

An analysis on the culture of Airsoft players

A Research Paper submitted to the Department of Engineering and Society

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Science
University of Virginia • Charlottesville, Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Science, School of Engineering

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Spring 2025

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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Introduction

Airsoft is a rapidly growing sport with a projected 7.8% growth rate from 2023 to 2030 (McGeady, 2023). On top of this it has a worldwide following with hundreds of airsoft fields throughout the globe. This naturally has led to an increase in research in the area.

One survey conducted in Poland found that 50% of respondents strongly believed that “Practicing airsoft is one of the best things I've ever done/been doing.” (Nowacki & Wiśniewska, 2015, p. 75). This survey also found that people’s largest reasons for playing airsoft were hanging out with friends, escaping from everyday life, experiencing strong sensations and experiences, maintaining physical fitness, and reducing mental tension. One respondent elaborated by saying, "It's great fun. Physical effort, great people, cooperation with others, goals to achieve, competition and all this with warfare in the background... something beautiful." (p. 78). There have even been findings that airsoft could be used to treat combat-based PTSD (C-PTSD) (Weber, 2018). Weber conducted several interviews of veterans with symptoms of C-PTSD who played airsoft recreationally. The veterans reported that playing airsoft allowed them to socialize more easily and use skills they worked hard to develop in the military. They even found that playing airsoft reduced the effects of triggering events, as playing airsoft could expose veterans to triggers in a safe and comfortable space. Looking at these studies in isolation one could easily conclude that airsoft is a fun and healthy sport, but there have been several studies that contradict this.

A study observing how children acted when playing with different toys found a much more disturbing result. The children were given different toys, one of which being a toy gun like an airsoft gun. The researchers observed that when playing with toy guns the children were more likely to display real aggression rather than fake aggression (Watson & Peng, 1992). This

supports the theory that airsoft guns increase violence and aggression among users. Another study followed adults and asked them to fill out a questionnaire on their mood and political beliefs before and after playing paintball (Gilmore, 2015). They found that playing paintball had little effect on the mood of participants but that after playing paintball they answered more aggressively on one question in particular. This question was on the US response to Arab Spring with more participants wanting to forgo a diplomatic solution in favor of sanctions after playing paintball. This is deeply troubling and further supports the theory that playing airsoft increases aggression. However, this seems to directly contradict the findings of the first two studies, those being that airsoft was full of welcoming players who just want to blow off steam and have fun. This leads to the question, how is the culture of airsoft players impacted by the sport they play?

Case Context

Airsoft guns were invented in the 1970's in Japan (Duthie, 2024a). The main motivation for this was Japan's strict gun laws. To circumvent these laws Japanese gun enthusiasts created in depth replicas of real firearms, however, these replicas did not fire bullets but instead small plastic pellets. From these beginnings airsoft guns grew in popularity in Japan and soon their use evolved from simple target practice to using them to shoot at other enthusiasts. Due to the light pellets being fired and relatively low speed these airsoft guns were largely harmless so long as a person wasn't hit in the eye. Once this sport of wargaming, or "survival games" as it's known in Japan, started to grow in popularity it spread to the US and Europe, this started in the late 1980's. From there Airsoft has grown to become a well-organized sport with different game modes and large competitions.

In airsoft there are several ways to play, with the main three being skirmish, objective, and milsim (Duthie, 2024b). Skirmish involves two teams trying to hit all the players on the

other team. When a player is hit, they raise their hand to indicate as much and are either out of the game or can be brought back in by a teammate depending on the specific rules. In objective, the two teams are competing to try and capture some sort of objective, this could be anything from king of the hill to capture the flag. In milsim the players reenact military combat using the realistic airsoft guns, this form is usually more popular among dedicated players, rather than beginners. Alongside these standard game types, some fields create their own large-scale styles. As an example, Ballahack airsoft often hosts in-depth roleplay scenarios where players are given backgrounds they must act according to. The airsoft community loves suspending their disbelief and encouraging realism as can be seen in the different game modes and their equipment.

Airsoft enthusiasts utilize a wide breadth of equipment, much of which is not essential to the game but instead helps build immersion. Looking at Figure 1 you would be excused for



Figure 1. Milsim airsoft team, (Duthie, 2025).

thinking you were looking at a team of fully trained and equipped soldiers, however that is a team of dedicated airsoft players. Of the equipment they are using the only necessary part is the airsoft gun and some manner of eye protection. Despite this airsoft players often have a complex and semi-realistic kit they play with. This

extends into the airsoft guns that are available. Airsoft guns, despite having largely the same specs, are broken up into different real gun types, such as long guns, light machine guns, and sub machine guns just to name a few. Some airsoft fields will even put restrictions on the fire rate and range of an airsoft gun based on what category it belongs to. It's important to keep in mind going forward that airsoft started as a way of replicating real firearms and as it has gained popularity this love for immersion and realism has only grown with it.

STS Theory

Because the sport of airsoft is so intrinsically linked to the airsoft guns and the “realistic” impersonation of warfare, it makes sense to analyze it from an STS point of view. That is to say we can analyze how a technology, airsoft guns, impact a society, their users. For the purposes of this research I will be utilizing a well-known STS framework known as Actor Network Theory (ANT). According to ANT each object, person, organization, or other entity is an actant. Every actant is connected to every other actant in a network where they can influence and change each other (Callon, 2001). When a technology is created or designed there are certain morals baked into it, these morals are a program of action. A car beeps when you don’t have your seatbelt on, this is a program of action, the designers want the user to wear a seatbelt. Technology can also force humans to change or develop new behaviors, this is prescription. Everyone carries around a phone and checks it constantly, this action is prescribed onto humans. Technology can also discriminate. A technology can’t change from person to person, so some people won’t be able to use it as well or at all. Blind people often can’t use computers and the internet, due to the way the information is displayed.

For this study I will focus on two main parts of ANT, those being the program of action and the prescription. From this a basic preliminary analysis of the airsoft field can be reasoned through. From the history of airsoft, the program of action was originally for airsoft guns to be exacting replicas of real firearms so that firearm enthusiasts could enjoy their hobby in countries with restrictive laws. From here the program of action has evolved to making airsoft guns specifically for airsoft players, though many of the original principles still shine through, with realism being a very important aspect of any airsoft gun. From this we can infer that the

designers expect players to play airsoft as if they were in a real battle with real stakes, this is further seen in how players play with military simulations as a very popular style of play.

The interesting question is if this program of action extends to a prescription of behaviors onto the players. An initial analysis would say yes as many players are highly invested into realism and role-playing, however it is possible that these players play airsoft because they enjoy realism and role-playing and not the other way around. This thought process can further be played out with thoughts of aggressive tendencies and violence. Do violent people gravitate toward airsoft, or does airsoft make people violent, or is neither true. This is the fundamental problem of airsoft and part of what is being answered.

Research Question and Methods

To answer the central question question, I went to two airsoft fields near me and conducted an observational study of the players while competing and working with them. I had never played airsoft before this, so as part of this study I was able to see how airsoft players treat new members and experience the culture of airsoft with open eyes. Of specific interest to me was the behavior of players in different environments and situations. The two airsoft fields I visited, Augusta airsoft and River City airsoft, exhibited two different styles of play with one being indoor and one being outdoor. While playing I observed the interactions of players between teammates, competitors, and myself, at both locations both on the field during play and outside of play. Additionally, I used a GoPro style camera to record my gameplay experience, this allowed me to go back and conduct a more thorough investigations of player interactions. After gathering this evidence, I analyzed it, starting with identifying the program of action at each airsoft field based on interactions I observed during play. I then investigated how that program of

action lead to a prescription onto the players at each field. This as a whole showed how airsoft players are affected by airsoft and the environment of each given field.

Results

The culture of airsoft is split, it is either a ‘silly kid’s game’ that encourages openness and friendly competition, or it is an aggressive combat game that encourages antisocial behavior and frustration. This is mainly seen in the vast difference in the interactions of players in Augusta Airsoft when compared to Rivercity Airsoft. At Augusta Airsoft the owner made a concerted effort to change the program of action into a ‘silly kid’s game’, and this led to a very inviting and social group. At Rivercity Airsoft the owners did nothing to promote these values and had a general blasé attitude that infected the players and led to antisocial behavior and negative emotions. Despite this there were still several groups that were very close with one another and were happy to talk whenever the subject was airsoft. Below are my observations at both Augusta Airsoft and Rivercity Airsoft respectively with select quotes and images that demonstrate these points.

Augusta Airsoft started with a 45-minute drive into the more rural parts of Virginia. Upon arriving I was met with an open shipping container and several groups of people at their cars gearing up, as seen in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Parking lot of Augusta Airsoft, with everyone gearing up, and talking to each other.

At first, I was intimidated by everyone in the parking lot, they were all wearing tactical gear with camo and seemed to know exactly what was going on. However, when I went into the shipping container to get my rental gear I was welcomed with open arms. The owner, Bo Willet, talked to me there, asked me my name and introduced me to some of the other regulars at the field, before giving me my gear. After that and a bit of a wait for everyone else to get ready, everyone gathered together to go over the rules of the field and get on the same page.



Figure 3. Everyone gathered around Willet (wearing the orange jacket) during his opening speech.

Above in Figure 3 everyone is gathered around Willet as he starts his speech on the rules and conduct at this field. In this image everyone is gathered around respectfully and paying attention to Willet as he speaks. This speech is a large part of how the owner changed the program of action around airsoft, he opened up his speech with a long spiel that in part downplayed airsoft, as seen below.

“I don’t see any young folk here today. But the spirit of the place has always been for kids and so while we get to dress up and have cool kits and cool guns and be with sons and dads and friends and family it will always be a silly kid’s game. But in my experience, doing this thing for 11 years, it can sometimes *Get you*, so what we have to do is prepare ourselves, remember that if we treat others the way we wanna be treated and we remember that it’s a silly kid’s game we set ourselves up for a lot of fun and then also the most important thing is it is just BB wars, or there’s really not a lot to it. That we just gotta be focused on ‘hey we’re outside, its really nice weather... we’re not getting rained on we’re not getting snowed on we have a lot to be thankful for but we have to carry that together as a group for the next four hours, so that’s my goal, I hope you’ll come along aside it and then don’t take it so serious. Does that make sense? Alright, so lets say it one more time ‘silly kid’s game’” (Bo Willet)

Willet started this speech by reminding everyone that airsoft is a silly kids game, and that while it’s easy to get frustrated it’s important to not let it ‘get you’. He then went on by downplaying airsoft again, reminding people its just BB wars and that there is a lot of things to be thankful for. He asked that everyone carry that thankfulness forward into the game and one final time reminds everyone that airsoft is a silly kids game. With this ending though he asks everyone else to repeat that phrase too, and they do, all of the players in their intimidating gear admitted that airsoft is just a ‘silly kid’s game’. This is how Willet changes the program of action, he makes the players change there way of thinking, to make the game something he wants to play. He uses this tactic several more times as he goes through the rules, starting by asking everyone to take care of the field and their eyes, he says the following.

“We’re at a very special place to me so you all say ‘special’... when we go past that wall your eyes are precious, you all say ‘precious’” (Bo Willet)

He also has an uncommon rule when it comes to getting hit on his airsoft field, with players having to compliment their opponent on the hit, as shown below.

“When you get shot at this field your gonna pull out your dead rag and say ‘hit hit hit, good job, good shot’... this is a no talk airsoft field, so when you get maimed, shot up, or otherwise frustrated, all you can say is ‘hit hit hit, good job good shot’” (Bo Willet)

Lastly, he finished his opening speech with another plea for everyone to remember that this is a silly kid’s game, as seen below.

“the last thing is that I’m begging you, please remember that it’s a silly kids game and we’re here to have fun, we’ve got nice weather, don’t take it too seriously because its BB wars... there is a slight probability that we may not all be compatible and that’s not the end of the world we’re just here to play airsoft. Let’s not make a big deal about it. I know I am not a nice person. I know I am not a good communicator and unfortunately, I also know I do not care... While your money and your time is appreciated, it is not as valuable as you think it is. I’d rather have two people that get it, and we can joke, and we can laugh, we can find the kid that got stuck in the pond, that stuff’s more important to me than fussing about, hey this is how it’s done at my field or my back yard or at this place, it’s so much better. Then go there. Does that make sense?” (Bo Willet)

Willets does more than just that, he also explicitly states that he doesn’t care how much people paid to be there. Instead, he cares about the type of person they are and if they can joke around and have fun. In this entire speech Willets completely changes the program of action of

airsoft. In the initial analysis the investigation pointed towards the program of action of airsoft being militaristic and aggressive. Willets spends 15 minutes in this speech breaking that down and rebuilding a program of action where airsoft is a silly kids game where people get to dress up and play fight with their friends. Then he reminds everyone that they are friends here, he calls several people by name, and also reminds people that if someone is unfriendly, they won't be around for long. This is a powerful speech and as seen throughout the games below impacts the prescription of airsoft in the actions of its players.

Once everyone was on the field and they were waiting for the first game to begin they gathered together and started talking as seen in figure 4. No one talked about anything impactful



Figure 4. Everyone talking and hanging out before the start of the game.

or important but everyone talked with each other, sharing stories and generally having fun as they waited.

This shows where airsoft shines, everyone hanging out and having fun together. This pattern repeated itself after

each round with everyone in the team going back to

their side and discussing the last match or just whatever

is on their mind. This action shows the welcoming environment at this field with people talking to strangers openly. Another example is in the beginning set of games when someone lost their phone. Everyone got together in a line and performed a search through the woods for it. This again shows how everyone cared for their fellow players and competitors, as will be seen with Rivercity Airsoft this is not always the case.

After the first hour or so we went back to the parking lot for some water and ammo refills. During this break one of the other players was having trouble with their airsoft gun so Willet loaned him one of the rental airsoft guns so he could keep playing. When this happened

one of the other players related a story about a regular known as ‘Vietnam’ that Willet also seemed to know.

“he showed up with whatever he had and he was like ‘owww the battery the battery was dead’ and I was like ‘here use mine’ and he was like ‘really’ and he used it all day... everytime one of his guns is broken.” (Anonymous Airsoft Player)

Apparently, this player often modified their airsoft guns or brought self-assembled guns. Accordingly, they also often had broken airsoft guns, but the interesting part is that people would lend him batteries or guns when his was broken. This shows how the players at this field care about each other and want to have fun and share that fun with others. This helpful attitude is further demonstrated when a player was having trouble with one of their own guns. As seen in



Figure 5. Two airsoft players, helping a third repair their gun.

Figure 5, several other players gathered around to help them repair it with one holding a flashlight attached to their own gun and the other trying to give advice. This is another example of the players at this field being welcoming and friendly. More personally they were also very welcoming to me. Parker, one of the most experienced players, even gave me advice and introduced me to several people at the field. These

people came from all walks of life, some from NOVA, some local, some engineers, some farmers, or construction workers, but everyone was equally welcoming and kind. Another player known as ‘fun dad’ lent me a spare magazine of ammo when I ran out near the end of the game. This is an action that actively cost him money in the form of pellets, but he didn’t care he just wanted everyone to keep having fun. All of this stems from the attitude of this field and the

program of action instilled by Willets at the start of the day. They led to a new prescription of welcoming and brotherhood that can be seen in all of the players. Without this concerted effort, the culture is very different as will be seen at Rivercity Airsoft.

Rivercity Airsoft started with a one hour drive to Richmond and was housed in an old repurposed warehouse. Upon entering, I talked to a receptionist who gave me my rental equipment and told me a few of the rules. I couldn't make out the exact words in the recording but it amounted to 'keep the airsoft gun on semi-auto' and 'don't shoot up as you'll hit smoke detectors and the firefighters will come'. The only other thing she told me is that I would have 3 more refills for free, amounting to 1000 pellets. This blasé, business only attitude is what leads to the antisocial program of action, when the owners don't care why should the players. After this I entered the staging area, there were several groups there who had been playing earlier in



Figure 6. Everyone in the staging area of Rivercity Airsoft, in their own groups. Notice how many people are alone, on their phones, and not hanging out.

the day along with several individuals as seen in Figure 6. Looking at this image, most of the people are either alone or only talking amongst the group they came with. Many of the people are just on their phone waiting for the next round to start. This is the first of the antisocial behaviors seen at Rivercity Airsoft.

After about 20 minutes of waiting the referee called for everyone to gather around to discuss the next game as seen in Figure 7.



Figure 7. Everyone gathered around for the Rivercity pregame talk on rules and the game mode.

In this case no one really seemed to be paying attention to the referee and in part for good reason. He didn't really go over the game well, and most of it he just mumbled out. After he was done speaking everyone filed onto their side of the field and prepared themselves. Looking at Figure 8, everyone here is alone, not talking to each other in the time between rounds. The only



Figure 8. Image of everyone a few minutes before the game began, notice how everyone is standing apart and not talking.

conversation was when I asked someone what the rules were because the referee didn't make it clear. This person was actually really nice, but I still had to work to get a conversation out of them, and this is also true for everyone else I tried to talk to.

Everyone was very businesslike, they were there to play airsoft and if you wanted to talk, that wasn't playing airsoft. This is another demonstration of the program of action, unintentionally set by the attitude of the owners.



Figure 9. Player using a simulated muzzle flash, that is intimidating and makes it hard to see them behind the flash.



Figure 10. Frustrated player flippantly waving their hand after getting hit.

A few minutes later the round started. In general, people at this field seemed more aggressive during play and agitated when they lost. In Figure 9, a simulated muzzle flash can be seen. This light went off whenever someone fired and made it harder for competitors to see the shooter and was altogether intimidating. As a new player these were very frustrating, they felt like an unfair advantage and intimidation tactic. Additionally in Figure 10 you can see someone flippantly waving their hand as they walk back to the respawn point after being hit. While it's hard to see in the image, in the video it is clear this person was frustrated and upset, which never seemed to happen at Augusta Airsoft. I even found myself getting more frustrated whenever I got hit, even

if I was objectively doing well. These examples point towards a program of action more in line with what was initially hypothesized. Airsoft was made for gun enthusiasts to play out military simulations and at Rivercity Airsoft that came through in people's aggression and their standoffish attitude to strangers.

Rivercity Airsoft in their blasé hands-off attitude led to an antisocial frustrating environment, with people only hanging out with their in-group. Meanwhile, at Augusta Airsoft Willets made sure everyone was part of the in-group, that everyone knew each other, or at least someone, that everyone felt welcome. The main difference is that at Augusta Airsoft Willets worked to change the program of action to a 'silly kid's game' and this change dramatically

changed the culture. Meanwhile Rivercity Airsoft had a lazy bored attitude and treated players as customers at best and annoyances at worst. These results point to two cultures within airsoft, there is the silly kid's game which is welcoming and fun, but there is also the aggressive side of airsoft, which brings out antisocial tendencies, and frustration.

Discussion

When comparing this finding to the other works discussed earlier, their split nature starts to make more sense. As identified in the introduction, there have been many surveys that found that airsoft was a fun way to hang out with friends and make new friends. However, there have also been studies that show that airsoft leads to increased aggression and violence. Both of these make sense in the context of these observations. At Augusta Airsoft Willet brought out the fun, unserious nature of the 'silly kid's game'. This developed a program of action that encouraged openness and fun and led to players socializing, congratulating each other, helping each other, and generally taking it easy. This is in stark contrast to Rivercity Airsoft, who's blasé couldn't care less attitude bled into the players creating a program of action focused on self-centered actions, and standoffish interactions. Here players hardly spoke to each other and displayed much more aggression and frustration when compared to Augusta Airsoft. These two cases show the vast range of possibilities when it comes to airsoft, and the potential for great fun or frustration on any given field.

With that being said this study had a somewhat limited sample set, with only two airsoft fields. This means that Rivercity Airsoft could just be an anomaly, run by people who don't care about the sport, with that attitude bleeding into players. Alternatively, Augusta Airsoft could be an anomaly with most airsoft fields having an antisocial playerbase. Aside from this, these observations are also my own and tinted by my own emotions and experiences while playing.

Additionally, I do not represent a range of demographics, my findings may have been completely different if I were a woman, as I did not see any female players at either field. Additionally, I am young, and while I hadn't played airsoft before I have extensive theoretical knowledge from games and books. Someone older, or less experienced may not have been able to go as hard or fit in as well in the community of airsoft. Ideally this type of study would be conducted over a wide range of fields and players, without that it is quite limited and prone to bias.

If I were to repeat this study I would try to visit more fields, and recruit friends to visit fields as well, to get a wider scope of perspectives and locals. This was the main weakness of this study and patching it would help to back up the findings. Aside from that I would have liked to conduct this study in the summer when the fields are most active. This would have allowed for a bigger, more diverse player base, and more interactions to observe because of that.

Going further into my engineering career I will use this to remind me that a community's attitude can greatly change the experiences of that community. If I am ever in charge of a workplace or team, I will want to be like Willet and Augusta Airsoft. He changed the program of action of what he loved and made his community more welcoming and fun. In the future I can do the same, working to welcome people and making sure everyone feels like part of the group.

Conclusion

While this study is small in scope it is also the first observational study on airsoft and its culture. From my preliminary research all the current academic findings rely on interviews or surveys, which don't always paint the whole picture. This being the first observational study had interesting results, with two different parts of airsoft culture being identified. For future researchers it is critical to expand this form and other novel forms of investigation rather than

just surveys and interviews. Having physical boots on the ground helps to better understand the real way that people feel and act, so expanding this to more fields and types of people is the critical next step. The takeaways of this study are twofold. First, airsoft has a nuanced culture with two sides, being identified depending on the attitude of the players and the field. Secondly, is that the attitude of a group greatly affects the behaviors of those members, especially towards other people. This means that everyone has a responsibility to carry the attitude they wish to see in others, if no one cares, everyone suffers, and if just one-person cares, then that could make someone's day. Remember this going forward and put in the effort to create an environment you enjoy.

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