and government applications.”<sup>108</sup> According to other unofficial sources, though, there simply was not any money for the program;<sup>109</sup> due to the economic downturn, enlistment in the Army was up. Even though *America’s Army* had generated a considerable number of recruiting achievements and publicity over the years, such novel efforts had simply become less of an immediate fiscal priority. Funding for the Army Game Project, typically cobbled together from previously reliable annual budget surpluses from a variety of Army organizations, simply did not materialize.



**Figure 6.3: Developers of *America's Army 3* playing the published version of their game for the first time on release day. Photograph by the author.**

Largely due to preexisting external issues that were beyond the control of the Emeryville development office, the free game was critically broken and essentially unplayable for several weeks after its release. Frustrated players, many of them soldiers and veterans, had waited expectantly for months to download the game, and they naturally equated news of the layoffs as retribution for the broken *America's Army 3*. In an angry retort to players' mounting criticisms of the game and its developers, one of the former developers posted a comment (quickly deleted by forum moderators) at the [americasarmy.com](http://americasarmy.com) forums. He implored fans

to imagine trying to build a game with an impossible deadline, steadily declining workforce (via firings), a hiring freeze, constantly being fed misinformation, having the "higher ups" completely ignore your weekly plea for either a) more time, or b) more manpower, working a ton of unpaid overtime, pouring your heart and soul into a misadventure only to have the uniformed community scoff at you for uncontrollable variables ... RIGHT when you've just lost your job.<sup>110</sup>

Through multiple channels it had become painfully and abruptly clear to all of the developers that despite the similitude of their experiences to actual soldiers, they were, in the end, ex-employees of a subcontractor to a contractor to the U.S. military. “The Army takes care of its own” was a phrase that was ironically repeated during the days following the layoffs. They had always understood that they were not a part of “its own,” and that, anyway, the Army rarely adequately takes care of even “its own” veterans (see Rieman interview, Chapter 5). But there was an expressive bitterness in their words that seemed unusually high, even for freshly laid-off workers. A great deal of this rancor derived from a growing realization that the closest parallel between their experiences and the experiences of many U.S. soldiers was, ultimately, in how they ended up feeling forgotten, unappreciated, and discarded by the military (see Figure 6.4).

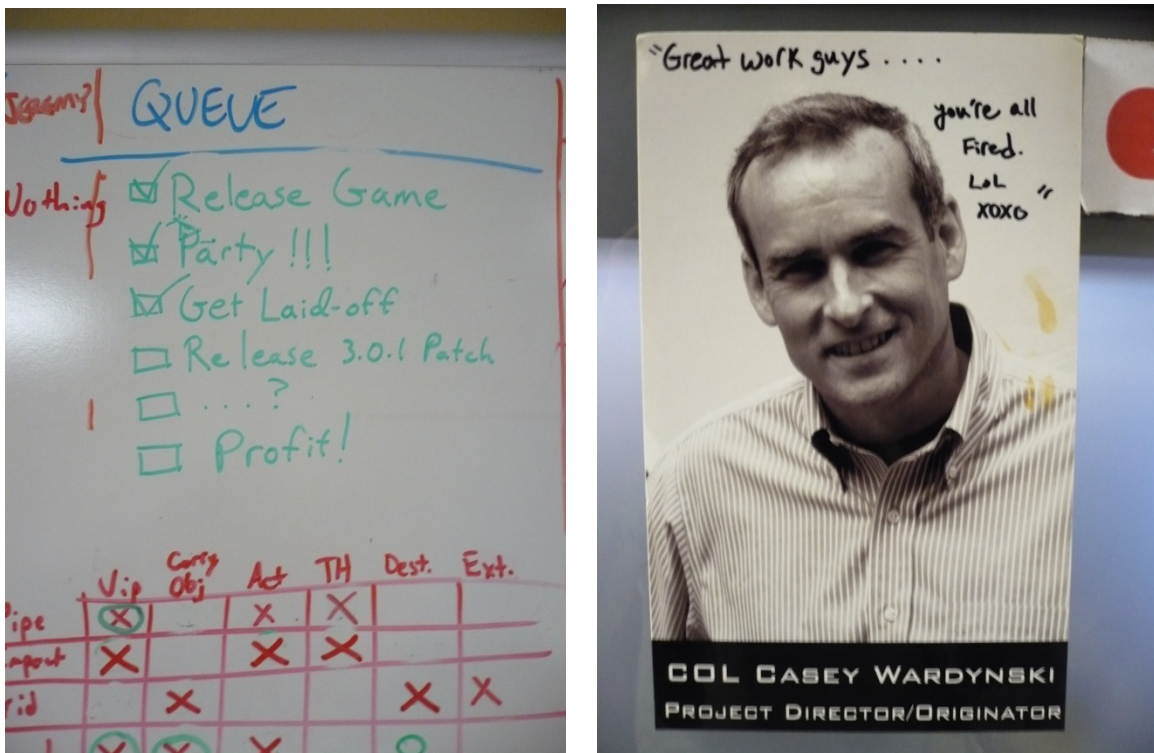


Figure 6.4: Images from the development office the day of the layoffs. Photographs by the author.

Much ado could be made about the uniqueness of the developers' situation. But my primary point in describing this here has not been to elicit sympathy for them or to show how their situation was anomalous. The abrupt joblessness of the developers was unfortunately not an abnormality, especially in California during June of 2009, when the state unemployment rate was fast approaching 12% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). Fluctuation in the video game labor market, punctuated by mass layoffs, has been an industry norm and post-Fordist principle for years.

My purpose, instead, has been to explain how the circumstances of the developers might illuminate general trends in the militarization of popular culture in the United States. The enlistment of the developers' labor to perform as virtual soldiers highlights a pervasive mobilization of the culture industry and the cognitive capacities of its laborers as vehicles of war. The corporatization of the military (and the militarization of corporations) is one underlying engine of this trend which is only accelerating. As more private mercenaries become employed in U.S. foreign occupations and counterterrorism attempts; as more businesses become contracted through Pentagon funding initiatives; as the capabilities of digital technologies increase the immersive qualities of military entertainment; and as social scientists weaponize culture and ethnography (see Price 2011; Whitehead and Finnström In Press a), new forms of virtual soldiering will emerge. It might, sooner or later, behoove everyone to ask of themselves, "How am I a virtual soldier?"

## VII. Conclusion

### The Godfather

*“It’s nothing personal; it’s strictly business.”*

—The Godfather (1972)

*Casey Wardynski: “Have you ever seen the Godfather movies?”*

*Robertson Allen: “Yes.”*

*CW: “You’re a good guy, right? Well, I hope you are because otherwise I’ll have to take care of you and kill you.”*

*RA: “I didn’t think that sort of thing was supposed to be something the Army does, sir.”*

*CW: “I’m not talking about the Army, I’m talking about me.”*

—a conversation at the Game Developers Conference, San Francisco (Fieldnotes, March 2009)

What do you do as an ethnographer when a full-bird colonel, your primary research subject, threatens you? Granted, the context was half-joking, a casual conversation in a hallway of the San Francisco W Hotel with other AGP executives, but I had been around Wardynski and those who knew him long enough to understand that his threats, however metaphorical and offhand, were not to be taken lightly. As I have alluded to previously, Wardynski liked to refer to himself as “the Godfather,” and some developers delighted in this practice as well, comparing the colonel with both Francis Ford Coppola’s Godfather character and another colonel figure called “Godfather” in Evan Wright’s book (2004) and HBO miniseries *Generation Kill* (2008).

Wardynski had at times channeled a mafia ruthlessness in his business and employment practices—mostly due to fiscal and institutional necessity, but perhaps sometimes simultaneously due to vendetta as a “price for failure” (see Chapter 2).

I have often returned to this conversation to speculate not only on what Wardynski was trying to achieve in making the comparison between the Army Game Project and the mafia (and, by extension, my questioned loyalty to the AGP “family”), but also why he allowed the research I was doing to even happen in the first place if he felt that a metaphorical threat was needed. The most direct answer I ever received from him was that, as an academic and military academy officer, he felt that it was his obligation to support research in whatever manner was plausible. I do not have any reason to doubt the sincerity of this sentiment, as Wardynski has demonstrated a willingness for not only being open to new ideas, but also acting upon them. I view my exceptional access to the AGP, as an institution competing for funding and legitimacy, as being something that was politically motivated as well. A preceding ethnographer, Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi, undertook (currently unpublished) NSF-funded research at the MOVES Institute with Mike Zyda’s authorization, and I cannot help but wonder whether my work, as a loyal member of “the family” (developers would often call me a part of “the team”), was in some way a continuation of the rivalry that Zyda and Wardynski had fostered during the early years of the game’s development: Zyda had his ethnographer; now Wardynski got his own.

But the politics of ethnographic access go deeper than this admittedly speculative and narcissistic endeavor. They lie, I think, in the potential utility my research and presence afforded Wardynski and others in several areas. I do not think that it is unreasonable to consider that I was, in fact, a “spy” of sorts in my ability to travel from institution to institution on a regular basis. I never conveyed any information that would compromise my first obligation to protect the

individuals among whom I was conducting research, but I would be honest when asked my opinion on the project and the general atmosphere of various offices. My interviews often felt like a much-needed chance for people to discuss their work frustrations and aspirations.

Many people compared me to embedded reporters, or regular journalists, and of all the institutions I came into contact with, the SED was by far the most wary of my presence—both within their building at Redstone Arsenal and anywhere else—and circumspect in their communication. If it were not for Wardynski’s blessing, I do not think that I would have ever set foot on base in Alabama. Other companies, like Ignited, seemed appreciative that an academic was attempting to take their product on its own terms, rather than beginning with criticisms (see Chapter 5), while others—including Wardynski himself—seemed to view me as a chance for good PR, another way to get their “message” out (see Chapter 3). The company of an external academic researcher perhaps added a small amount of legitimacy within military and government circles to the project, but I do not fool myself in thinking that I was generally seen as adding value to the Army Game Project by merely being present. In these ways that included me within the institutional structure of the AGP, my own cognitive labor as an anthropologist was being drawn upon in some small regard (see Chapter 6).

*Precarious Work, Perpetual Beta*

*“Only the autonomy of mental labor from economic rule can deactivate the suicidal mechanism of war and the obsession with growth that devastates the planet.”*

—Bifo Berardi, *The Soul at Work* (2009b:9)

This dissertation will be defended almost exactly 10 years after the “invasion of E3” that debuted *America’s Army* at the Los Angeles Convention Center in 2002 (see Chapter 2). The past 10 years of development of the game and its constituent products have seen a rapid evolution in military entertainment, to the point where now not only individual subjectivities, but also entire structures of the economy, forms of labor, methods of entertainment, and networks of information have become militarized. As such, this dissertation marks a significant chapter in the exponential rise in the militarization of American culture, which has been happening since at least the 1950s (Lutz 2001, 2009). In this context, I argue that the networks of power and production of *America’s Army* examined here should not be viewed as an exception or a curious anomaly, but as a harbinger of more similar recruitment and advertising methods—not only for the military, but also for corporations and products. Games and virtual interfaces are increasingly becoming used for recruitment, education, training, weapons development, and actual fighting and interface of battle, just as they are also increasingly being used as vehicles for entertainment, socialization, and even news and information. As these technologies of the visual continue to blend what we think of as being virtual and actual experience, virtual mediation will become more pronounced, not only in everyday entertainment and socialization, but also in war (cf. Virilio 1989).

It is unclear how much of a role *America’s Army* will continue to have in this process, though. After the closing of the California studio, the development of the game was fully absorbed by the SED and production moved entirely to Alabama. Past executive producer Phil De Luca predicted this happening two months before the layoffs, indicating to me that the project was “positioned well for the SED to take it over. It is a government entity and it’s got a lot of inertia. And it’s not fast-moving inertia. They like to control things, and anything that’s outside

of their direct control they'll eventually pull in. They're slow, they're the starfish, so they'll just keep on pulling until that clam gives it up" (Personal Interview, April 17, 2009). Though operational still in 2012, the project had to cut many of its ventures, including the Virtual Army Experience, which paradoxically won two Effie awards in the preeminent marketing awards ceremony held two weeks prior to the project-wide layoffs in 2009. The VAE won a gold in the "government/institutional/recruitment" category and a silver for "brand experience" (see Figure 7.1), and the Army and Ignited also won a bronze Effie for the Army Experience Center in the "brand experience" category in 2010. Now renamed the Army Game Studio within the SED, *America's Army* continues to be minimally supported, with software bug fixes and updated versions released on a semi-regular basis. Wardynski retired in 2010 from the Army, and is now the superintendent of Huntsville City Schools, a relocation that indicates his future involvement in the project is not out of the question.



**Figure 7.1. Ignited, SED, and OEMA project managers with the 2009 Effie awards received for the Virtual Army Experience. Photograph by U.S. Army Accessions Command.<sup>111</sup>**

I am told that one of the four developers from California who was able to continue working for the SED in Huntsville is now in charge of managing a volunteer army of quality

assurance testers, a tight and enduring community of devoted fans of the game. Regimented on a strict daily schedule of testing, these unpaid testers subdue Czerveniens regularly in the streets of Travnizeme as they search for and pacify bugs, glitches, cheats, and workarounds that affect the playability and balance of the game. This work of “beta testing” new game software in production is a critical but typically low-paid position in the video game industry. It is sometimes undertaken by individuals who are not compensated monetarily, but who volunteer their time and creativity. In such cases volunteer beta testing is discursively positioned by companies and fan testers alike as being a reward in itself by giving testers an opportunity to have a sneak peek at a new game or release. In the case of *America’s Army 3*, harnessing the volunteer labor of an army of virtual soldiers/beta testers appears to be a novel method that SED government employees have hit upon for working around the fiscal constrictions brought about by the global economic crisis that began in late 2008. Like long-term volunteer internships, it is a phenomenon that I expect to see more of in other sectors in future years.

“Perpetual beta”—a term coined from business practices that keep products like Gmail in beta “pre-release” mode for 5 years, until 2009—is coming to define the world of technological socialization and communication, with new attention economies structured around web traffic, Facebook “likes” (Thurlow 2012), and iterative software releases. The term succinctly captures the life world of the cognitariat in which nothing is ever really completed, in which biopower is voluntarily allowed to capitalize the most intimate “unproductive” time, and in which perpetual economic growth (despite limited natural resources supporting such growth) is assumed to be the natural state of affairs. I anticipate that we are looking forward to a world of perpetual beta, not only in mere products themselves, but also in how lives and subjectivities are structured. And this world, at least for the time being, will be thoroughly militarized.

## Glossary of Acronyms and Terms

*“The military’s preferred defense against civilian scrutiny: a mix of abbreviations, acronyms, and new concepts, all imaginatively arrayed on PowerPoint slides, leaving even a semiotician ... in a state of slightly bewildered awe.”*

—James Der Derian, *Virtuous War* (2000:126)

- AA3: *America’s Army 3*, released on June 17, 2009.
- AAFA: *America’s Army* Future Applications was located in Picatinny Arsenal, NJ.
- AAGA: *America’s Army* Government Applications had projects developed at both the SED and Virtual Heroes.
- AAPA: *America’s Army* Public Applications had offices in California located, in chronological order, at the Naval Postgraduate School’s MOVES Institute, Ft. Ord, and Emeryville.
- AEC: The Army Experience Center, a combination of five Army recruiting centers with a video game arcade and activity center, was located in the Franklin Mills Mall in Philadelphia, PA.
- AGP: The Army Game Project
- beta testers: Individuals who are solicited to test the pre-release version of software with the goal of testing usability and finding bugs in the software. Sometimes beta testers are paid for their services. In the case of *America’s Army*, compensation was in the form of being able to play the game before its official release, with the implicit idea that many beta testers would see the time volunteered as a service to the United States.
- crunch time: An unspecified period of time in game development work that most typically leads up to a release or update of software. Work hours are usually drastically increased, to the point that many are forced to neglect social and family obligations to stay at work late or even overnight.
- DCS: Digital Consulting Services were the employers of most of the game developers working on *America’s Army* in California.
- FPS: First-person shooter (FPS) refers to a genre of video games in which the gamer primarily or exclusively plays from a first-person perspective within a 3D

environment. The most visible representation of the gamer is typically a gun, and the most common means of play is shooting at targets—human, alien, etc.—in armed combat. A subset of the FPS genre is the military-themed FPS game. It is becoming more common for FPS games to offer a single-player narrative game—in which combat takes place against a computer opponent—alongside an online multiplayer option, which enables gamers to play against human opponents in area matches. *America's Army* is an anomaly in this trend, offering no single-player narrative outside of basic training, and the majority of gameplay happens in online or locally networked multiplayer combat.

- “honor”:  
A unit of measurement and prestige given to player-characters within the online game of *America's Army*, typically ranging from 0 to 99. “Honor” is an aggregate of many numbers, and is a generic indicator that measures the skill of players, the length of time a player has played as a specific character, and the ability or willingness of a player to conform to the Rules of Engagement (ROE) in the game. Players who commit more ROE violations on a regular basis generally have less “honor,” as do newer and less skilled players.
- MOS: Military Occupational Specialty
- MOVES Institute: The Modeling, Virtual Environments, and Simulation Institute at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterrey, CA was started by Mike Zyda and was the first development studio of *America's Army*.
- NPS: Naval Postgraduate School, in Monterrey, California
- OEMA: The Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis, located in the U.S. Military Academy (West Point) Department of Social Sciences; the direct military supervising office for all projects related to *America's Army*, including those located at the SED.
- ROE: Rules of Engagement
- SAIC: Science Applications International Corporation, a large military contractor that was the “prime” contractor for *America's Army*.
- SED: Software Engineering Directorate, a U.S. government entity located at Redstone Arsenal, AL, which oversaw the project management of the Army Game Project, including projects such as government trainers, the Virtual Army Experience, and the *America's Army* video game.
- SME: Subject Matter Expert, typically a soldier (non-commissioned officer or higher ranking) who advises civilians about specific aspects of the military. In the case of the VAE, SMEs are essentially tour guides and hired employees of Ignited Minds who have been enlisted in the Army. In the case of *America's Army* and other

AGP training tools, senior enlisted SMEs advised game developers regarding the content and presentation of the game.

VAE: The Virtual Army Experience, a mobile mission simulator that travels throughout the United States.

Virtual Heroes: Located in Raleigh, NC, Virtual Heroes was originally the AAGA. The company regularly claims to be “the developers of *America’s Army*” in press releases, although it was never the primary development studio. Virtual Heroes maintained connections with the SED, and co-developed projects with them such as *Moonbase Alpha*, a NASA-funded free-to-play public simulation. In 2012 it was announced that Virtual Heroes, which had emerged as a leading serious games developer, would work on additional projects for U.S. government organizations such as the FBI by using the Unreal game engine (the same engine used by *America’s Army*) to develop training simulations.

Zombie Studios: Located in Pioneer Square in downtown Seattle, Zombie Studios regularly worked as a secondary studio on Army Game Project material (such as the VAE and *America’s Army 3*) and other Department of Defense projects (such as *Future Force Company Commander*), in addition to developing independent commercial games.

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<sup>1</sup> Perplexed Jaguar was one of the names that *America's Army 3* automatically generated for me upon my first time playing the game. Players can create their own name, or go with one that is given to them.

<sup>2</sup> <http://pc.gamespy.com/pc/americas-army/951010p1.html>, accessed June 1, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/tech/gaming/2009-01-15-video-game-sales\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/gaming/2009-01-15-video-game-sales_N.htm), accessed May 28, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> I do not use this term, however. "Military entertainment," although longer, is more descriptively accurate and, I feel, carries a less flippant tone.

<sup>5</sup> A problem I have encountered in most academic writings regarding this topic is that there is a general vagueness in distinguishing biopower from biopolitics. For me, "biopower" denotes a force that wields power over life; "biopolitics" refers to the political field of this power, both for those who generally wield it and those who are generally subjected to it; and "biopolitical" I use as an adjective describing both of these nouns, to refer to the quality of biopower and biopolitics (instead of saying something cumbersome like "biopowerful.")

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, but not always, used synonymously with, or in relation to, the term "immaterial labor" (see Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004; Lazzarato 1996). I prefer "cognitive labor" as it is more general in its reference, and does not distance itself from the materiality of all types of labor. Even software programming, the epitome of "immaterial labor," is based upon a real materiality in time investment and computer hardware, which is often produced in maquiladoras or other hyper-exploitative "material" labor environments. Plus, when it comes down to the nuts and bolts of programming, even digital code possesses a real materiality to it.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, González 2009a; Gusterson 1999, 2009; Lutz 2001, 2002, 2006; Masco 2006; Network of Concerned Anthropologists 2009; Price 2004, 2008; Vine 2009a.

<sup>8</sup> Due to the evolving nature of any kind of phenomenon, in my descriptions of the Army Game Project and my fieldwork I am using the past tense throughout this dissertation so that I may try to mitigate the kind of artificial, synchronic, and unchanging character to ethnographic descriptions. At the time of writing, the Army Game Project is still a functioning entity, but parts of the project that I describe have already changed during the period between my fieldwork and the completion of this dissertation. Only in cases in which I describe media do I use the present tense.

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 3 for an in-depth look at a recorded interview with Wardynski.

<sup>10</sup> Note on interviews: All names of interviewees with surnames are their actual names. In most cases, these are individuals who are already identifiable due to being in a more public position. More often, however, I have anonymized interviewee names to protect their identity as employees, sometimes creating composites that combine two or more individuals. Anonymized interviewee names are always proper names, if a name appears at all. All quoted interview material was either audio recorded and transcribed or recorded directly in my fieldnotes. Everything within quotes is verbatim dialogue, although I have taken the liberty to edit redundancies, small grammatical issues, and verbal tics that would affect the ease of reading. For quoted interviews, ellipses inside brackets ([...]) indicate that a section of the interview has been elided. Regular ellipses within quoted interviews (...) indicate a pause in the conversation or an incomplete thought. For quoted references to published written material, however, regular ellipses follow the standard format of indicating that a section from the original referenced material has been elided.

<sup>11</sup> <http://virtualpeace.org/whitepaper.php#f6>, accessed May 14, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Through his affiliation with Duke University, Lenoir worked closely with Virtual Heroes, one of the *America's Army* development companies (see below), to develop the serious game *Virtual Peace*, a learning simulation for international humanitarian aid education. Despite the worthy goals of the project, funded by the MacArthur Foundation, to "repurpose the [*America's Army*] platform developed by Virtual Heroes to support ... peace and conflict resolution" (Lenoir, "Recycling the Military-Entertainment Complex," <http://virtualpeace.org/whitepaper.php>, accessed May 14, 2012), Virtual Heroes continues to undertake integral work on a variety of militarized software.

<sup>13</sup> Long conducted VR research at the David Sarnoff Research Center at Princeton and the Human Interface Technology (HIT) Lab at the University of Washington; has secured multiple defense and industry contracts, including subcontracting work for *America's Army* and a \$52 million contract from Hasbro to develop a head-mounted device that never went to market; and has served as CEO of two game studios.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://ict.usc.edu/projects> (accessed March 9, 2012) for a list of ICT projects.

<sup>15</sup> See <http://hardforum.com/showthread.php?t=1428555>, accessed March 10, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> See <http://info.americasarmy.com/projects.php?id=2>, accessed March 20, 2012; <http://www.sandia.gov/news-center/news-releases/2005/def-nonprolif-sec/americarmy.html>, accessed March 20, 2012.

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<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.futuresoldiers.com/>, accessed March 15, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> As a commercial game developer that regularly puts out second-rate products, the company's success and longevity (founded in 1994) is largely attributable to the political savvy and technical expertise of its co-founders, Mark Long and Joanna Alexander. As pioneers in developing and advancing virtual reality technology in both the government and business sectors, Long and Alexander have drawn upon their many connections within the military simulation community, relying on military contracts to supplement Zombie's revenue from the commercial sector. *Future Force Company Commander* (F2C2), a simulation meant to depict a technologically-savvy Army-of-the-future, was one such contract that Zombie completed for the military contractor, SAIC. The Virtual Army Experience was another such project to which Zombie was a major contributor. Zombie also came to do a significant portion preliminary work in developing *America's Army 3*.

<sup>19</sup> Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) supports the transmission of voice audio via the internet to other players who are on the same game server.

<sup>20</sup> Resulting in a dubious sounding linguistic turn, Pragmatic was also the purveyor of "honor" within the world of *America's Army*. As players advance in the game they accumulate "honor" points for undertaking actions in the game that conform to standard Army values. (For example, if you shoot civilians, your teammates, or surviving enemies who have been secured, you lose "honor;" if, however, you complete your objectives in the correct, prescribed manner you gain "honor.") With the encouragement of OEMA, Pragmatic spawned a mini-industry of "honor" between internet server companies and Pragmatic.

Not all servers that hosted *America's Army* actually granted "honor" to its players. Although anyone with enough technical and computing capabilities could create a server to host an *America's Army* game, in order for a server to grant "honor" to its players—thereby making it a more popular server which could be used to the advantage of tech-savvy businesses—its owner had to pay Pragmatic a licensing fee. Pragmatic, with its ability to "license honor" to internet server companies, would enable such servers to become "honor providers" which could then impart "honor" to its players. True to the company's tag line that "without us, it's just a game," Pragmatic leveraged the game mechanics of "honor" in such a way that *America's Army* became not only a game or even merely a military recruitment tool, but also a business opportunity for multiple game hosting websites.

<sup>21</sup> I was told by multiple individuals that for these services provided by DCS, the company earned an overhead rate that was approximately twice the salary per employee working at the AAPA. For example, for an AAPA game developer earning a salary of \$50,000, DCS would generally charge around \$100,000 to the holder of the primary contract, SAIC. As the prime contractor, SAIC would, in turn, bill the government \$150,000 for such costs of operations.

<sup>22</sup> The message read, in part: "In the early 1940's, Japan learned an important lesson – 'let the sleeping giant lie.' We may not react swiftly, but when we do it's with unstoppable force.... The Army has partners that deal with cyber crime as a matter of course. These include not just various Army IT departments, but also the Department of Justice, the Secret Service, and the Federal Bureau of Investigations.... Allow me to speak directly to the bad guys for a moment: When you get banned, know that we know and have records showing you were doing something that's a violation of terms of service, breaks your EULA, and also happens to be against the law. We know who you are, and can track down where you play from. We have incontrovertible proof you did something illegal. The Army is angry, and we're coming for you." See

<http://www.unknownworlds.com/forums/lofiversion/index.php/t86439.html>, accessed April 20, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> See <http://investors.saic.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=373048> (accessed October 27, 2009) and <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2009/snapshots/10218.html> (accessed October 27, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> See <http://arcadeheroes.com/2007/07/20/americas-army-coming-to-arcades/>, accessed March 19, 2012.

<sup>25</sup> See [http://www2.gameloft.com/corpo\\_press.php?date=2007&press1=552](http://www2.gameloft.com/corpo_press.php?date=2007&press1=552) (accessed October 30, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> See <http://www3.ausa.org/webint/DeptAUSANews.nsf/byid/PGRH-7N2QQU>, accessed March 20, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> See <http://www.army.mil/article/12589/>, accessed March 20, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Such security restrictions were in place due in part to repeated successful cyber attacks originating from unknown sources in China on offices at Redstone Arsenal and multiple other national security research and development offices. Dubbed the "Titan Rain" attacks, they began occurring in 2003 and resulted in the exposure of an unspecified amount of classified information to the perpetrators (see Barnes 2008; Markoff 2007; Thornburgh 2005). A number of government firewalls designed to prevent such attacks at the SED acted as continual barriers which impeded the development process of *America's Army*. Workers using government computers to develop *America's Army* at the SED, for example, could not download, access, or play their own game from the internet.

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<sup>29</sup> During my three visits to the SED, extremely tight security restrictions dictated that I be escorted at all times, including bathroom breaks, when inside any building. To enter Redstone Arsenal, I had to undergo an extensive security check and I often had to be picked up by project managers at the entrance to the base, about a 15-minute drive away from the SED. My visits consequently placed considerably more strain on the employees there than they did on employees in Emeryville. After reading the accounts of other anthropologists and their efforts to visit similar restricted national security R&D locations (Gusterson 1998; Masco 2006), I felt lucky enough to have been able to visit the SED as many times as I did.

<sup>30</sup> See <http://www.teamodb.com/main/index.php?showtopic=1140>, accessed March 8, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.linkedin.com/in/wardynski>, accessed July 11, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> See <http://www.stripes.com/news/army-renews-incentive-program-to-improve-retention-or-captains-1.77789>, accessed July 11, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.linkedin.com/in/wardynski>, accessed July 11, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> One assessment that is sometimes leveled at *America's Army* is that it does not provide equal access to the game in terms of the traditional military recruitment pool of immigrants, minorities, and impoverished classes. This assessment, however, misses the point that it is precisely the persons who have access to computers that *America's Army* wishes to reach.

<sup>35</sup> For example, the hugely commercially successful iteration in the *Call of Duty* series of games, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* (2009), grossed over \$310 million in its first week of sales in the U.S. and U.K., making it the largest release for any form of entertainment media ever. By mid-January, 2010, the game had grossed over \$1 billion in revenue (<http://gameinformer.com/b/news/archive/2009/11/12/modern-warfare-2-sells-close-to-5-million-in-first-day.aspx>, accessed January 29, 2010; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8457335.stm>, accessed January 29, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Now retired, Wardynski serves as the superintendent of Huntsville, AL City Schools: [http://blog.al.com/breaking/2011/05/dr\\_casey\\_wardynskis\\_military\\_b.html](http://blog.al.com/breaking/2011/05/dr_casey_wardynskis_military_b.html), accessed July 1, 2011.

<sup>37</sup> *America's Army* uses versions of the commercially successful Unreal engine, which is familiar among industry game developers. Other outsourced military games and simulations, such as the official Army simulation training game *VBS2*, often use less common game engines that typically are not as familiar among game developers. Large-scale engines like the Real Virtuality 2 engine used by *VBS2* trade the high-fidelity but small “soldier-scale” focus found in *America's Army* for larger “company-scale” (100-200 people) but lower fidelity simulations that are useful for training large numbers of troops. See also <http://www.peostri.army.mil/PRODUCTS/VBS2>, accessed July 11, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Some of the games Wardynski is referring to here would likely—from his perspective—include the DoD-funded Institute for Creative Technologies’ *Full Spectrum Warrior* and *Full Spectrum Warrior II*, the Navy game *Strike and Retrieve*, and PEO-STRI’s contract for Bohemia Interactive’s *VBS2*, which is the official training game for the U.S. Army.

<sup>39</sup> Compare also with <http://au.gamespot.com/news/6242635.html>, accessed July 1, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> <http://blogs.abcnews.com/thenote/2011/02/pentagons-nascar-sponsorship-gets-a-green-light-congress-rejects-measure-to-cut-funding-for-ads-on-r.html>, accessed July 1, 2011; see also note 18.

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.stripes.com/news/army-paying-17-7m-for-training-game-1.86770>, accessed July 11, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, <http://www.thereitis.org/?p=638>, accessed July 15, 2011.

<sup>43</sup> The book *Smartbomb*, which Wardynski suggested I read at our first meeting, describes him as claiming that “*America's Army* is not that unique. He says that it’s just part of a continuum dating all the way back to Uncle Sam posters of World I or the propaganda movies of World War II. And he makes no apologies” (Chaplin and Ruby 2005:219).

<sup>44</sup> [http://www.democracynow.org/2002/11/13/hey\\_kids\\_lets\\_play\\_war\\_u](http://www.democracynow.org/2002/11/13/hey_kids_lets_play_war_u), accessed July 15, 2011.

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.americasarmy.com/aa/support/faqs.php?t=9&z=68>, accessed July 14, 2011.

<sup>46</sup> <http://techliberation.com/2009/01/23/video-games-and-moral-panic/>, accessed July 15, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, <http://www.humboldtssentinel.com/081226-02.htm>, accessed July 15, 2011.

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.wired.com/gamelife/2008/08/ubisoft-protest/>, accessed July 15, 2011.

<sup>49</sup> For more about sexualized language in the military, see Myrntinen 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Congressman from Ohio and former presidential candidate.

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.commondreams.org/newswire/2009/03/12-6>, accessed June 23, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> See [http://blog.al.com/breaking/2011/08/davis\\_hills\\_middle\\_school\\_tec.html](http://blog.al.com/breaking/2011/08/davis_hills_middle_school_tec.html), accessed February 10, 2012.

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<sup>53</sup> See <http://www.wired.com/gamelif/2008/08/ubisoft-protest/> for a description of an August 2008 protest in front of the San Francisco Ubisoft game publishing offices. Ubisoft was publisher of the two commercial *America's Army* video games, *Rise of a Soldier* (2005) and *True Soldiers* (2007), but was no longer publishing either game at the time of the protest. Following this incident in San Francisco, the Emeryville development studio across the Bay, which had up to that point office signs identifying the studio as the "*America's Army*", took down their signs and replaced them with ones identifying the studio as "Digital Consulting Services," the name of the contracting organization from which most developers received their salary.

<sup>54</sup> See [http://www.unr.edu/art/delappe/gaming/dead\\_in\\_iraq/dead\\_in\\_iraq%20jpegs.html](http://www.unr.edu/art/delappe/gaming/dead_in_iraq/dead_in_iraq%20jpegs.html), accessed February 16, 2012.

<sup>55</sup> See <http://www.americasdiplomat.com/>, accessed February 16, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> A variety of well-known games have been developed using the Unreal Engine. These include *Lineage II*, *Unreal Tournament 2004*, games in Tom Clancy's *Splinter Cell* and *Rainbow Six* series, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, and *Star Wars: Republic Commando*—all of which use the Unreal Engine 2.

<sup>57</sup> [http://manual.americasarmy.com/index.php/Target\\_Identification:\\_Know\\_Your\\_Enemy](http://manual.americasarmy.com/index.php/Target_Identification:_Know_Your_Enemy), accessed April 5, 2010.

<sup>58</sup> I use the pronoun "his" deliberately because the discourse surrounding the Future Objective Force Warrior and his enemy is decidedly masculine.

<sup>59</sup> Excessive retaliation from teammates who are mistakenly shot by new players is common. When I first began playing *America's Army* I would shoot at anything that moved out of gut reaction, despite knowing about the ROE. As a medic, I would try to offer to heal those whom I would shoot on my team, but in many cases I would be killed by my mistaken victim before being able to type any message of atonement. ROE violations, because they are publicly known in the game, are not as scorned as cheating, however. *America's Army* Server Admins (AASA), now defunct, was an independent, militia-like organization monitoring and documenting "illegal" activities of players in the game by publicly posting screenshots of actions classified as "cheats" alongside the names and the clan affiliations of the cheaters (formerly located at [www.aaserveradmins.com/index.php](http://www.aaserveradmins.com/index.php)). AASA functioned through donations and volunteers while remaining unconnected to any institution of power. It, nevertheless, had significant authority to ban an avatar from participation in the *America's Army* community by publicizing their cheats. For a player, this was, in a sense, another form of biopolitical, albeit digital and delocalized, "administration of bodies" (Foucault 1990:130–145; Hardt and Negri 2000:22–41).

<sup>60</sup> Simons paints a different picture of Fayetteville and Ft. Bragg than Lutz, one that is exclusively from the point of view of the Special Forces soldiers with whom she conducted fieldwork. She describes how a growing emphasis on missions involving "direct action" (i.e., combat) is changing the type of soldier interested in joining the Special Forces. This emphasis, Simons laments, is at the expense of the other three areas of Special Forces operations that do not involve direct combat but nevertheless make up the overwhelming bulk of Special Forces missions: unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, and special reconnaissance. The iterations of *America's Army: Special Forces* (2.0 to 2.8.3.1 currently), as a game that almost exclusively emphasizes direct action, reinforce this trend.

<sup>61</sup> Axe products have been advertised in military-themed video games such as *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* and *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* in addition to Axe's very own series of online marketing games that are loaded with male heterosexual fantasy (see [www.theaxeeffect.com/axearchive.html](http://www.theaxeeffect.com/axearchive.html)). Such symbiotic and networked relationships between various products and industries—deodorants, video games, the military, etc.—are often left unsaid or even unrealized by consumers and academics alike. The cadet whose idea it was to use Axe body spray as an Army weapon, however, made this connection.

<sup>62</sup> <http://www.americasarmy.com/realheroes/index.php?id=4&view=media>, accessed December 22, 2009.

<sup>63</sup> See PJ's introductory section in Chapter 1 for a description of how combat life saving works in the game.

<sup>64</sup> <http://www.americasarmy.com/realheroes/index.php?id%2F44&view%2Fbio>, accessed April 6, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> See <http://www.americasarmy.com/intel/recon.php>.

<sup>66</sup> Following the mass layoffs in June 2009 (detailed in Chapter 6), the executive producer of *America's Army*, Michael Bodé, took a position in Prague as the Chief Operating Officer of Bohemia Interactive.

<sup>67</sup> E.g., "The only good Czervo is a dead Czervo," echoing racist statements made about American Indians (see Mieder 1993).

<sup>68</sup> For small examples, he writes, "The Army released *America's Army: Real Heroes*, a game version that includes profiles of actual soldiers" (Stahl 2010:129). There was never a game released that was entitled this,

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although, as I detail in this chapter and the previous one, the Real Heroes program was an integral aspect of the Army Game Project. He calls the Army Experience Center a “theme park” (2010:3). This might be a slightly more acceptable description of the Virtual Army Experience, considering its appearances at actual theme parks and fairs, but most any person who actually visited the Army Experience Center to understand it on its own terms would likely not describe it in this way.

<sup>69</sup> I feel like the comparison between the “armchair anthropologists” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who relied on missionaries and travelers to supply them with reports about natives for their research, is actually quite apt in this case.

<sup>70</sup> Compare with the description of the Czervonian conflict outlined in Chapter 4.

<sup>71</sup> Although the VAE was popular at NASCAR events, OEMA later determined that they were not optimal sites for the VAE in terms of reaching a recruitable population, due to the older and relatively more affluent demographic of fans who purchase race tickets.

<sup>72</sup> In order to be more easily available to its target demographic of teenagers, *America's Army* products have intentionally been designed to achieve a “Teen” rating by the ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board). Among other things, this means that no dismemberment, gore, or postmortem manipulation of bodies can occur in the game. Enforcement of this age restriction at the VAE, as with all video games, is difficult. The issue of whether the VAE was age-appropriate continued to be a controversy throughout its existence, and came to a head at several occasions, including the 2008 Wisconsin Summerfest: <http://www.jsonline.com/news/29400594.html>, accessed January 13, 2012.

<sup>73</sup> <http://vervephoto.wordpress.com/2010/05/19/christopher-sims/>, accessed May 28, 2010

<sup>74</sup> <http://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/military/weapons/crows-and-the-joystick-army>, accessed June 22, 2011.

<sup>75</sup> In gamer jargon, “respawn” refers to the gaming convention in which a player’s avatar returns to life after being defeated; “god mode” refers to a state in video games in which the player’s avatar is invulnerable to damage.

<sup>76</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B51abXkmN\\_I&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B51abXkmN_I&feature=related), accessed June 23, 2011.

<sup>77</sup> <http://www.americasarmy.com/realheroes/index.php?id=2&view=videos>, accessed June 23, 2011.

<sup>78</sup> <http://www.americasarmy.com/realheroes/index.php?id=3&view=bio>, accessed June 23, 2011.

<sup>79</sup> <http://www.americasarmy.com/realheroes/index.php?id=2>, accessed June 23, 2011.

<sup>80</sup> [http://www.americasarmy.com/flash/rh\\_videos/rieman\\_1.swf](http://www.americasarmy.com/flash/rh_videos/rieman_1.swf), accessed June 23, 2011; <http://georgewebush-whitehouse.archives.gov/stateoftheunion/2007/photoessay/04.html>, accessed July 11, 2011.

<sup>81</sup> <http://www.americasarmy.com/realheroes/blogs.php?id=23>, accessed June 23, 2011.

<sup>82</sup> In particular, the AEC was run through the chief marketing officer for the Army’s office, which is organized under the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army (Manpower and Reserve Affairs), Marketing and Recruiting division.

<sup>83</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/tech/2009/01/14/carroll.mall.recruiting.cnn>, accessed June 23, 2011.

<sup>84</sup> <http://www.icue.com/portal/site/iCue/flatview/?cuecard=39820>, accessed June 23, 2011.

<sup>85</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/05/us/05army.html>, accessed January 20, 2012.

<sup>86</sup> <http://www.phillyimc.org/en/phillys-military-amusement-park>, accessed January 20, 2012.

<sup>87</sup> <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2009/02/19-2>, accessed June 23, 2011.

<sup>88</sup> See [http://www.heinz.org/grants\\_spotlight\\_entry.aspx?entry=566](http://www.heinz.org/grants_spotlight_entry.aspx?entry=566), accessed January 27, 2012.

<sup>89</sup> See [http://www.heinz.org/grants\\_spotlight\\_entry.aspx?entry=566](http://www.heinz.org/grants_spotlight_entry.aspx?entry=566), accessed January 27, 2012.

<sup>90</sup> See <http://www.persuasivegames.com/games/game.aspx?game=fatworld>, accessed February 3, 2012.

<sup>91</sup> See [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/05/19/080519fa\\_fact\\_halpern](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/05/19/080519fa_fact_halpern), accessed February 3, 2012.

<sup>92</sup> Though Grant proclaimed during my interview that Chomsky’s writing style “exhausts me.”

<sup>93</sup> This chapter is rhetorically structured according to the phases of Basic Combat Training (Red Phase, White Phase, and Blue Phase).

<sup>94</sup> Over the course of 20 months (2007–09), I spent approximately seven months at the Emeryville, California development offices of *America's Army* in addition to shorter visits to several institutions affiliated with the Army Game Project.

<sup>95</sup> [http://www.gamecareerguide.com/features/416/the\\_game\\_industry\\_salary\\_survey\\_2007.php?page=1](http://www.gamecareerguide.com/features/416/the_game_industry_salary_survey_2007.php?page=1), accessed March 2, 2010

<sup>96</sup> Valve’s *Team Fortress II* and *Left 4 Dead* were popular studio favorites.

<sup>97</sup> See [www.milspecmonkey.com](http://www.milspecmonkey.com), which designs and sells military gear and patches.

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<sup>98</sup> <http://www.army.mil/-news/2007/11/15/6131-americas-army-contractors-take-basic-combat-training/>, accessed March 2, 2010

<sup>99</sup> <http://www.americasarmy.com/about/blogImages.php?xmlImageName=DevBlogsGreenUpImages&blog=true>, accessed March 1, 2010

<sup>100</sup> To use Baudrillard's terminology, this sequence of representations is intended by the Army to be interpreted as a simulacrum of the first order (1994:6) in which the in-game boot camp serves as an artificial placeholder for the real Army boot camp. I would contend, however, that the representational process of *America's Army* is much more complex than this. I prefer to think of the game as part of a hyperrealistic narrative of what the Army desires itself to be, a narrative which *produces*, rather than reflects, realities (see Allen 2011). This would place *America's Army* in Baudrillard's schema as a simulacrum of the third order in which the original is preceded by its copies, much in the same way that the contemporary boot camp experiences of many new Army enlistees are preceded by an abundance of narratives (i.e., virtual boot camp experiences) populating the military-entertainment culture industry (1994:6).

<sup>101</sup> Such claims are also made for other Army Game Project products, like the Virtual Army Experience (Allen 2009).

<sup>102</sup> [http://www.americasarmy.com/press/newsletters/enewsletter\\_2009\\_01.php](http://www.americasarmy.com/press/newsletters/enewsletter_2009_01.php), accessed November 13, 2009.

<sup>103</sup> <http://www.americasarmy.com/media/videoViewer.php?xmlImageName=allVideos>, accessed March 2, 2010.

<sup>104</sup> <http://www.aa3.americasarmy.com/about/article.php?blogid=1>, accessed March 1, 2010;

<http://www.americasarmy.com/about/blogs.php?blogid=2>, accessed March 1, 2010.

<sup>105</sup> [http://www.goarmy.com/downloads/americas\\_army.jsp](http://www.goarmy.com/downloads/americas_army.jsp), accessed March 1, 2010.

<sup>106</sup> <http://forum.americasarmy.com/viewtopic.php?t=269828>, accessed November 13, 2009.

<sup>107</sup> I was physically present at the layoffs, and had the formal and informal consent of the entire development team to audio record the procedures. I was specifically invited back to the studio for the game release by the executive producer Mike Bodé, who knew in advance about the layoffs and who told me that I “really should be there” for the week. I am, nevertheless, honoring Major Mike Marty's threat/request to me, despite the fact that my nondisclosure agreement with the Army Game Project has long expired. All of the information presented here derives from either documented third-party sources, or from informal interviews with *America's Army* developers following the termination of their employment.

<sup>108</sup> See <http://www.shacknews.com/onearticle.x/59202>, accessed March 8, 2010;

<http://kotaku.com/5296131/americas-army-3-devs-let-go-day-after-launch>, accessed March 8, 2010.

<sup>109</sup> As the SED project manager of *America's Army* two years later told me over the phone regarding the defunding of many previous AGP projects, including that of the Emeryville studio, “It's political. It's all political.”

<sup>110</sup> <http://www.gamepolitics.com/2009/06/20/america039s-army-launches-new-version-sacks-developers-moves-hq>, accessed March 1, 2010

<sup>111</sup> See <http://www.army.mil/article/22699/army-wins-three-effie-awards-for-marketing/?ref=news-home-title6>, accessed March 22, 2012.

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## Vita

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