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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## Marketing to Potential Soldiers Through Video Games

**Reviewer:** Kyle S. Bikowski

Allen, Robertson. 2017, *America's Digital Army: Games at Work and War*. University of Nebraska Press.

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Play, Marketing, Institutions, U.S. Military, Video Games

Video games, the military, and marketing might seem like disparate sections of society, but anthropologist Robertson Allen's book, *America's Digital Army*, aims to connect the dots and demonstrate ways in which persuasive technology has been used to change the methods of military soldier recruitment. Through an examination of both military history and the history of commercial war games, Allen discusses the blurring of the virtual and real worlds that occurred during the mid-2000s. At the time, the U.S. Army attempted to recruit new soldiers by marketing military careers through the development of the video game, *America's Army*, the purpose of which was "the persuasion of players and users to enlist in the army or, failing that, to accept it more willingly as a legitimate, commonplace institution" (61).

Allen opens his introduction with a vignette from a typical round of the video game *America's Army*, the game that serves as the focal point for his ethnography. He then provides a brief history of the Army Game Project (AGP), before positioning himself as an avid player of the First-Person Shooter (FPS) genre of video games. After describing his ethnographic approach to this project, he provides the social context of his research in relation to the rise in popularity and use of video games since the 1980s. Next, Allen discusses the various dichotomies he engages with and troubles in his book: war and game, soldier and civilian, and work and play. Finally, he discusses how the diffusion of institutional power into a broader society of control has helped shape the use of games like *America's Army* for use in pervasive cultural militarization.

Allen's second chapter focuses on the way *America's Army* serves as a marketing tool for the U.S. Military. Following a brief description of the office in charge of the game development, the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA) at West Point, Allen discusses how the game was conceptualized as a way to tap into an existing market of the military FPS genre and target technologically competent and talented young men for recruitment. The remainder of the chapter is largely comprised of conversations between Allen and Dr. Casey Wardynski, the colonel who served as director of the Army Game Project. One topic of conversation was ineffective marketing methods, such as unidirectional television advertisements, that only have a slight chance of being seen by the target demographic of young men, particularly in the age of

video streaming. The chapter ends with a discussion about the frequent moral panic arguments surrounding violence in video games, as *America's Army* is often derided by the public as both glorifying violence and for not being realistic enough in depictions of the consequences of killing or being killed in combat. Allen notes that Wardynski claims *America's Army* is different than most military FPS genre games because they add realistic consequences for violating army protocol.

Chapter 3 discusses ways in which the developers of *America's Army* tried to discourage racist messaging. They achieved this through randomizing the appearance of all characters so that there was no one race involved and used nondescript locations. At the same time, the AGP allows oblique references to real conflicts and enemies because “the construction of an anonymous but proximal enemy, complete with its own ambiguous language, is one institutionalized effort at achieving a symbolic supremacy over potential enemies” (73). Allen notes how all of these design choices mirror actual world training practices that the Military conducts in ROTC and military academy programs. Further extending into the real, *America's Army* includes biographies and stories of actual world non-commissioned officers, referred to as “Real Heroes,” whom players are encouraged to see as role models. The chapter ends with a discussion between Allen and one of the “Real Heroes,” Tommy Rieman, and his struggles with PTSD, an element sanitized out of the *America's Army* biography.

The primary focus of Chapter 4 is the Virtual Army Experience (VAE), a mobile mission simulator used by the AGP at various events from 2007 to 2010. Attendees of the events first fill out various questionnaires and speak with army recruiters, before entering either a mockup of a jeep or helicopter, rigged to vibrate and shake along with the simulation elements. Participants also man light guns and then participate in a virtual simulation of a battle. While the stated goal is to provide a realistic experience for those considering a career in the military, Allen notes that unlike *America's Army*, there is no way to fail the mission and all participants receive identical feedback.

In Chapter 5, Allen discusses how academics have traditionally written about the military institution as a top down structure of inevitable progress through technology, rather than acknowledging that it also changes through bottom up and horizontal interactions. In an effort to change this, he examines the history of war themed commercial games, beginning in the nineteenth century, followed by the history of military training simulations. Allen closes the chapter with a highly detailed account of the history of the development team who worked on *America's Army*.

Allen uses his final chapter to describe how the game developers blur the line between civilian and soldier, because they had “expert military knowledge” and “worked within a liminal space between so-called military and nonmilitary spheres to translate this knowledge to video gamers and the larger public” (149). Although civilians, the development team were brought under the military umbrella and often thought of themselves as a squad, and many underwent a shortened version of bootcamp and wore fatigues to the office.

In *America's Digital Army*, Allen seamlessly blends together elements of both military and gaming history with his own ethnographic work and interviews with members of the Army

Games Project to illuminate decision making processes and developments within the institution of the military that are rarely seen by the public. That being said, I was left wanting more engagement with the game itself and those who play it. By focusing almost entirely on the military and civilian developer side of the game, Allen somewhat misses the mark in exploring one of his central arguments, that of the institutionalization of society, and he may have been more accurately exploring the corporatization of the military. Considering his primary focus on virtual soldiers, those who are not yet soldiers but have the potential to be recruited, and only brief discussion of the digital, perhaps *America's Virtual Army* would have been a more accurate title.

In sum, portions of this book should appeal to those with an interest in video games or classes on virtual worlds, while the book as a whole should serve as a great resource to anyone with an interest in studying persuasive technology, the military, and business, specifically marketing. Further, Allen's clear explanation of his methods and easy to understand writing style would make this book a great addition to any upper level or graduate class on those topics.

**Kyle Bikowski**, Ph.D. student at The University of Iowa, studies the anthropology of video games, gender, science and technology, social media, and geek culture. His most recent research examined how the interplay between virtual and actual worlds has helped shape the Gamer identity.



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