

Praxis

The Army rolls through Indianapolis: Fieldwork at the Virtual Army Experience

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This essay takes an ethnographic look at the individuals and institutions associated with the development, production, and implementation of the Virtual Army Experience (VAE), a mobile mission simulator that travels across the United States to venues such as state fairs and air shows. As an explicit aid to Army recruitment and interaction with the public, the VAE is an interesting nexus point that often channels public anxieties surrounding the medium of the video game and its role in the militarization of society. Here, I present my own experience of doing ethnography at this site, describing how it is received by visitors and interpreted by its employees. By means of the example of the VAE, I argue that polarizing media reports and academic criticisms that pit the processes of militarization against critical reflection of those processes are counterproductive and result in silencing more nuanced and thoughtful critical reflection that is already present at sites such as the VAE.

[0.2] *Keywords*—*America's Army*; Army Experience Center; Ethnography; Marketing; Militarization; Military recruitment; Propaganda; U.S. Army; Video game

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1. Introduction

[1.1] 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." 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 Sisyphean scene begins anew.

[1.2] 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 is one of the latest developments in the Army's push to market itself in a new, positive light, and it is unabashedly an aid to Army recruitment. Launched in January 2007, this mobile mission simulator is open to the public at locations across the United States, presenting a kinetically engaging battle scenario to individuals who visit large public events (figure 1). These events are often air shows featuring well-known military teams such as the U.S. Army's Golden Knights, the Navy's Blue Angels, and the Air Force's Thunderbirds. The VAE has also visited NASCAR races, as well as fairs, theme parks, and other festivals.



Figure 1. *An exterior view of the Virtual Army Experience at the Indianapolis Air Show (photograph by the author).*

[1.3] In order to learn more about the VAE, I spent 3 weeks during the summer of 2008 living in a Motel 6 in southern Indianapolis, making daily trips to the Indiana State Fair and the Indianapolis Air Show. My journey to Indiana and the VAE goes back much further, however. It began with a lifelong obsession with video games, but my research on what is known as the Army Game Project was the substantive reason for my visit to Indiana. Although it is best known for its video game franchise, *America's Army*, the Army Game Project encompasses much more than just the *America's Army* video games themselves (note 1). It is a network of institutions that use the same animations and artistic assets visible in *America's Army* to produce simulation tools that aid in visualizing weapons systems, training enlisted soldiers, recruiting potential soldiers, and winning the hearts and minds of possible enemies of the U.S. Army. The VAE is one of these tools geared toward recruitment.

[1.4] The institutions that inform and carry out the development of these games and products, endeavoring to create fans of both the Army and Army products, have been my primary field sites. Although I consider myself a native fan of first-person-shooter games like *America's Army*, along with role-playing games and strategy games such as *Oblivion* and *Medieval II: Total War*, my interactions with the Army soldiers, game

developers, marketers, and simulation experts within this military entertainment complex (Lenoir 2000) 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 am the son of a Navy veteran and have family and friends in the armed forces, but nevertheless, I am an outsider when it comes to things military.

[1.5] As an outsider, I chose to look at the internal 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*. As an anthropologist, it was crucial for me to approach this topic, politically laden as it is, as empathetically as possible in order to understand the actors' varying positionalities. I thought it was important since academic publications and documentary films on military-themed and -funded games seem to refuse any kind of agency besides outright dissent to those involved in the production and consumption of such media. Instead, academics largely position the military gamer as a passive subject that uncritically accepts the array of messages in military-themed games (Hunteman 2000; Stahl 2007). While I do not deny the utility of critiques of state power as exercised through entertainment and propaganda, in this article, I argue that these kinds of approaches to the Army Game Project and militarized gaming in general have the potential to be counterproductive, silencing more nuanced and thoughtful critical reflection that is already present among those who actually engage with such media on a daily basis.

[1.6] An early ethnographer of the player communities of *America's Army*, Zhan Li, makes a similar argument in his master's thesis, which highlights 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). Instead, groups of players continually reinscribe the game with new meanings that are divergent from the official Army message. As I will show below, divergent individual and institutional interpretations regarding the meanings of Army Game Project products are apparent even among the employees of the Army Game Project itself.

2. A virtual test drive

[2.1] Before visiting Indiana, I spoke with Mark Long, CEO of Zombie Studios, one of the developers of the VAE. He described how the VAE integrates virtual reality with physical elements:

[2.2] It has kinetic hammers that, when an explosion goes off, rock the Humvee [figure 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. (Long, personal communication, September 28, 2007)



Figure 2. *Mock-up, life-size Humvees inside the VAE (photograph by the author).*

[2.3] It took a year, but finally I was on my way to get my fill of this experience firsthand, to see whether or not it really is a fair deal. As I blearily stood in the Atlanta airport waiting for my transfer flight after a grueling red-eye, I had my doubts when a soldier in the Army National Guard limped to the front of the line, everyone's sleepy eyes on the back of his head. He was dressed in full uniform and carried a pack on his shoulder; he also wore a neck brace and used a cane to walk. My self-pity instantly trivialized, I told myself this was the beginning of my fieldwork with the VAE; I wondered whether this returning injured soldier was perhaps a darker face of this multimedia Janus (figure 3).



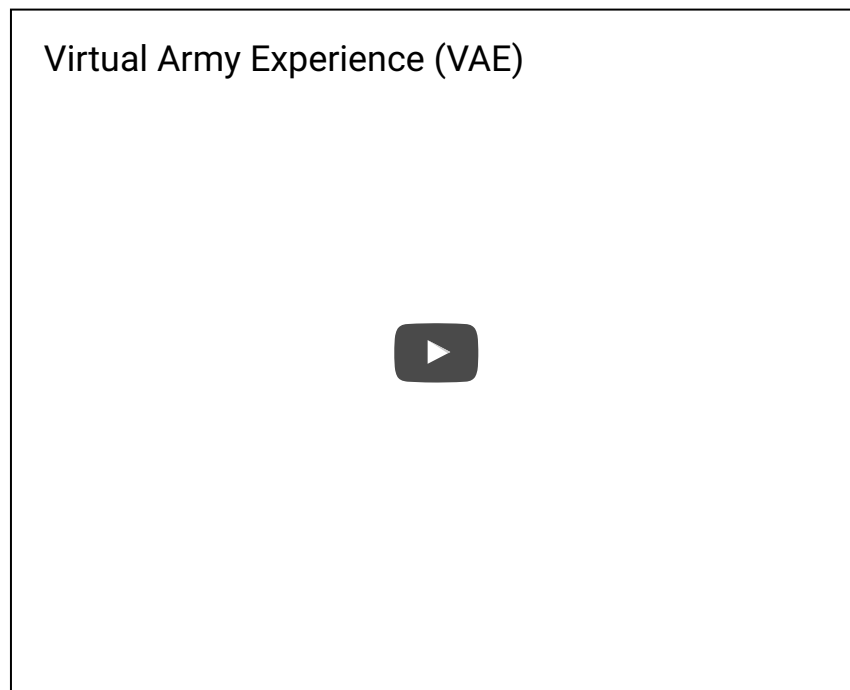
Figure 3. Drill sergeants provide entertainment for visitors waiting in line outside the VAE by challenging them with push-ups for Army gear (photograph by the author).

[2.4] The visitor, of course, would never see this side of soldiering represented at the VAE, which sits at the Indiana State Fair among the General Motors and Saturn tents, a trailer promoting biofuels, and the State Fair's 4-H building. The physical shell of the VAE is part tractor trailer, part inflatable building, and it is visible across most of the fairground. Huge fans in the back of the structure must constantly be kept blowing, lest the entire thing collapse. The VAE comes in four sizes, each named according to Army unit designations: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and Delta. These configurations travel 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 and the Midwest. Alpha is the largest configuration and Delta the smallest (accommodating only about 5 people at a time), but Bravo and Charlie (which hold between 15 and 20 people each) are the most typical versions, each collapsing to fit within three full-size tractor trailers. Alpha is essentially a combination of Bravo and Charlie, and when these two configurations come together at events such as the Indianapolis Air Show, a huge interior space is fashioned. As an Army Game Project public relations press release describes it, within this structure, the VAE

[2.5] 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)

[2.6] Such press releases emphasize the virtual reality part of the Virtual Army Experience, but in fact most visitors spend a significant amount of the time outside the actual simulation. The wait outside can be as short as 20 minutes, but has reportedly been as long as 4 hours; the typical length of time spent inside the VAE is about 30 to 40 minutes. To occupy the time during the wait, Army recruiters and drill sergeants stand around, ready to chat with people about the Army or give out Army T-shirts, hats, and even copies of the *America's Army* Xbox video game to people who do enough push-ups (figure 3). A representative from the Army-sponsored Top Fuel dragster racing team is there as well, taking complimentary photos of anyone who wants a picture taken with the car (figure 4). This is a popular option for kids who cannot enter the VAE, as the posted minimum age is 13 years old (note 2). Near the building, videos explain the VAE's fourfold process: registering, obtaining the mission briefing, playing the simulation, and participating in the after-action review. Video teasers for the VAE, such as the one shown in video 1 below, play on large screens on top of the trailers:



Video 1. *A Virtual Army Experience teaser video.*



Figure 4. *The Army Top Fuel Dragster outside of the entrance to the VAE at the Indiana State Fair (photograph by author).*

[2.7] Finally, visitors are able to walk up the short set of stairs and enter the air-conditioned registration lobby, where they are greeted by several attractive college-aged women standing behind a counter with computers (video 2). They ask 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 collect more basic information, such as an individual's address, telephone number, e-mail address, and level of education. They take each visitor's photo and present each one with a plastic Virtual Army Experience identity card with the visitor's picture, name, and zip code, which slides inside a neck wallet fitted with an RFID sensor. As people wait for everyone in their group to finish with registration—a process that takes up to 10 minutes—visitors can kill some time by playing a LAN version of *America's Army* at computer stations in the center of the room. For most, this is 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. For people like me, who are casual but not obsessive players of *America's Army*, the lobby of the VAE is probably the only place where they have ever dominated at the game (video 2).

Virtual Army Experience



Video 2. *America's Army Real Hero SGT Tommy Rieman gives a video tour of the VAE.*

[2.8] Once everyone is registered, a man introduces himself to the group as a subject matter expert (SME). He invites everyone to stand in line as a group and quickly explains the weapon systems that are simulated inside the VAE, such as the Black Hawk helicopter and Humvees mounted with CROWS (Common Remotely Operated Weapons System). The SME tells the group that he has served in the Army—he may have deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan—and if anyone has questions about the VAE or the Army to ask him at any time. He then opens the door that leads to the interior of the VAE and a huge, dark space filled with life-size mock-ups of Humvees and a Black Hawk helicopter (video 2). Before people can take their seats inside these vehicles, however, the SME directs everyone to watch a 5-minute video in which the group—now referred to as a squad—is briefed on the upcoming mission. In this video, a colonel and several officers describe the scenario that I outlined to begin this paper, using the official-sounding technical vocabulary of the Army. Regardless of what they are saying, which might be difficult for the average nonmilitary person to completely understand at times, the seriousness of their tone and the dramatic music set the stage for the upcoming mission (video 2). At the end of the video, the SME shows the squad a map of the area that displays the critical points where everyone will have to be careful during the mission. He then instructs people how to identify civilians, tells everyone not to shoot at them, and directs the squad to take a seat in one of the vehicles.

[2.9] Unlike roller coasters or motion simulations found in theme parks, there is no overall consensus among visitors about which seat or which vehicle is the best for the

experience. Although it is not visibly apparent, shooting from the Black Hawk helicopter, as opposed to the Humvee, is quantitatively more difficult. Sometimes SMEs try to preempt complaints about the Black Hawk being too hard by framing it as a target practice challenge in their briefings beforehand. This "are you good enough?" kind of framing typically encourages younger men to sit in the Black Hawk mock-up. Guns, properly weighted and appearing as they would in real life, are mounted to the vehicles (figure 2), and the M249 SAW turret guns at the tops of the Humvees tend to be popular. After standing in line for over half an hour, though, many forego standing to shoot these, choosing instead to sit in the seemingly less glamorous passenger and rear seats of the Humvees. This is fine—I contend that part of the purpose of the VAE is 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 better to ride in.

[2.10] After the SME starts the simulation, squad members can fire the air rifles mounted to the vehicles. At this point, there are no targets, and a montage of scenes, accompanied by heavy metal music, appears on the three large screens in front of each vehicle. The montage shows missiles launching, Army helicopters starting their run to the battlefield, and HALO parachutists making their jump. Finally, the montage changes to an aerial view that swoops down to the squad's position, and the camera goes into the virtual Humvee, bringing everyone a first-person perspective, as if they are viewing the action from their vehicle. Although there is no actual driver, the vehicle starts moving on-screen, and a physical rumbling from the vehicle simulates movement. The screens show civilians who are running away; although the SME tells visitors not to shoot at them, some (including me) do anyway. The virtual civilians, however, do not react in any way and keep on running. Sometimes if visitors persist in shooting at civilians, the SME threatens to remove them from the simulation.

[2.11] But soon, several men with guns run out, crouch in the middle of the road, and start firing their weapons in what appears to be the direction of the vehicles. Most of the time, the squad swiftly takes them out, but an enemy jeep drives up soon after. After taking a few bullets, the jeep explodes, creating a vibration that can be felt from the seat of the Humvee. After a few minutes of this, some people begin to realize that there is nothing the enemy can do that would hurt them—that they are 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 usually go by swiftly for most, and the convoy crosses a bridge and arrives at the refugee camp, the objective of the mission. Try as one might try to shoot the refugees and aid workers (yes, I have tried, along with countless other visitors), nothing happens, and

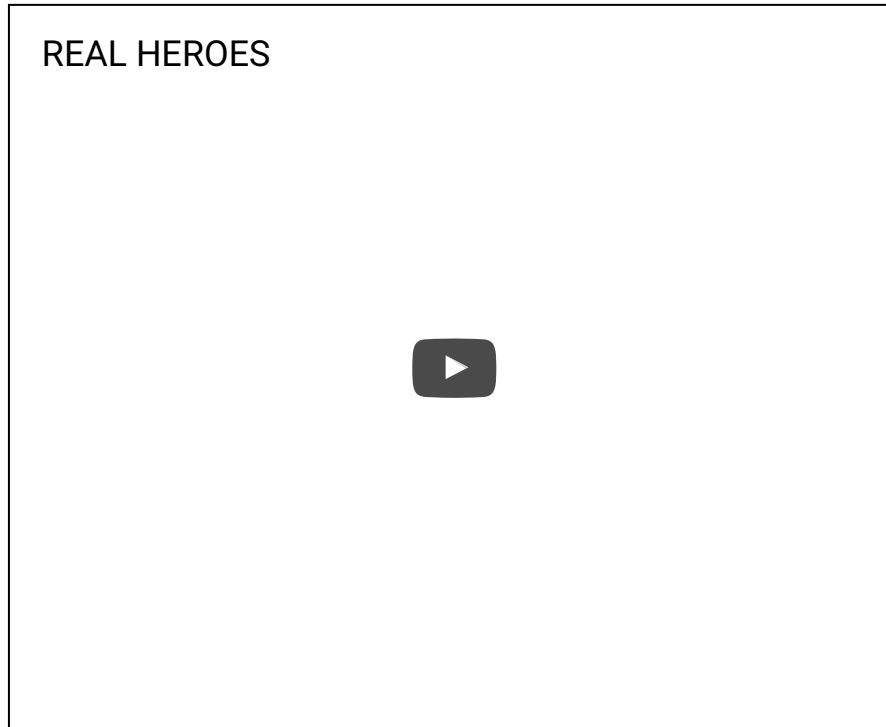
participants sadly realize that their weapons are no longer effective. One visitor, blogging on the technology news Web site CNET, describes a similar experience of the simulation:

[2.12] 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. (Greenwald 2007) (note 3)

[2.13] Although some may find the idea of shooting at civilians appalling, whether or not they are virtual, I would contend that most people do not do it out of spite or as a result of any "corrupting" influence of video games. Rather, visitors do it to test the limits of believability in this virtual environment, to push back against and reappropriate the scripted narrative that is thoroughly entrenched 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 proved to be disappointing to many, especially regular gamers; 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."

[2.14] As the simulation ends, the voice of the SME directs everyone to exit the VAE structure to a small tent, where he conducts an After Action Review (video 2). At these reviews, the SME shows the squad images that he indicates were taken during the game. These images do not vary, nor does the essence of the SME's review, which conveys to the squad that they did a good job but need to work more on communicating with other members in their vehicles. At this point, the SME has the group watch another video, this one about an actual Army soldier who was awarded a medal (video 3). The video explains the activities of this individual's heroic efforts in the face of combat, calling him a "Real Hero." Then the Real Hero enters the tent as the SME introduces him to the group. This is one of *America's Army's* eight Real Heroes, common soldiers chosen to represent an ideal of achievement, an individual whose service is a model of aspiration. The Real Hero tells the group more about his experiences in the Army, hands out a Real Heroes action figure made in his likeness to a member of the group (usually 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 makes himself available to sign autographs or chat about the Army. The SME directs

people to remove their neck wallets but to keep their VAE ID cards, and as visitors return their wallets, they are given a copy of the *America's Army* PC game attached to a Virtual Army Experience neck key chain. Visitors walk away to the rest of the state fair, perhaps going to the 4-H building or the dog show nearby.



Video 3. *A video explaining the combat actions of Real Hero SFC John Adams.*

3. Embodying the Army: Real Heroes and SMEs

[3.1] As the above description indicates, the Virtual Army Experience cannot be reduced to a singular kind of experience or a pithy description of what it does or is; rather, it communicates a variety of messages through different channels and episodes, and it does 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, vary 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 seeks to frame the experience in a highly scripted manner that communicates a positive message to participants (especially teenagers) about the career opportunities available in the Army. It does 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 is very intentional because

[3.2] 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. (Victor, personal communication, August 2008) (figure 5)



Figure 5. Two Real Heroes sign free copies of the *America's Army* video game that are given to visitors as they exit. (photograph by the author).

[3.3] The Real Heroes in particular are at the center of the *America's Army* campaign to place a human face on the Army (see also Allen, forthcoming). Most of the time, at least one of these individuals is present at the Virtual Army Experience. The combat stories of each Real Hero are highlighted at the *America's Army* Web site (<http://www.americasarmy.com/realheroes/index.php?id=2&view=videos>), and as the above description of the VAE indicates, they are shown to visitors at the VAE when a specific Real Hero is present. The Real Heroes, who are carefully chosen as representatives who present a realistic career goal for prospective recruits (with six noncommissioned officers and two commissioned officers), are portrayed as soldiers

whose training in the Army has enabled an ordinary person 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" (<http://www.americasarmy.com/realheroes/index.php?id=3&view=bio>). 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" (video 3).

[3.4] In this effort to personalize the Army through the individual figures of the Real Heroes, certain aspects of their lives are revealed at the *America's Army* Web site. Blogs, personal photos, bios, and videos all play a part in this multimedia public relations project (see <http://www.americasarmy.com/realheroes/blogs.php?id=23>). Notably, however, no Real Hero has any visual physical handicap, as this would be counterproductive to what the VAE and the Real Heroes program seek to accomplish. I have spoken with Real Heroes about personal injuries that have left them physically handicapped and psychologically traumatized, but none of this backstory is a part of the media personality of the Real Hero.

[3.5] SMEs also play an active role in personalizing the Army at the VAE and are central to interpreting the VAE to visitors in a way that maximizes the number of visitors leaving with a favorable impression of the Army. Some SMEs crack jokes and keep their explanations upbeat, while others choose to focus on describing their own experiences and the kinds of career trajectories that enlistment in the Army allows. One SME, for example, informs visitors about his deployments and return, but chooses to tell visitors mostly about his subsequent pursuit of a college degree with Army support. SMEs say their job is to "educate, promote, and entertain the public," and they conceptualize their work as both performer and educator. "I think I'm a little bit of each," one SME told me,

[3.6] 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. (Rick, personal communication, August 2008)

[3.7] These men are all former enlistees in the Army, and many work as contract employees at the VAE between stints of active duty in the Army. As such, the SMEs themselves blur the lines between the soldier and civilian, which acts as an effective marketing mechanism for the Army. To explain this, one employee rhetorically asked,

[3.8] 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. (Victor, personal communication, August 2008)

[3.9] Although the Virtual Army Experience is a marketing effort to sell a real experience of joining and being in the U.S. Army, there are a plethora of products—both literal and metaphorical—that shape the visitor's experience at the VAE. The SMEs, recruiters, and Real Heroes (all products of the Army) help create a militarized, highly masculine experience that guests can take home with them after their visit. Items given to visitors (ID cards, key chains, action figures, T-shirts, hats, and video games) are some of these take-home products, as are the intangible memories of the experience. Additionally, people who fit the right demographic and who have indicated an interest in the Army also take home with them the prospect of being contacted in the near future by a recruiter. Indeed, after indicating at registration that I was interested in learning about all aspects of the Army but was not interested in signing up (an honest statement), I received several calls and e-mails from recruiters in the Seattle area only a week after first registering my name, address, e-mail, and phone number with the VAE.

[3.10] The Real Heroes and SMEs are 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 seemingly contradictory—slogan "Army of One," the Real Heroes and SMEs seek to portray to civilians (and potential recruits) that the Army is 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 (video 1), and the Real Heroes and SMEs act as real-life embodiments of this discourse of individual empowerment within the total institution of the Army.

4. Virtual armies

[4.1] 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 are a force that has not yet been mobilized, and the VAE serves as a conduit that could be the first step 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 the Army Game Project headquarters at the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis at West Point, is forthright about this function of the VAE. They state 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).

[4.2] Although Army recruiters are present at the VAE and the information provided at registration is passed on to recruiters, an overarching conceptual basis of the Army Game Project is that the hard sell by recruiters to join the Army is not an effective means of garnering recruits (COL Casey Wardynski, personal communication, August 2008). The Army Game Project has, in most cases, relied on the kind of soft sell that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to track the efficacy of its marketing campaign. According to the director of the Army Game Project, however, visitors to the VAE are nine times more likely to enlist in the Army than nonvisitors and 30 percent more likely to play *America's Army* than nonvisitors. Players of *America's Army*, in turn, are 30 percent more likely to join the Army than nonplayers (COL Casey Wardynski, personal communication, September 24, 2008). To be sure, a good portion of these impressive numbers is a result of a self-selection process; many people who visit the VAE or play *America's Army* are already interested in the military to a certain degree. Although unconfirmed to me by statistical data, these figures nevertheless demonstrate a hugely successful marketing campaign supported by minimal investment in comparison to other marketing and public relations campaigns run by the Army.

[4.3] The development, construction, presentation, and postpresentation aspects of the VAE involve a constellation of part-time, temporary, and full-time laborers. These too are a virtual army in the sense that they are not a part of the U.S. Army proper but nevertheless fulfill many of the functions of the Army (see also http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B51abXkmN_I&feature=related). This virtual army is composed of SMEs, technicians, tour directors, public relations representatives (all employees of the Los Angeles marketing firm Ignited), local 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 are all involved in the VAE media campaign. These individuals, especially men who tour with the VAE and are with it on a consistent basis, tend to speak of their

work in terms of the military. "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 communication, August 2008).

[4.4] This virtual army exists 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 Software Engineering Directorate at Redstone Arsenal, and the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis are only the most central organizations in a complex array of institutions that have had a hand in the production and implementation of the VAE.

5. Militarization and protest

[5.1] In other writings (Allen, forthcoming), I have connected the practices of the Army Game Project such as those described above with theoretical perspectives that argue that disciplinary institutions such as the military, prisons, hospitals, schools, and asylums no longer work to discipline only those subjects within these institutions. Instead, they act in more diffuse ways, spreading their disciplinary tendencies across the general population (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004). Simply put, militarization no longer happens only at the military base, in the classroom, or on the battlefield (wherever that may be), but instead increasingly occurs in less institutionalized settings such as state fairs, air shows, and car races. A man I'll call Tom (a pseudonym), a VAE employee, directly spoke to this point when he said that

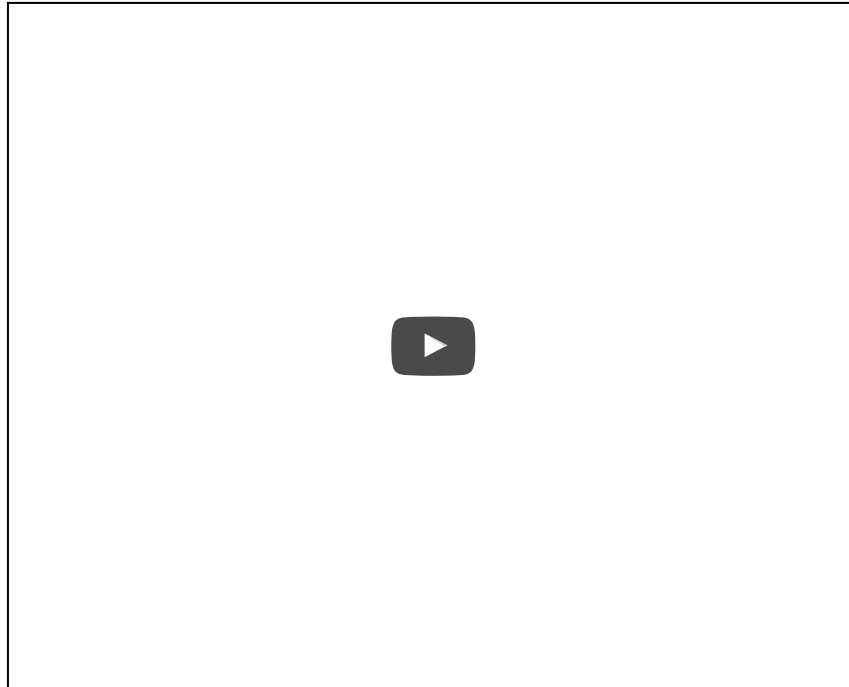
[5.2] so much of society—American society specifically—is incredibly militarized, but we don't see it. You can hang out and watch the history channel and that might not bother you, but it's all basically war. You could write a whole thesis on sports and militarization in the United States, but for some 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 communication, August 2008)

[5.3] 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" (Rick, personal communication, August 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" (Tony, personal communication, August 2008).

[5.4] A representative from Veterans for Peace, the group that has organized protests against the VAE in Cleveland 2 years in a row, 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; video 4). Veterans for Peace made headlines a few months later at another Army recruiting event that used the game *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). However, these reactions are also grounded in a legitimate concern over the kinds of messaging the VAE imparts. The marketing term *messaging* is continually deployed in public relations language surrounding the VAE.

Although the word *propaganda* and the phrase *recruitment tool* are explicitly avoided by the marketing team for *America's Army* and the VAE, employees readily acknowledge that their products could be interpreted as being such. As one *America's Army* employee acknowledged to me, "one person's 'messaging,' of course, is another person's 'propaganda'" (October 28, 2008).



Video 4. *A report on the VAE from Channel One news.*

[5.5] Concerning this, I found an unlooked-for but serendipitous source of informant-driven theoretical reflection in the person of Tom, whose interest in the political writings of Noam Chomsky (Herman and Chomsky 2002) opened a new perspective on the Army Game Project. Tom's interest in Chomsky's writings on media, propaganda, and politics was one that, as he explained me, created for him a lot of "cognitive dissonance" in his line of work. He spoke candidly about how he

[5.6] was thinking about what Chomsky would think about something like this...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. (August 2008)

[5.7] Tom went on to explain to me that when he was in high school and heard about *America's Army*, he imagined

[5.8] 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. I mean, you come in to the VAE, and people give their information...so there are protesters that really hate this thing. But I think that they also have this impression of guys in an office, watching you to see what you are doing, just trying to trick people into joining the Army. In my experience, it's not like that. (August 2008)

[5.9] 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. His position, like that of many others, is a complex one that cannot be summarized by pithy phrases or slogans. Consequently, it is a position that often becomes 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.

6. Conclusion

[6.1] I have sought in this essay to take an ethnographic look at a specific articulation of a vast network of institutions and practices that are often elided by the phrase "military industrial complex," now sometimes referred to as the "military entertainment complex" (Lenoir 2000) or simply "militainment" (Stahl 2007). I think that this level of detail in describing the praxis of fieldwork is necessary to gain any solid understanding of the sinews that connect individual actors to larger trends. Although I am informed by much of the recent work of writers originating in the Italian autonomist movement (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004; Virno 2004), such overarching theories need to be balanced by a solid foundation of fieldwork and empirical data. 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).

[6.2] Along with other articles in this Games issue, I make the case that an ethnographic approach to games, gamers, and game development that takes seriously the voices and interpretations of research subjects is critical in gaining any real understanding of topics such as empire, militarization, and human interaction through technology. Research in the game-developing community—and especially the military game-developing community—is one of the largely uninvestigated areas within game studies. As both video games and the military come to affect the everyday lives of people in subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways, it is crucial to listen carefully to the individuals who grapple daily with the political and personal complexities of their position in these environments.

7. Addendum: Killing in the name of what?

[7.1] Since my original fieldwork in Indiana, coverage on the VAE has continued to be prevalent in the media (see <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121721198768289035.html>). Two days before this article was to go to print, the VAE became a point of debate in Congress, with Rep. Dennis Kucinich writing to the House Committee on Armed Services to request that the nearly \$10 million in yearly funding for the VAE be dropped from the National Defense Authorization Act for 2010 (<http://www.commondreams.org/newswire/2009/03/12-6>). The new Army Experience Center inside the Franklin Mills Mall in Philadelphia, a related program that uses the same *America's Army* technology, has arguably generated even more contention and coverage, with reports from CNN (<http://www.cnn.com/video/#/video/tech/2009/01/14/carroll.mall.recruiting.cnn>), NBC (<http://www.icue.com/portal/site/iCue/flatview/?cuecard=39820>), and the *New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/05/us/05army.html>), as well as independent media organizations (<http://www.phillyimc.org/en/phillys-military-amusement-park>) and activist organizations (<http://www.commondreams.org/view/2009/02/19-2>). PR representatives from Ignited are generally happy with this wide exposure, claiming that "in the last two years we've maintained 97% positive to neutral coverage" (personal communication, February 2009), a statement that makes me wonder how this article itself will be classified.

[7.2] As my experiences doing fieldwork in these environments reveal, 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 in front of the VAE. (The original mantra that concludes the song, which is edited out for the game, is Zack de la Rocha's powerful and emotional response to the kind of institutionalized power that the Army represents: "Fuck you, I won't do what you tell

me.") Indeed, much of the video game industry thrives and profits from the commoditization of irony. If anything, these moments indicate that the military's appropriation of video games will continue to be a nexus point for important continuing conversations about the consumption of war and the ambiguous relationship between war and game.

8. Acknowledgments

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9. Notes

1. *America's Army* is playable on a variety of platforms, including the PC, original Xbox, and Xbox 360. The PC game has been released in an iterative format since 2002, with a new 3.0 version slated for release in 2009. There are also cell phone and arcade versions of the game.
 2. 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.
 3. In gamer jargon, *respawn* refers to the gaming convention in which a player's avatar return to life after being defeated; *god mode* refers to a state in video games in which the player's avatar is invulnerable to damage.
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