America's Digital Army: Games at Work and War by Robertson Allen.

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From 1980's *Battlezone* through the latest *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* offerings, the ability to depict war digitally and interactively has created experiences that go far beyond mere entertainment. The US Army-funded video game franchise known as *America's Army* has been continually refined since its inception in 2002.[1] It is now an everyday recruitment tool for American infantry. Both gamers and scholars have long desired to investigate the behind-the-scenes developments of *America's Army*. Independent ethnographer Robertson Allen has now written a revealing study of the video-game industry and its relations with the US armed forces.

Chapters 1, "America's Digital Army," and 2, "The Art of Persuasion and the Science of Manpower," explore the development and maintenance of the software. Chapter 3, "The Artifice of the Virtual and the Real," sets out some of the more theoretical and philosophical aspects of Allen's work, considering representations of the enemy across other forms of popular culture, and the notion of "cultural slippage" as it occurs in *America's Army*. Chapters 4, "The Full-Spectrum Soft Sell of the Army Experience," and 5, "Complicating the Military Entertainment Complex," concern the promotion of the game and critical and popular responses to it. The sixth and final chapter, "The Labor of Virtual Soldiers," revisits the notion of post-Fordist labor in terms of Allen's thesis that producing and marketing *America's Army* has involved developers, promoters, gamers, and entire communities as "virtual soldiers."

The author enjoyed unprecedented, if not complete, access to the programmers, testers, and advertising personnel who worked on the *America's Army* project. He is forthright about the complicating effects of his interpersonal contacts with these individuals. For example, Army Game Project director Casey Wardynski's "personality was so forceful that in my conversations with him I regularly felt compelled to believe his explanations indisputable" (43). So, too, Allen is aware of and candid about the reactions of various people to his presence as a researcher

Allen uses *America's Army* as a case study of "trends in militarization, interactive entertainment, and immaterial labour" (37). Hence, he explains the criticisms leveled at the game for glorifying violence and gathering personal information from its players. At the same time, he cautions that

> the complexities of ethnographic experience have made it imperative for me to include the thoughtful yet ambiguous voices I have found over the course of my research. These points of view complicate the common knee-jerk "for or against" political mentality that often emerges among even thoughtful academics and other individuals when polarizing issues such as military recruitment are discussed. (91-92)

The volume's ethnographic "data" are relayed by quotations from firsthand interviews and engaging anecdotes of Allen's experiences. Of particular note is his interview with Tommy Rieman,

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1. See James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network*, 2nd ed. (NY: Routledge, 2009).

an Iraq War veteran chosen as a poster child for the *America's Army* "Real Heroes" campaign. Underlying the façade of gung-ho idealism, Allen detects a more nuanced story of PTSD and the sense of expendability experienced by infantrymen who have returned from combat. "In contrast to his public persona, Rieman's own account of his enlistment and return is an ambivalent one that tells of simultaneous disillusionment and patriotic pride" (80). From this personal perspective, Allen zooms out to the wider implications of his selective storytelling and the depictions of American soldiers and enemy combatants in the video game series itself.

The author perceptively addresses the propaganda aspects of US-sponsored video games, the labor considerations involved, and the broader concepts of real, "unreal," and virtual warfare. In evaluating the military-entertainment machine, he cites the community outreach efforts around the Philadelphia-based Army Experience Center, contending that "these relationships between the army and 'the community' deliberately exploit a class and racial system of structural inequalities that provides few attractive alternatives for employment or advancement besides military service to low-income youth of color" (108). A wider ranging concern in Allen's work is the problematic blurring of boundaries between politics, entertainment, and consumerism.[2]

Robertson Allen convincingly demonstrates that *America's Army* has blurred the old, neat margins between local and global, real and virtual, in a new "globital" era of war in which we are all soldiers.

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2. See further Rikke Schubart, *War Isn't Hell, It's Entertainment: Essays on Visual Media and the Representation of Conflict*, ed. Fabian Virchow et al. (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2009), and Patrick Crogan, *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture* (Minneapolis: U Minn Pr, 2011).