

America's Digital Army: Games at Work and War

Robertson Allen

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There is such a large body of books and essays on video games that it is hard to imagine that anyone has anything new to say, but Allen's book takes a fresh tack and is a welcome addition to the subject. He is familiar with the history of the development of digital gaming, and in the culture wars over the role of violent First-Person Shooter (FPS) games in the lives of young people. He sides with those who see little evidence that playing the games stokes violent behavior in the players and who see lots of evidence of the "moral panic" (as historians call it) in adults who actually know little-to-nothing about the games and play they are condemning.

Instead, Allen takes a wider view of the role of these games in the ways powerful institutions in our culture work to create the sort of labor that serves these institutions. For his case study of this process by which "digital games and simulations act as channels for enlisting and militarizing immaterial labor" (p. 36), Allen looks closely at the Army Game Project and, specifically, at the development, marketing, and consumption of the game, *America's Army 3* (2009). "Immaterial labor," or labor featuring the affective and cognitive aspects of work or tasks is a term describing the sort of nonphysical labor late capitalism demands. Allen sees "persuasive technology" (pp. 30–31) at work in the Army Game Project, as the military uses

the games it develops to recruit and train young men and women. So his book is a case study of "the military-entertainment complex" (p. 35) at work, creating workers skilled at "immaterial labor" suited to the late-capitalist economy.

Allen brings to the project the ethnographic skills of a trained anthropologist, and he conducted his fieldwork among the developers of the game for the military, interviewing over sixty game developers working for the Army Game Project. As a skilled interviewer, Allen manages to get the creators of these games to describe not only the technical challenges and processes but also to express their own understandings of their work in this project aimed at recruiting and training warriors.

Allen is mindful of the critique of this military-entertainment complex, and he shares many of the misgivings of the critics. He shows the reader, though, how the developers aim to make their games different from the usual FPS games. The difference, explain his informants, is that the U.S. Army has a culture of values featuring honor, courage, loyalty, and teamwork. The designers create the game narrative following the official military rules of engagement in combat, and the player loses points or is otherwise punished for violating these rules or for refusing to work with the team. Moreover, the developers of the *America's Army* game take care to construct fictional narratives (missions) that emphasize heroic conflict that is "just and virtuous" (p. 71). Allen does not mention the scholarship on redemptive violence (e.g., three books by historian Richard Slotkin), but what the game designers seek is a familiar formula in American culture, a formula as old as seventeenth-century

Indian captivity narratives. Redemptive violence, violence in the service of honor and justice, seems legitimate in American culture. The *America's Army* website reinforces this goal of valorizing redemptive violence by featuring the biographies of real military heroes. The aggressive marketing of *America's Army* included for a while (2007–2010) a mobile mission simulator (VAE—Virtual Army Experience), which the project took to shopping malls and high schools. Still in the pursuit of duplicating the real experience, several of the *America's Army* game developers attended a five-day “Mini Basic Combat Training” event at the army’s Fort Jackson.

A major theme in Allen’s book is the larger influence of games like *America's Army* on Americans, especially young people. The extensive marketing of the game contributes to the militarization of the culture, with a goal (intended or not) of turning everyone into a “virtual soldier” (p. 10). Allen sees his case study as unveiling the trend toward collapsing the distinction between virtual space and “meatspace,” the “physical world of flesh and blood” (p. 22). This is where his discussion joins the larger scholarly examination of the effects of digital games on cognition, including the structures of the brain.

Allen’s ethnographic training as an anthropologist means that he embraces the trend of ethnographers’ eschewing “objectivity” and comfortably making his own experiences and reactions part of the ethnographic account. He felt like one of the “embedded reporters” who work in the combat zone in Iraq and Afghanistan, and like those reporters he had to navi-

gate a tricky balance between being an outsider and an insider. As the funding for the *AA* project began to decline and morale of the workplace also declined, Allen experienced increased stress in his stance as an embedded ethnographer. When he began receiving threatening comments from the project director, General Casey Warynski, he decided the research had concluded.

Play scholars should not overlook Allen’s book as just another study of FPS games. His is a unique study, both microscopic in its examination of the work of the game developers and macroscopic in its putting the development of *America's Army* into the larger perspective of the rise of the militarization of American culture and the creation of a military-entertainment complex—the late-capitalist version of the military-industrial complex President Eisenhower warned us about in his 1961 farewell address. Allen’s book is smart about many of the issues the reader will find in the body of scholarship on digital gaming and culture.

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**On Video Games:
The Visual Politics of Race,
Gender, and Space**

Soraya Murray

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In the current sociopolitical climate, Soraya Murray provides a significant