

Virtual Soldiers, Affective Laborers: Video Game Designers go to Basic Combat Training

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Arrival: Civilian Work, Soldier Play

On my first morning at the development offices of the official U.S. Army video game, *America's Army*, I was met by the game's executive producer. He showed me around the office which housed a 34 person workforce of electronic entertainment industry professionals.¹ After this brief tour, we gravitated towards the office kitchen, the intuitive choice for coffee and morning conversation. "Coffee is a big deal here. It fuels the team," he told me. We were met in the kitchen by a group of four uniformed men—some in full U.S. Army fatigues, others wearing digitized camo pants with regular t-shirts. Naturally, I assumed that they were soldiers; it was the U.S. Army's video game studio, after all, and they were dressed in Army gear. As conversation continued, I asked one of them how long he had been in the Army, adding that I did not know that actual soldiers worked on the video game. He laughed and said, "Oh, we're civilians. We like to play at being in the Army."

This statement stuck with me long enough to record it in my notes precisely because of its glibness and salience in achieving a blending between worlds which are typically talked about in contemporary American discourse as being oppositional and discrete from one another: the separate worlds of work and play, and those of the soldier and the civilian. Of course, the actual boundaries between these spheres, if they exist at all, are porous and eroding, and they have been becoming less visible for quite some time through multiple channels (Virno 2004). The corporate adoption of the "play-at-work" mantra (and its darker double, the imperative to "work-at-play")

has only accelerated in the past decade, and seems not to be abating (de Peuter and Dyer-Witthford 2005; Kline et al 2003). A huge variety of social networking tools problematize the work–play binary even further as employees continue to use networked technologies during work while extending working hours beyond discrete activities and temporally bounded segments of time. This has led some to describe these sets of practices as being a primary characteristic of a post-Fordist “regime of high technology capitalism—the sort of capitalism in which video and computer games are right at home” (Kline et al 2003:65).

Similarly, the rhetorical distinction which once existed between the world of the civilian and that of the soldier has become increasingly vague through a wide variety of media representations (Gregory 2006; Halter 2006; Lenoir 2000, 2003) and militarized practices (Lutz 2001, 2002; Network of Concerned Anthropologists 2009). As a video game that touts one of its goals as “compet[ing] in the electronic entertainment space for youth mind share” to encourage the consideration of military enlistment at an early age (Wardynski 2009:15), *America’s Army* seems to actively and effectively perpetuate this ambiguity—more so than many other forms of military recruitment and media campaigns. The free online game was imagined with the intention of providing a relatively unthreatening game space for younger male video gamers to also “play at being in the Army.” In a sense, many had already done so through an array of other hugely successful military-themed combat games in the commercial market.ⁱⁱ But whereas these commercial military games sought to gain a market share among the demographic of teenage to thirty-something males through increasingly sensational, cinematic, and technophilic combat gaming scenarios, the purpose of *America’s Army* hinged on gaining headway within a separate market for future military recruits. Because the target demographic for both of these markets was essentially the same, creating a video game developed and produced by the U.S. Army was, to

the calculating minds of military economists, a logical opportunity to leverage a preexisting demand for militarized games by co-opting messages about the Army that were already in circulation in the electronic entertainment industry.

This type of play enlists civilian players as *virtual soldiers*—not only in the popular sense that they are soldiers playing in a virtual or simulated environment, but also in the sense that they are potential soldiers (in other words, virtually soldiers) who might fight in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere in the future. Throughout this paper when I refer to “virtual soldiers” I use the term interchangeably, sometimes to connote one or both of these meanings simultaneously as they are not mutually exclusive. But the latter meaning of *virtual* is especially salient given the fact that versions of *America’s Army* are also used in training enlisted soldiers for weapons familiarization and cultural awareness role-playing exercises. Actual enlistment or the aspiration and ability of an individual to do so are not the only determining factors which make a virtual soldier, however; instead, it is the institutionalizing force of the Army acting upon individual subjectivities which enlists persons as virtual soldiers. In this way, a person who does not have even the slightest desire to join the military might nevertheless be a virtual soldier.

In this paper, I illustrate how the video game developers of *America’s Army* became virtual soldiers. For through their work and basic training experiences they became a kind of hybrid soldier-civilian, possessors of expert military knowledge who worked within a liminal space between so-called military and non-military spheres to translate this knowledge to video gamers and the larger public. In doing so, their labor produced not only a finished software product, but also projected an affective, militarized ethos for marketing and public relations. I show how this type of work, characterized by some as “affective labor” or “immaterial labor” (Hardt and Negri 2004; Lazzarato 1996), was mobilized to soften the stark distinctions between

the categories of the gaming civilian and the working soldier. I argue that this amalgamation of categories engages in a playful but serious liminality which is arguably an effective vehicle of militarization; it is a post-Fordist magical construction which perpetuates war.

Red Phase: Post-Fordist Military Game Laborⁱⁱⁱ

A post-Fordist economy is generally distinguishable from its Fordist predecessor by the economic privatization and deregulation of formerly state-run industries and social service programs; shorter production cycles; more networked and less hierarchical structures of organization; greater mobility of jobs, coupled with increased instability in long-term employment; and the centrality of new technologies in all of these processes (see Virno 2004). Among the starkest characteristics of post-Fordism is the increase in the ambiguity between work time and leisure time; there is no longer “a clean, well-defined threshold separating labor time from non-labor time.... [S]ince the ‘life of the mind’ is included fully within the time-space of production, an essential homogeneity prevails” (Virno 2004:103).

These general conditions describe the post-Fordist workplace of the early 21st century. Once the separation between work and non-work time becomes ambiguous, other qualities of human labor power become privileged. While the ability to carry out manual tasks has remained essential, other skill sets have grown in importance: “Just as in [the industrial] phase all forms of labor and society itself had to industrialize, today labor and society have to informationalize, become intelligent, become communicative, become affective” (Hardt and Negri 2004:109). Although specific types of labor have always compelled or required employees to project an emotional tenor in their work (e.g., flight attendants, service work), types of post-Fordist labor more extensively privilege and capitalize upon these affective, social qualities of employees. As

I will show below, this projection of affect, socialibility, and apparent candidness is also a central characteristic in the “soft sell” marketing and recruiting efforts of *America’s Army*.

Video games, as a rising part of the contemporary global information-entertainment culture industry, operate as an exemplary industry in the post-Fordist knowledge economy, emphasizing “scientific know-how, hi-tech proficiency, cultural creativity, human sociability, and cooperative interactivity” (de Peuter and Dyer-Witthford 2005). It is an intensely cyclical industry which has always entailed a significant amount of labor turnaround, with studios commonly laying off a majority of employees after major releases of games. This trend became more pronounced following the economic recession beginning in the autumn of 2008. In this highly competitive trade which has blended work and non-work time almost seamlessly, even artists, designers, and engineers receiving state unemployment checks have had to continually labor to keep their skills fresh and their portfolio new.

This was the industry in which the game developers of *America’s Army* worked; they were, by and large, a group of individuals in pursuit of careers in game development or similar fields. As is often the case with soldiers who enlist in the U.S. military, it was principally economic and career advancement opportunities which led most *America’s Army* game developers to choose work for a military contractor. Although a few of them had experiences with the military through past enlistment or employment, for most developers their work was the first extended period of contact that they had ever had with a military organization. It was a young group, with the vast majority of employees having less than five years of game development experience; many were fresh graduates from Bay Area universities with degree programs in graphic arts, design, animation, and other software- and skills-related programs.

Even by the standards of the demographically-skewed video game industry employment norms,^{iv} it was a bearded group of mostly 20- to 40-year old white male game developers.

The game which they were creating, *America's Army 3* (see Figure 1), was the latest in the *America's Army* franchise, an ongoing Army recruiting experiment since 2002. In this free online first-person shooting game—essentially a continuous immersive advertisement for the U.S. Army—players cooperate with teammates to compete against an opposing squad for the purposes of achieving fixed objectives like capturing or defending a building, protecting or killing a VIP. *America's Army 3* places players through virtual boot camp and combat experiences, and awards them with medals and career advancement points if Army sanctioned rules of engagement are followed. Players then use these points to specialize their soldier characters to specific Army combat roles.



Figure 1: A marketing image of the in-game environment of *America's Army 3*

Most *America's Army* developers were avid video gamers. Some typically stayed at the game development studio hours after the end of the work day in order to use the studio computers and facilities for their personal enjoyment. One person told me, “All of these new games come out and you need to go check ‘em out. For me, I feel like it’s a part of my research and development. But if I didn’t do this for a living, I would still [play games].” While sometimes they played as an individual activity, very often it was a collective, social enterprise of networked gaming which kept employees of *America's Army* playing together, either at the studio’s computers or at their home computers.^v Because such activities directly fed back into their development of the game, keeping them up-to-date about new games, news, technologies, and memes, these practices were encouraged by the game’s producers who sought to maintain the studio as a comfortable and stress-free space. During “crunch time,” an unspecified period prior to the game’s release when tasks compressed into smaller windows of time, many would

forgo their gaming and would stay late to work at the studio, sometimes sleeping there. In these experiences, the game developers of *America's Army* differed little from the rest of the game development industry.

White Phase: Recruiting the Designers

But the labor of *America's Army* game designers went beyond the mere development of the game, and entered into a resocializing, institutionalizing, and militarized process which crafted them into virtual soldiers. This emerged in part as a result of the subject material of their game, as designers and artists necessarily had to be knowledgeable about the minute details of Army uniforms, weapons, and doctrine. As I describe below, efforts undertaken to include the team under the institutional umbrella of the Army further achieved this. Several developers also brought their past experiences and interests in the military to the development offices: Two were veterans of the U.S. armed forces, while several others were gun enthusiasts, volunteer participants in live simulation training exercises for Bay Area police forces, and, of course, enthusiastic players of games which were often military-themed. One developer even left the team to run a successful business designing military gear and reviewing new weapons for sale on the civilian market.^{vi} With these influences, the design team embodied a remarkable mix of militarized libertarian principles, coupled with a hefty dose of Berkeley liberalism, hipster irony, and a sardonic disdain for almost anything to do with the Republican Party, especially Sarah Palin.

In this work environment the developers adopted to varying degrees the subjectivities of soldiers. This was especially true in their thinking about their employment. The HBO mini-series *Generation Kill* (2008), based upon Evan Wright's book about his experiences as an embedded

reporter with a marine unit during the 2003 invasion of Iraq (2004), was one of many shared narratives that shaped how several developers envisioned their work relations and relationships with outside institutions in terms of the military. Off-site managers at military bases in Alabama were compared to incompetent leaders in the film series, such as Captain America. Colonel Casey Wardynski, the director of the Army Game Project, was the Godfather, another character in the series. And I, the anthropologist, was clearly in the position most analogous to Evan Wright: “I don’t think of you as a spy anymore,” an artist, Walker,^{vii} told me after my first week in the office, “you’re more like an embedded journalist, and that means we need to keep you alive.” When I joined developers during countless in-studio playtests of their game, I came to understand that this sense of camaraderie also was brought about and sustained through the shared, and patently fun, experiences of virtual military combat in video games.

Later in an interview, Walker expanded his analogy between the development team and Army units, explaining to me that

this is an elite team. We are an elite squad of individuals. We have been chosen by the Army to make this game. That’s a big deal and I think a lot of team members take that for granted.... There are 30 people on-site here and four people off-site. That’s a tight squad; that’s a platoon-sized unit. That’s exactly what that is, a platoon-sized element, and [the producer] runs around like the platoon sergeant. We got a design squad, an art squad, and [the executive producer] is like the lieutenant.

For many Army game developers, their exposure to some of the specialized experiences of soldiers became a meaningful way for them to include themselves within the greater institution of the Army and identify with the situations of enlisted soldiers. Walker went as far as

envisioning his work on the game, living in California away from many of his friends and family in Georgia, in terms of an extended deployment overseas.

This metaphor of the team as a military unit continually resurfaced to explain other situations and employment experiences throughout my time at the *America's Army* game development studios. But it was a metaphor that had some grounding in real experiences as well, for many on the development team had trained together as a military unit when the Army sent them to boot camp.

As it turned out, so many people were dressed in Army Combat Uniforms on my first day of fieldwork because about one third of the developers—one woman and twelve men—were freshly returned from a voluntary five day job-related excursion to Fort Jackson's Army Training Center.^{viii} Along with employees from other Army Game Project offices, they underwent five days of "mini Basic Combat Training," otherwise known as "mini BCT." During this short period of time, they endured many of the same ordeals of resocialization as new entries to boot camp—buzz cuts, obstacle courses, pushups, cafeteria lines, weapons training, and obnoxious drill sergeants. They were assigned to squads, slept in barracks, and were issued their own equipment and uniforms, complete with an *America's Army* arm patch. Describing it later, one participant claimed, "The first day was one of the worst days of my life" (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Civilian *America's Army* video game developers at Mini Basic Combat Training.^{ix}

This ordeal had manifold purposes. At its core, it was intended to give the game developers an experiential taste of boot camp for the purposes of integrating their new familiarity with Army life into the video game. Many developers approached the event as an opportunity to build their professional skills as artists, sound technicians, level designers, programmers, and producers. Developers indicated that their mini BCT experiences aided in the creation of an introductory framing segment of *America's Army 3* involving a virtual boot camp where users learn how to play by navigating an obstacle course, completing weapons familiarization, and running through a live fire shoothouse. In this way, the developers' experiences at mini BCT came to be portrayed as kind of half-way mark in a referential sequence pointing from the virtual boot camp of the game, to the mini boot camp of the game developers, to the "true" boot camp of the enlisted Army soldier.^x

In emphasizing this sequence of representational fidelity, press releases claimed the game as a “virtual test drive” of the Army and that it is “as close to being in the Army as you can get without enlisting.”^{xi} Tag lines for the game also revealed this rhetorical vice quite succinctly, declaring that “*America’s Army* is a game like no other, because of its detailed level of authenticity” and that the game, although mostly created by subcontracted civilian developers, was “Designed, Developed, and Deployed by the U.S. Army.”^{xii}

The Army was quick to advertize the fact that they had sent its game developers to boot camp, enlisting them as virtual soldiers. The mini BCT event was used for marketing to generate hype among video game players prior to the release of *America’s Army 3* in June of 2009. The *America’s Army* marketing agency put together a video^{xiii} and photos of the event, taking on-site film recordings and interspersing it with retrospective interviews of developers and video game footage. Two game developers were asked to blog about their experiences at mini BCT, which they extensively describe in online forums at americasarmy.com (see Figure 3).^{xiv} Short video blogs with various developers enabled fans to take behind-the-scenes looks at the work and offices of the development team. And, adhering to a promotional language of realism, a press release for *America’s Army 3* advertised how its developers became transfigured into the role of a soldier, implying that players can also undergo a similar transformation through the game:

Nobody knows military simulations like the world's premier land force, the United States Army So, when the Army began making the America's Army game to provide civilians with insights on Soldiering from the barracks to the battlefields, it sent its talented development team to experience Army training just as a new recruit would. The developers crawled through obstacle courses, fired weapons, observed paratrooper

instruction, and participated in a variety of training exercises with elite combat units, all so that you could virtually experience Soldiering in the most realistic way possible.^{xv}



Figure 2: Image of an *America's Army* employee at mini BCT before and after a new recruit's buzz cut.

Despite the unexpected physical intensity of mini BCT, nearly all developers who attended the event remembered it as an occasion that contributed to their personal growth and understanding of the Army. One developer wrote on the *America's Army* online forums that he and other coworkers “were yelled at, chided, [and] pushed beyond our physical and mental limitations, but came out all the stronger for it in the end because we endured.”^{xvi} After his return to the office, another developer told some colleagues, “It has changed me. I don’t know if for good or bad, but it has changed me.” Yet another described the experience as being really moving, even though it wasn’t the full blown experience. [It was] as much of a taste as you really can get without actually being in the Army. I would never have opted to do it, knowing what I know now [about how difficult it was], but I’m glad that I did. I wasn’t going to be the only person on the team that quit.

Often, these personal reasons for attending accompanied professional ones. This was the case with one producer (from another Army Game Project office) who stated that “the short answer as to why *I* want to go and do it is that I’m about to turn 40 and I’d really like to know if I can handle it.” He went on to articulate why he thought the Army sent the game developers, telling me that

they believe the more we know about what it takes to turn civilians into soldiers the better we will be able to depict that in the things that we build. I think also that the more we know about tactics, techniques, trainings, and procedures, the more lifelike we can build scenarios, and the more effective we can be.

As this producer implied, “turning civilians into soldiers” no longer happens solely in the institution of the military, but has become a process which happens during the everyday life of media consumers in the United States (Der Derian 2001; Hardt and Negri 2004). Nearly every American has become (in some cases unwilling or unwitting) consumers of war and participants in the national mediated narratives of war (Lutz 2009). “Soft sells” such as *America’s Army* further contribute to production of this militarized subjectivity by adding the dimension of interactivity and the veneer of agency through the medium of the game. By relying on user-generated interest and discovery of the Army through the game and other *America’s Army* material online, the messages of *America’s Army* (which might be dismissed as heavy-handed statist propaganda in other contexts) instead morph into impressions which can be readily accepted. Such processes of subjectification which originate from institutions but operate as if they derive from individual motives exemplify how biopower capitalizes upon the ostensibly liberatory nature of social media, interactive entertainment, and networks of information sharing in the early 21st century.

The marketing and media efforts of mini BCT capitalized upon the affective performance of the game developers as soldiers. This figure worked to translate and reconfigure military power to gamers, suggesting to players that they also can possess the knowledge and expertise which was imparted to the game developers by the Army—either by participating within the liminal space of the game, or better yet, enlisting and joining the Army. Through these diverse methods, both developers and players of *America's Army* became virtual soldiers.

Blue Phase: Selfless Service during Crunch Time

Following the developers' return to California, stories of mini BCT continued to periodically effervesce conversations, and the experience became one of many in the folklore of *America's Army* game development. For some, it was a high point in their employment at the studio, for in the year following mini BCT the team went through difficult times. There was a general lack of direction and vision—both internally and externally—as to what the new *America's Army 3* was supposed to be like. One root of these problems was a frustrating and convoluted system of military contracting and subcontracting which separated the development team from much Army institutional support. In a networked arrangement that was confusing at best, the team's offices near Berkeley communicated with a variety of other offices across the United States. In name, the development team worked for a private company. This company was contracted to develop *America's Army* by another large private military contractor, SAIC, which was, in turn, contracted by the U.S. government. But there was minimal contact between the game developers and these private employers; instead, their customers, the U.S. Army and the U.S. government, oversaw the majority of project operations from offices in Alabama and at West Point.

This arrangement led to many difficulties. Nearly everyone in the office felt that the management of the project from the Alabama offices was inept. The demands placed on them to perform their work, they felt, did not match the amount of monetary and institutional support which trickled down to the office after the prime contractor (SAIC) and the subcontractor had taken a substantial portion of the funding allocated to the development of the game. Often, they felt, the team became a scapegoat for problems which originated elsewhere. In one exchange during an interview with a developer named Benjamin, I asked what he felt about the project management outside of the team in regards to their understanding of the process of game development:

B: I don't think they have any idea. It doesn't seem uncommon, this sort of understanding as to what actually goes into producing this stuff. These people just don't understand how [games] are made.

R: Do you think they are like, "They just play all the time!"

B: Yeah, "They're just messing around!" They don't really understand what goes into it all and the nuts and bolts—how much work is actually required. The end product is all this fun, all this cool stuff, so for them it's just this "magic" that happens behind the scenes and for them it must seem rad doing it because playing the product is fun. I don't think they have any idea as to how tenuous everything still is.

Following a series of employment shakeups which eliminated most of the experienced members of the development team, they became demoralized and doubtful of their own job security. This created a considerable level of hostility towards project management, but also closer level of camaraderie among team members. "No one is here out of loyalty to the product at this point," Benjamin went on to tell me,

Everyone who is still here after all of those firings took place is here out of loyalty to each other and to the people who got let go. We're not going to disgrace their efforts that they put in to trying to get this game out the door; we're not going to screw over each other by abandoning this project so that people don't have the credit to put on their resumes.

When this came to a head near the lowest point of the 2009 economic recession, Walker assessed the team's situation in terms of troop morale:

All of us—the team as a whole—would feel much, much better if we could see a year into the future. But that is a well-guarded secret. That is a problem, a *huge* problem. It is a problem with our management; it is a problem with the Army. It is a problem that will have to be solved if they want to continue to do this, because it is *horrible* for morale.... If they don't want people to continue to look for jobs all day long, then they need to make them feel like they are going to be taken care of in the future, and that is something that is *severely* lacking.

When it was useful to their purposes, members of the Army sought to militarize this discontent by continuing to project to the subcontracted development team a sense of inclusion within the larger organization of the Army. In a team meeting, a visiting senior officer sought to encourage the overworked and understaffed office as they entered “crunch time” a few months prior to the release of *America's Army 3*. Speaking to them as if they were soldiers and framing their work in terms of “selfless service,” one of the seven core Army values, he told them,

Thank you for putting up with the drama ... but you can't quit, because you represent an organization that doesn't quit. This country wouldn't be here if the organization that you represent had a quitter's attitude. I don't care who pays you, you work for the Army.

You're going to have to be like the Special Forces and do more with less. You have the Special Forces mentality.... Everybody wanted to have a piece of the bad guy after 9/11. You guys are serving the war effort in a huge way."

While the officer's ploy did not appear to work in terms of motivating the designers, his words were not visibly dismissed for their reliance on cheap platitudes and patriotic appeals. The developers took pride in their work, and most were pleased to be creating something both non-commercial and for the Army. For this reason, and despite their disagreements with individuals at the project management level, the office's orientation in regards to "big Army" at the institutional level was a positive one. But the pressing needs of job security, more competitive salaries, and better benefits—in addition to receiving much-needed resources to ensure the timely release of *America's Army 3*—were on the minds of nearly everyone at the time. When these issues were mentioned to the officer, he dismissed them, telling the team, "That's not a big problem, I think." But some developers persisted, petitioning to him, "We've lost talent, and can't attract talent because we can't pay competitively. We want to continue to work for the project, but [management] has screwed us." Choosing not to take into account these realities, the officer instead interpreted this as a threat and asked the team, "Is this a 'let's have a walkout' kind of problem?"

In eliding the fact that the game developers were laborers by implying that they were developing the game purely for patriotic reasons to help "get a piece of the bad guy", the officer recreated the situation of many soldiers who join the military for primarily economic reasons but nevertheless feel compelled to speak of their enlistment in terms of national service. The language of selfless service here mystifies the economic reasons which underlie employment in the military and by military contractors. Andrew Bickford writes that "if we think of the U.S.

military as a labor market, and its soldiers as workers, these are people who find themselves in coercive and exploitative situations [which] can compel soldiers to fight and soldier on; it is a form of labor rationalization ... that ultimately does little for the soldier” (2009:151). His description of soldier labor applies to that of the game developers’ work as well, for these virtual soldiers were essentially asked to continue projecting the affective qualities of a soldier by pushing on through crunch time in the service of their nation.

Graduation: i.e., Layoffs

Crunch time abruptly ended on June 17, 2009, when the completed *America’s Army 3* was released to the public for free download. At the end of the workday, the developers went to their favorite Emeryville bar for a celebration. The next morning, they came to their offices to find the usually dark studio brightly lit and their computers locked. On that day, all but a handful of employees were laid off without prior warning and the Emeryville development office was shut down. Referring to the move as a “consolidation,” an Army Game Project representative told reporters that the layoffs “will allow us to gain efficiencies between our public and government applications.”^{xvii} According to other unofficial sources, though, there simply was not any money for the program; due to the economic downturn, enlistment in the Army was up. Although *America’s Army* had generated a considerable number of recruiting achievements and publicity over the years, such novel efforts had simply become less of an immediate fiscal priority.

Largely due to preexisting external issues which had been beyond the control of the Emeryville development office, the free game was critically broken and essentially unplayable for several weeks after its release. Frustrated players, many of them soldiers and veterans, had

waited expectantly for months to download the game, and they naturally equated news of the layoffs as retribution for the broken *America's Army 3*. In an angry retort to players' mounting criticisms of the game and its developers, one of the former developers posted a comment (quickly deleted by forum moderators) at the americasarmy.com forums. He implored fans to imagine trying to build a game with an impossible deadline, steadily declining workforce (via firings), a hiring freeze, constantly being fed misinformation, having the "higher ups" completely ignore your weekly plea for either a) more time, or b) more manpower, working a ton of unpaid overtime, pouring your heart and soul into a misadventure only to have the uniformed community scoff at you for uncontrollable variables ... RIGHT when you've just lost your job.^{xviii}

Through multiple channels it had become painfully and abruptly clear to all of the developers that despite the similitude of their experiences to actual soldiers, they were, in the end, ex-employees of a subcontractor to a contractor to the U.S. military. "The Army takes care of its own" was a phrase that was ironically repeated during the days following the layoffs. They had always understood that they were a not part of "its own," and that, anyways, the Army rarely adequately takes care of even "its own" veterans. But there was an expressive bitterness in their words which seemed unusually high, even for freshly laid-off workers. A great deal of this rancor derived from a growing realization that the closest parallel between their experiences and the experiences of many U.S. soldiers was, ultimately, in how they ended up feeling forgotten, unappreciated, and discarded by the military.

Much ado could be made about the uniqueness of the developers' situation. But my primary reason in writing this paper has not been to elicit sympathy for them or to show how their situation was anomalous. The abrupt joblessness of the developers was unfortunately not an

abnormality, especially in California during June of 2009, when the state unemployment rate was fast approaching 12% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). Fluctuation in the video game labor market, punctuated by mass layoffs, has been an industry norm and post-Fordist principle for years.

My purpose, instead, has been to explain how the circumstances of the developers might illuminate general trends in the militarization of popular culture in the United States. The enlistment of the developers' labor to perform as virtual soldiers highlights a pervasive mobilization of the culture industry as a vehicle of war. The corporatization of the military (and the militarization of corporations) is one underlying engine of this trend which is only accelerating. As more private mercenaries become employed in U.S. foreign occupations and counterterrorism attempts; as more businesses become contracted through Pentagon funding initiatives; as the capabilities of digital technologies increase the immersive qualities of military entertainment; and as social scientists weaponize culture and ethnography (Network of Concerned Anthropologists 2009), new forms of virtual soldiering will emerge. It might, sooner or later, behoove everyone to ask of themselves, "How am I a virtual soldier?"

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ⁱ Over the course of 20 months (2007–09), I spent approximately seven months at the Emeryville, California development offices of *America’s Army* in addition to shorter visits to several institutions affiliated with the Army Game Project.

ⁱⁱ For example, the hugely commercially successful iteration in the *Call of Duty* series of games, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* (2009), grossed over \$310 million in its first week of sales in the U.S. and U.K., making it the largest release for any form of entertainment media ever. By mid-January, 2010, the game had grossed over \$1 billion in revenue (<http://gameinformer.com/b/news/archive/2009/11/12/modern-warfare-2-sells-close-to-5-million-in-first-day.aspx>, accessed January 29, 2010; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8457335.stm>, accessed January 29, 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ This paper is rhetorically structured according to the phases of Basic Combat Training (Red Phase, White Phase, and Blue Phase).

^{iv} http://www.gamecareerguide.com/features/416/the_game_industry_salary_survey_2007.php?page=1, accessed March 2, 2010

^v Valve's *Team Fortress II* and *Left 4 Dead* were popular studio favorites.

^{vi} See www.milspecmonkey.com, which designs and sells military gear and patches.

^{vii} All individuals referred to by only proper names are aliases.

^{viii} <http://www.army.mil/-news/2007/11/15/6131-americas-army-contractors-take-basic-combat-training/>, accessed March 2, 2010

^{ix} <http://www.americasarmy.com/about/blogImages.php?xmlImageName=DevBlogsGreenUpImages&blog=true>, accessed March 1, 2010

^x To use Baudrillard's terminology, this sequence of representations is intended by the Army to be interpreted as a simulacrum of the first order (1994:6) in which the in-game boot camp serves as an artificial placeholder for the real Army boot camp. I would contend, however, that the representational process of *America's Army* is much more complex than this. I prefer to think of the game as part of a hyperrealistic narrative of what the Army desires itself to be, a narrative which *produces*, rather than reflects, realities (see Allen 2011). This would place *America's Army* in Baudrillard's schema as a simulacrum of the third order in which the original is preceded by its copies, much in the same way that the contemporary boot camp experiences of many new Army enlistees are preceded by an abundance of narratives (i.e., virtual boot camp experiences) populating the military-entertainment culture industry (1994:6).

^{xi} Such claims are also made for other Army Game Project products, like the Virtual Army Experience (Allen 2009).

^{xii} http://www.americasarmy.com/press/newsletters/enewsletter_2009_01.php, accessed November 13, 2009.

^{xiii} <http://www.americasarmy.com/media/videoViewer.php?xmlImageName=allVideos>, accessed March 2, 2010.

^{xiv} <http://www.aa3.americasarmy.com/about/article.php?blogid=1>, accessed March 1, 2010;

<http://www.americasarmy.com/about/blogs.php?blogid=2>, accessed March 1, 2010.

^{xv} http://www.goarmy.com/downloads/america_army.jsp, accessed March 1, 2010.

^{xvi} <http://forum.americasarmy.com/viewtopic.php?t=269828>, accessed November 13, 2009.

^{xvii} <http://www.shacknews.com/onearticle.x/59202>, accessed March 8, 2010; <http://kotaku.com/5296131/america-army-3-devs-let-go-day-after-launch>, accessed March 8, 2010.

^{xviii} <http://www.gamepolitics.com/2009/06/20/america039s-army-launches-new-version-sacks-developers-moves-hq>, accessed March 1, 2010