

U.S. Military Utilization of Video Games and Digital Media in the Modern Era

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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STS Research Paper

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Introduction

Video games have long captured the hearts and minds of every age group and have seen an increase in popularity in the last decade. Around 1980, the valuation for the arcade and console game industries at their peak was \$39B and \$20B, respectively. In 2020, valuation for the mobile gaming market alone was \$85B, with the total video game market estimation being at \$165B (Wallach, 2020). As the games industry has evolved, so has its place in American society, becoming one of the main examples political and media personalities cite when asked about the causes of mass violence that occurs at the hands of young adults. While certainly a divisive issue, there is one group that has long embraced the idea of violence in video games: the United States military.

This paper will answer the research question: How has the U.S. military utilized the popularity of video games and the gamification of modern warfare to influence recruitment? Since the beginning of video games' emergence into the societal spotlight, the U.S. military has put in a massive number of resources to utilize the video game medium to its advantage (NPR, 2010). From developing and publishing their own line of realistic combat games to shifting the way recruitment commercials portray modern warfare, the military has always seen opportunity where others have seen a point of criticism. Due to the ongoing political conversations surrounding video games, the STS framework Political Technologies is used to assist in answering the research question. The Political Technologies framework provides the opportunity to inspect various technological artifacts and discuss the internal or external factors which politically charge the artifact. By reinventing their recruiting process around the gamification of

elements surrounding warfare, the various branches of military impose external factors into the conversation of video games as a political technology.

Research Question and Methods

The following methods address the research question: How has the U.S. military utilized the popularity of digital media to shape their image and influence recruitment? The information in this paper is analyzed through the lens of a case study, especially for specific encapsulating topics covered in this paper. Interviews will also be used throughout this paper, although all of them will be from a secondhand source. The interviews illuminate the internal discussions surrounding the design decisions of *America's Army*, specifically how recruitment tactics were placed into the game. The main keywords for data gathering are computer war games, gamification, army recruitment, America's army, social media, and modern recruitment tactics. These keywords are used in the University of Virginia's (UVA) *Virgo* system. UVA provides access to countless credible sources of academia on the military's past, present and future interactions within the digital media medium and what trends it has created on the military's recruiting abilities. This data is organized into different sections throughout the paper, weaving together a complete look at the military's first entrance into digital media with *America's Army* to their modern ad campaigns. The findings will be analyzed via various scholarly articles or books about the Political Technologies framework found also through UVA *Virgo* systems and academic partners such as *Jstor*. These research methods will form the rest of this paper by first examining the complete story behind the intentions and results of *America's Army*, and then focusing on the military's integration with social media to counteract the recruiting challenges faced in recent years.

Brief Introduction of *America's Army*

“Violent video games” as a generalized game genre has existed since video games themselves have been around (Wallach, 2020). Violence in entertainment media sells, as on average American youth will witness 200,000 violent acts on television before age 18 (*Violence in the Media and Entertainment (Position Paper)*, n.d.). Video games are no exception, with the first controversial video game, “Death Race”, being pulled off store shelves in 1976, only five years after the very first arcade video game was released (“A Timeline of Video Game Controversies”, 2022).

While many are aware of the popularity of violent video games in recent years, others may not know that the U.S. Army has a publicly released game series of their own for almost two decades. On July 4th, 2002, the U.S. Army released their first game, *America's Army: Recon* (“*America's Army*”, 2022). The game was branded as a strategic communication device designed to allow Americans to virtually explore the Army at their own pace and allowed them to figure out if becoming a soldier suits their interests. The release marked the first large-scale use of game technology by the U.S. government as a platform for strategic communication and recruitment and was the first use of game technology in support of U.S. Army recruiting (“*America's Army*”, 2022). The *America's Army* series continued to grow, with three more major releases before the final game in the series, *America's Army: Proving Grounds* (released on October 15, 2015) went offline in May of 2022 (*Steam*, 2022). While it is impossible to know the exact recruitment numbers generated by the series, it has likely inspired thousands given the government support of the game for two decades. The most influential factor in *America's Army* success is attributed to its unique business model not really seen in the gaming industry around the early 2000s – the game was free to play, allowing all who had an internet connection to play

(“How This Video Game Was One of the Best Army Recruiting Tools,” 2019). For a group with the target audience of young adults who are already interested in video games, the Army found great success in building an active player base with a direct line of communication to the Army themselves.

While the *America's Army* game franchise historically worked very well for the Army and its subsidiaries, the digital entertainment industry has radically changed in the last decade. In that vein, the military has shifted its focus from *America's Army* to altering Generation Z's perception of the army and recruitment in general. General Frank Muth, the head of the Army Recruiting Command, stated in 2019 that they are giving the recruiters power to go on Twitter, Twitch, and Instagram, and use the venue to start a dialogue with the Z generation (Fadel & Morris, 2019). Changing the young generation's perspective of the military by further separating the wartime reality from the non-combat positions in the Army is the new form of recruitment appealing to Generation Z.

The Military and Political Technologies

As with almost all forms of warfare, the U.S. Military and its branches have been deeply tied in political discussion. Similarly, technology becomes more integrated into our society with the political conversations surrounding technological devices growing louder every day. It follows then that the military uses society's link with technology for its own gain. The Political Technologies framework provides the opportunity to inspect various technological artifacts and discuss the internal or external factors which politically charge the artifact. For example, a park bench with elevated seat dividers could spark a political discussion surrounding whether the bench as a technological artifact makes a statement of anti-homelessness. A focused artifact via the framework could also be examined as a tool which introduces new aspects of political

conversation into societal discussions. The military aims to change the power relationship in society between themselves and their target recruitment demographic and the conversations surrounding the politics of violent video games.

The Political Technologies framework was formulated by Lewis Mumford, author of *Technics and Civilization* (1934), a pioneer work in the history of technology (Mumford, 1966). Mumford first articulated the inherent connection between human societal tendencies and the development of technics. In his address at the Smithsonian Bicentennial celebration in 1965, Mumford encapsulated the main idea of the framework as, “In terms of the currently accepted picture of the relation of man to technics, our age is passing from the primeval state of man, marked by his invention of tools and weapon for a purpose of achieving mastery over the forces of nature, to a radically different condition, in which he will not only have conquered nature but detached himself completely from the organic habitat” (Mumford, 1966). Another notable scholar within this field, Langdon Winner, concurs with Mumford’s original statements by stating, “It is no surprise to learn that technical systems of various kinds are deeply interwoven in the conditions of modern politics. The physical arrangements of industrial production, warfare, communications, and the like have fundamentally changed the exercise of power and the experience of citizenship” (Winner, 1980). Various other scholars have pointed to the Political Technologies framework whenever examining the technics of war, and the military’s new wave of overhauled recruiting warrants discussion through the lens of the framework.

Results and Discussion

Warfare is changing, and the way the army wants people to think about American warfare is changing too. The military has been involved in the digital media space for decades. The army’s own video game, *America’s Army*, will be the focus of discussion when viewing the

military's emergence into the digital media space for the purpose of recruitment. The development, release, and reception of *America's Army* are all important factors that have directly influenced the modern recruitment methods being used in the last few years. Like the way *America's Army* changed the public's perception of what video games can be used for, the military's usage of social media to revitalize their image for the purpose of driving up recruitment is evolving the notion of social media as a political technology.

America's Army

Development and Intentions.

America's Army's concept was first created in 1999 by Colonel Casey Wardynski, the Army's chief economist (Kennedy, 2018). From its inception, *America's Army* (AA) was designed as an elaborate interactive advertisement for the U.S. Army, one that also served to deliver information in an entertaining way (Allen, 2017). As Wardynski put it, AA was envisioned as "using computer game technology to provide the public a virtual soldier experience that was engaging, informative and entertaining" (McLeroy, 2008). The game was both a video game advertisement and a first glimpse at what virtual training simulators would eventually become.

The pre-release expectations of the public were controversial and doubtful, with various game journalist outlets wondering whether the military could produce a good game in the first place. These worries were compounded by the game's self-proclaimed goals, one of which being "to educate the American public about the U.S. Army and its career opportunities, high-tech involvement, values, and teamwork" (Allen, 2017, p 6). However, the game had some merits that worked in its favor, with a main selling point being that the game was free-to-play. At the time, few games were free-to-play, increasing the appeal to a younger audience that may be hesitant to

ask a parent to purchase a first-person shooter. Furthermore, AA was to be released during a time when the popularity of online competitive first-person shooter games was rising (Wallach, 2020).

Beyond the expectations of how AA would fare as a game, there were also those who felt the game was an attempt at militarization in a post 9/11 America. “*America’s Army* does not simulate real warfare – it does, however, reinforce the broader socio-political process of militarization” (Martino, 2021). Video games as a medium were also under scrutiny at the time in 2002, as U.S. Representative Joe Baca introduced a bill that would make selling or renting video games to minors a federal crime (“A Timeline of Video Game Controversies,” 2022). The game was also a completely new form of digital entertainment that had never existed prior: a video game used for political aims. With regards to the Political Technology framework, *America’s Army* was the first popular video game to completely change the bounds of what could or should be included in a video game for another gain rather than revenue. Video games are inherently a political technology, as Winner states, “The [technological] thing could not exist as an effective operating entity unless certain social as well as material conditions were met” (Winner, 1980). Game developers are naturally going to include situations in their game which align with their social, moral, or political views, and AA was developed with all these factors close in mind. While video games can clearly contain political agendas, AA is certainly on the extreme end of the spectrum where its politics are closely tied to its game identity. There are plenty of video games which have no political agenda at all, making AA even more significant. The reason for AA’s very *existence* was politically imbued, as every member of the development team was acutely aware of the game’s motives as a recruitment tool.

Where *America’s Army* differs from other political technologies, however, is how it embraces and displays its political affiliation. The game’s connection with the Army is bragged

about in much of its marketing material (*Steam*, 2022), a decision that can be interpreted as an attempt to further make the player themselves feel as though they are already affiliated with the Army just by playing. Developers knew no matter how hard they tried, AA would not be an accurate portrayal of what it is like to be in the military. One developer states in an interview, “Our game does genuinely try to portray certain parts of the military... but I also feel like there are levels of lying...” (Allen, 2017). Even just playing the game can be a political action, as players are perfectly knowledgeable about playing software that the former deputy director of development for *America’s Army* admits is a recruitment tool (Turse, 2003). Wardynski and the Army created uncharted territory for video games as a digital entertainment format, and the results of *America’s Army*’s meticulous crafted development paid off.

Release and Reception.

Upon its release on July 4th, 2002, it was clear that *America’s Army* would have staying power among the Army’s target audience (“America’s Army - Wikipedia,” 2022). The game was so successful that the project’s scope rapidly expanded to encompass a large network of commercial and military institutions known as the Army Game Project (AGP) (Allen, 2017). AA received favorable reviews from critics, with multiple outlets praising the attention to detail and gripping realism of the game (*Metacritic*, 2002). Of course, the success of the original *America’s Army* game generated the Army’s desire to create multiple sequels, another reason for the formation of the AGP. Reviews from critics were the least of the Army’s concerns, however, as personnel focused on utilizing the success of the game and shaping the game’s image to strengthen their recruitment efforts.

Like the meticulous focus the developers put into the realistic aspects of the game, the Army put in much effort to quell any controversy surrounding the game. The military was

dedicated to being transparent about the game's development and simulation intentions in the public eye. In an interview with the New York Times, Wardynski and the game's executive director Michael Capps spoke on the realism present in *America's Army*. Capps detailed how everything from the direction and velocity of shell ejection to the way the weapons are affected by the player's breath and movement is based on the way the Army really operates (Kennedy, 2018). Wardynski spoke about the lowered level of violence in the game and the reason behind the game's appropriate for teenagers rating, "We don't want to use violence as an entertainment vehicle." Wardynski further explained how enemies are designed to look as generic as possible (Kennedy, 2018). The realism depicted in the AA series emphasizes the potential of the different games as political technologies.

The release of the first AA game marked the military's first real dive into "militainment", or the concept of the military entertainment complex, where military ideals and entertainment paradigms are combined to shroud propaganda or ulterior motives (Muir, 2003). The first AA game was also graphically impressive for the time, contributing to the realistic ideas put into the gameplay and the game's essence. Through the lens of a form of militainment, or a tool for militarization, *America's Army* seeks to influence how non enlisted individuals think about the army (Allen, 2017, p 64). The political implications of the AA series are also unique in the attributes that the content within the game can be perceived differently depending on what information the player themselves has at their disposal. That is, if the player is inclined to do their own research on the game, they may find secondary media that talks about AA in a positive or a negative light. The player's discovery of the news information they read about the game will change their perspective of the game itself as a political artifact, which indirectly can change an individual's feelings about the political topic (Winner, 1980). Everything about the AA series is

designed to change the player's perspective of warfare to something that can be accurately portrayed in a video game, a sentiment that would become the focus of various parts of the AGP's mission (Allen, 2017).

Results and Legacy.

Although there is no concrete numerical evidence for how many people were recruited directly due to their playing AA, the game series can safely be regarded as a success for the military. After the release of the third game in the series, *America's Army 3* (2009), the series had over 9.7 million registered users, or about eight times the total size of the actual U.S. Army (Allen, 2017). Colonel Wardynski himself talks about the value of the hundreds of millions of hours spent by players in *America's Army*, saying, "A million hours of AA are worth more [than conventional tv ads] because... it's focused attention... and we're way beyond "did you know there's an army?" part... in AA you're part of the army." (Allen, 2017). Following the release of *America's Army 3*, the funding for the AA development team was cut to apply the success of the video game to other Army Game Project virtual experiences (Allen, 2017). *America's Army* paved the way for the military's entrance into militainment, and the subsequent virtual experiences were built on expanding the army's dive into the separation between the virtual and the real.

The legacy of the AA series would manifest itself in multiple forms, with the two most prominent being the Virtual Army Experience (VAE) and the Army Experience Center (AEC). The VAE was a mobile simulator that launched in February 2007, and reworked *America's Army* to provide a variety of scenarios. It is estimated that the VAE hosted more than 130,000 participants in its lifetime (McLeroy, 2008). The VAE was displayed at many different public events with the intention of appealing to primarily teenage boys (Allen, 2017). In a similar vein

to the VAE, the AEC was a facility located inside the Franklin Mills Mall in Philadelphia that featured interactive simulations to inform potential recruits about Army career opportunities (Voight, 2008). Both the VAE and AEC shared the goal of recruitment, but also to give Americans the opportunity to “understand their Army”. As Maj. Gen. Thomas Bostick, head of the U.S. Army Recruiting Command in 2008 states, “oftentimes people have a negative perception of the Army, but the negatives are a very small part... the AEC will help dispel many of the myths that exist about the Army” (McLeroy, 2008). Inside of the AEC, there was also an area where visitors could play *America’s Army*, a purposeful inclusion for potential recruits to know they can continue to have similar experiences had in the AEC inside AA (Allen, 2017).

Without the Army Game Project, it is unknown how the U.S. military would have changed to evolve its recruitment tactics in the modern era. *America’s Army* created a new subset of the video game medium in a game with clear political motives, and the VAE and AEC utilized virtual simulations as if they were equivalent to real-life training scenarios. AA changed the political implications of *any* first-person shooter game, past or present, by suggesting that games featuring warfare could frame the military in a positive light (Payne, 2016). The fundamental shift in potential for digital entertainment mediums due to the AGP is evidence of a change in both the internal and external social conditions of creating such a political artifact. For arguments in favor or against violent video games, both sides were granted the ability to cite concrete evidence that playing AA had real-life effects on the player base’s decision whether to pursue a career in the military (Allen, 2017). With regards to the socio-political implications of creating a violent video game, the inherent politics become a much more glaring issue for developers to consider. The existence of violent video games in a post-AA industry forces the discussion of the potential pressure of controversy upon release because of external social factors (Winner, 1980).

While the AGP represented the military's first leap into a virtual entertainment space, the dramatic shift in recruitment campaigning within recent years is the opposite – the Army has been making attempts to enter an already deeply politically charged and corporate field in various social media platforms.

Modern Digital Media and Military Recruitment

Recruiting Crisis Brings Change.

With the shutdown of *America's Army: Proving Grounds* (2013) online services in May of 2022, the military officially concluded supporting the once hugely popular recruiting game series (Good, 2022). The AA series no longer attracted enough attention from the target demographic to justify further resources being poured into the project. In the 2020s, the military faces a rapidly evolving target demographic, one whose attention span is much more limited compared to the teenagers of the early 2000s (Barno & Bensahel, 2023). The existence of countless social media platforms vying for the youth's attention is compounded with the social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young adults.

Prior to the pandemic, 13 percent of young Americans said they would consider military service, with the number falling to just 9 percent in 2022 (Barno & Bensahel, 2023). During the two years of public shutdown caused by the pandemic, recruiters were unable to access schools, public events, and other youth organizations where in-person recruiting was the most effective (Baldor, 2022). Furthermore, the Army discharged over 1,700 soldiers from 2021-2022 for refusing to take the mandated vaccine. According to Army Secretary Christine Wormuth, the Army fell about 15,000 soldiers short of its 2022 recruitment goal, a glaring shortcoming for the Army (Kube & Gains, 2022). Even worse, the Army chief of staff, Gen. James McConville,

testified before Congress that only 23 percent of Americans ages 17-24 are qualified to serve without waivers to join, down from 29 percent in recent years. The shrinking eligibility pool is attributed to more young men and women being disqualified for obesity, drug use or criminal records (Kube & Gains, 2022). With countless other factors working against the military's favor, Army recruiters began changing the way they presented the act of service to potential recruits.

The Army's recruiting crisis has warranted a complete shift in the way Generation Z is approached, even prior to the pandemic. In 2019, the head of Army Recruiting Command, General Frank Muth, stated "...our recruiters go on Twitter, go on Twitch, to go on Instagram, and use that as a venue to start a dialogue with the Z generation" (Fadel & Morris, 2019). Muth also highlighted the focus the Army is putting on non-infantry roles, such as combat photography, engineering, cyber, and IT. The focus on non-combat roles can also be felt in modern military advertisements, which tend to stray away from the traditional portrayal of proud soldiers in combat activities. In the 2019 ad campaign, 'What's Your Warrior?', various roles not featured in previous Army ads are featured in a futuristic and heavily stylized light (Widener, 2019). The ad campaign portrays these uncommon roles like how weapon classes are displayed in video games, and there is a complete lack of any sounds that Gen Z would expect to be associated with warfare (American Military News, 2019). According to the Army's Chief of Enterprise Marketing, Brig. Gen. Alex Fink, the 'What's Your Warrior?' campaign was designed to be full of surprises and seeks to change the way Gen Z views the Army to reduce the civilian-military divide (Widener, 2019). The radical shift in tone of recent military campaigns works in tandem with the military's publicity personnel repeatedly emphasizing how the new campaigns are less about hitting a recruitment quota and more about how the military can provide Gen Z with the tools to expand their horizons. In the Navy's recent 'Never' ad campaign, one

description for an ad reads, “Joining the Navy sounds crazy. But missing out on a lifetime of adventure is way crazier” (America’s Navy, 2022). This sentiment of opportunity drastically differs from military campaigns in the previous decades, like the ‘US Army Strong’ commercial from 2009, which focuses on individual soldiers talking about their pride in joining the Army but nothing about various roles or tools for accomplishment (USArmyMediaCenter, 2009).

Re-Contextualizing Social Media.

Along with revitalized ad campaigns, the military has created many accounts on multiple social media platforms. The military’s decision to become heavily involved in recruiting on social media is in stark contrast with their first dive into digital media with *America’s Army*. Social media, in its modern form, is already a deeply political technology. Countless corporations and political figures have a heavy social media presence with the intention of influencing all those who view their content to support their activities. Where the Army was the first to create a politically charged video game, they are among the last to join the social media wave to its full extent. However, the military’s vast amount of social media accounts is unique in the sense that they are government-official accounts, and thus must follow a certain set of general guidelines when conveying information to the public.

By visiting the U.S. Army Recruiting Command’s Instagram, it is apparent that recruiters are focused on the individual rather than the whole, specifically the accomplishments of newer members as an inspiration to potential recruits (*U.S. Army Recruiting Command Instagram*, 2023). Beyond the profiles consistent with the ideals established in recent ad campaigns, the military has also entered the esports industry with multiple teams to further appeal to Gen Z (Vincent, 2020). The dichotomy between the regulations faced by branches of government and the “normal” rules that apply to most content creators online has backfired on the military in

several cases, however. The *USArmyEsports* channel on the popular streaming site Twitch was caught in controversy due to the soldier who was streaming blocking various users in chat for bringing up war crimes. Lawyers argued that the U.S. military streams must uphold the first amendment, while the Army stated that the offensive language used in their stream chats violated Twitch's terms of service and thus was in their right to censor (Vincent, 2020). Similarly, Army recruiters were caught using the social media site TikTok to recruit young Americans despite the U.S. Department of Defense's ban on the use of TikTok for recruitment purposes (Rubio, 2021). There is a gray zone that exists within the laws that permit government institutions from acting a certain way on social media, and until properly defined the military will continue to find itself in controversy.

The political implications of the military's existence on social media are not as impactful as the creation of AA, a video game that had explicit external political motives. It remains to be seen how the regulations of a government institution such as the Army will evolve in terms of what can and cannot be shown on social media. In the modern social media era, billions of users' data is scattered throughout the internet to various other data-hungry companies. The question remains as to whether the military will have access to user data in its attempts to select eligible users to focus on recruiting. The simple act of searching for military related content can alter a person's algorithm on many social media platforms such that they receive more content related to military recruitment, and the military does not yet even have control over these algorithms. Therefore, it can be argued that the existence of the many recruitment accounts on social platforms can impact the political implications of just using said platform. Social media as a technological artifact is constantly evolving, as are the politics associated with it.

Project Limitations

While this project utilized many different sources both in type and content, it is impossible to fully detail the military's efforts within a comprehensive page limit. Several books were used in this paper, although there exists enough content in each individual book to write papers on their own. I care deeply about this topic, as it represents a shift in how we as people are beginning to be treated much more like a number in a report rather than a complete being. Although I will not personally continue to research this topic, it would be a valuable venture for other groups of researchers to perform many interviews with new recruits who cite social media for their main reason for serving. The military's utilization of digital media will continue to evolve rapidly, and there is no telling what data will be available once the next wave after social media arises.

Conclusion

The military's utilization of digital media began and evolved from the massive effort put into developing *America's Army* and the Army Game Project. Army recruitment campaigns have shifted to be more reflective of Gen Z's needs and desires, which includes an increasingly welcoming image on many social media platforms. There is little doubt that the military's recruitment tactics have and always will stir up controversy, especially among those who argue against the militainment common in modern media. Recruiters will continue to do whatever it takes to hit the yearly quota, despite the outward appearance of not caring about numbers or quotas. All one can hope for is that new recruits understand the gravity of what their service means – and that there is no extra life for them.

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