

The Militarization of Video Game Culture

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Takeaways

- The U.S. military uses video games for a range of purposes including recruitment, training, and public relations because of their popularity, especially among younger generations.
- The military's embrace of video games and entry into the social world of video gamers is an attempt to shape players' views, using games that misrepresent the realities of war and the military itself.
- Since at least 2018, military branches have paid active-duty military personnel to compete in "esports," or professional video game competitions, and to engage in daily conversations about the military with viewers on major live-streaming platforms like Twitch.
- The "military realism" that defines most "shooter" games is not military reality: games often omit non-combatants as well as political complexities such as war crimes and the morality of war.

Militaries and video games are strange bedfellows. Militaries are hierarchical organizations that wield deadly force, while games are cultural goods that foster play. The former flexes its power through global threats and coercion, while the latter elicits individuals' voluntary participation through invitation and consent. The binaries continue: serious versus frivolous; rational versus irrational; dire versus carefree; the horrors of war versus the joys of play. On their face, the two are seemingly incompatible. Yet their histories are inextricably tied.

Today, the United States military uses video games and gaming technologies for a host of goals—chief among them training, recruitment, and public relations—because of their ubiquity and due to their popularity with younger, would-be recruits.² Yet a game is never *just* a game. This is because, no matter how fantastic or abstract the content, games

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² Mead, C. (2013). *War Play: Video Games and the Future of Armed Conflict*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

resonate with players for all the ways they connect with a lived reality. The question is *how* does our government use video games and to what end? The Pentagon's decades-long investments in game-making and its esports recruitment efforts all point to instrumental uses of games for buttressing the military and its strategic goals.³

Historical Entanglement of Militaries and Video Games

Pre-digital tabletop games have been a vital war-planning tool for centuries. The connection between early electronic games and the military grew tighter after computers were first used during World War II to assist with enemy code-breaking and ballistics calculations.⁴ Later, during the Cold War, multiple nations used analog and digital games to run countless simulations hoping to gain some predictive edge over their foes.

The end of the Cold War didn't dampen the Pentagon's enthusiasm for simulations and games. Indeed, the armed forces discovered that it was far cheaper and faster to modify and retrofit existing off-the-shelf games, software, and hardware for military applications than building them from scratch. In the 1990s, the Marine Corps transformed the popular first-person shooter *Doom II* (id Software, 1994) into "Marine Doom." This modification replaced *Doom's* sci-fi weaponry and demonic foes with realistic guns and enemies so that marines could role-play as fireteams engaged in combat. Later, the Air Force tried a similar experiment with the real-time strategy game, *Starcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998).⁵ In 2002, the U.S. Army produced their own computer game, *America's Army*, as a public relations and recruitment tool with the goal of attracting a new generation of game-players.

Today, simulations and "serious games," or those aimed at achieving specific goals, train soldiers to use weapons and vehicle systems, and ammo-free virtual gun ranges enable soldiers to improve their marksmanship before attempting live-fire exercises. Drone operators carry out remote strikes from half a world away using video game-style controllers adopted from popular home game systems.⁶ Some of the same game engines used to train warfighters before they see combat are employed to treat their PTSD when they return home.⁷ Active duty and retired personnel serve as subject matter experts who do consulting work with game studios to help ensure authentic representations of military

³ Robertson, R. (2024, October 24). Call of Duty: Pentagon Ops. *The Nation*. <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/call-of-duty-pentagon-ops-2/>

⁴ Crogan, P. (2011). *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture*. University of Minnesota Press.

⁵ Nye, L. (2024, April 2). 6 Video Games (Sorry, 'Simulators') the US Military Used for Training. *Military.com*. <https://www.military.com/off-duty/games/6-video-games-sorry-simulators-us-military-used-training.html>.

⁶ Keller, J. (2024, October 4). This Video Game Controller has become the US Military's Weapon of Choice. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/story/fmcu-us-military-controller/>.

⁷ Miller, A. (2020, October 20). How Video Games are Saving Those Who Served. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/story/video-games-therapy-veterans-ptsd-treatment/>; and Losh, E. (2006, December 4). The palace of memory: virtual tourism and tours of duty in *Tactical Iraqi* and *Virtual Iraq*, in *CyberGames '06: Proceedings of the 2006 International Conference on Game Research and Development*, 77-86.

jargon and tactics. Likewise, collaborations and cross-promotions between gun manufacturers and game developers have become commonplace.⁸

This is an incomplete list, but it represents some of the different ways that the “military-entertainment complex”—the web of associations and collaborations between the military, gun manufacturers, and entertainment firms—finds expression.

Recruiting Troops with Video Games

Young people’s enthusiasm for video games explains why the Pentagon has turned “esports,” or professional video game competitions, into its latest recruiting front.⁹ In esports, competitors play various genres of games, from first-person shooters like *Call of Duty* and battle arena games like *League of Legends*, to the “vehicular soccer” game *Rocket League*. In 2018, the Army missed its recruiting goal for the first time in thirteen years.¹⁰ Hoping to connect with Gen Z (born 1997-2012) and Gen Alpha (born 2013-today), the Army created their own esports team. The Navy and Air Force quickly followed suit by forming their own teams, and in 2022, the Pentagon hosted the first Armed Forces Esports Championship.¹¹ A number of these enlisted esports competitors also host gaming sessions on live-streaming sites like Twitch and YouTube in their official capacities as service personnel. Here, military representatives play online games together while casually chatting with viewers about their military experiences. While the Pentagon has not released data about the effectiveness of esports recruiting, some officers think esports now may be its most effective recruiting tool.¹² The Pentagon’s use of esports, video streaming sites, and social media is, in many ways, the latest variation of a time-tested tactic of recruiting new military personnel through games. *America’s Army* (2002-2022), a series of multiplayer computer games developed and published by the Army, had similar public relations and recruiting goals, as did the “Virtual Army Experience” (2007-2009), a traveling interactive exhibit that purportedly offered visitors an experience of soldiering.¹³

⁸ Stanton, R. (2023, October 17). How one gun company partnered with Call of Duty to attract ‘young potential shooters.’ *PC Gamer*. <https://www.pcgamer.com/how-one-gun-company-partnered-with-call-of-duty-to-attract-young-potential-shooters>.

⁹ Schwartzburg, R. (2024, February 14). The US military is embedded in the gaming world. Its target: teen recruits. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/feb/14/us-military-recruiting-video-games-targeting-teenagers>.

¹⁰ Grappe, M. and Nervest, N. (2020, September 9). How the US Army uses Video Games to Attract Gen Z. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-army-esports-team-twitch-livestreams-recruitment-2020-9>.

¹¹ U.S. Armed Forces Sports. (2022, May 26). FORCECON 2022 to Kick Off 1st Armed Forces Esports Championship. *Armed Forces Sports*. <https://armedforcessports.defense.gov/Media/News-Stories/Article-View/Article/3044414/forcecon-2022-to-kick-off-1st-armed-forces-esports-championship/>.

¹² Schwartzburg, R. (2024, February 14). The US military is embedded in the gaming world. Its target: teen recruits. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/feb/14/us-military-recruiting-video-games-targeting-teenager>.

¹³ Huntemann, N. B. and Thomas Payne, M. (2009). Introduction, *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games*. Routledge, 1-16.

Figure 1. The Air Force takes home the first-ever Armed Forces esports championship in San Antonio, Texas on May 28, 2022.



Credit: Armando Perez; public domain.

Figure 2. Guests at the “Virtual Army Experience” eliminate opposition forces in the Army’s interactive exhibit in 2007.



Credit: Virtual Army Experience; public domain.

Yet there is something different afoot. In previous recruiting campaigns, the military's game or an interactive exhibit was the primary draw. The games were essentially an immersive form of advertising. But when the military's esports competitors are playing commercial shooter games not produced by the military, and when they're doing so using public social media and streaming sites, they—the player-recruiters—are the points of connection. What we're witnessing is a shift from the militarization of video games to the militarization of video game *culture*—the social world of video gamers. This isn't about using games to model battlefield procedures for audiences; rather, it is about expanding what the military can lay cultural claim to, through positive associations. The Pentagon is entering the world of video gaming, much as it has done in schools or traditional sports, to amplify its cultural salience in the minds of players and more effectively recruit them.¹⁴

It's not surprising that the Pentagon would seek to leverage the global popularity of video games for various ends—particularly for recruitment. According to the Electronic Software Association, the leading trade association for U.S. game firms, over 190 million U.S. Americans play video games, including digital word puzzles, and 61% of the population plays *at least* an hour every week.¹⁵ Total consumer spending on video games eclipsed \$57 billion in 2023.¹⁶ And the reason why the military's teams stream on sites like Twitch is simple: it's where the players are. Viewers collectively watched a staggering 20.35 billion hours of Twitch content in 2024 alone.¹⁷ The Pentagon's use of streaming sites represents a novel but relatively inexpensive outreach experiment. One available data point shows that the Navy spent 3-5% of its marketing budget, or about \$4.3 million, from October 2022 to September 2023, on its esports initiative.¹⁸

Shooter Games and the Difference between Military Realism and Military Reality

The military knows that playing and watching games is big business. But the Pentagon isn't interested in harnessing just *any* interactive entertainment. It is most interested in showcasing games that thematically resemble other military entertainment, or "militainment," for instance in films and TV shows.¹⁹ In the world of game genres, the armed forces are most interested in "shooter" games.

Games across genres contain military-themed content (e.g., real-time strategy, platformers, turn-based strategy, flight simulators), but the shooter is by far the most

¹⁴ Donald, I., Webber, N. & Wright, E. (2023). Video Games, Historical Representation and Soft Power. *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*, 105-127.

¹⁵ The Entertainment Software Association. *2024 Essential Facts about the US Video Game Industry*. Washington, DC: Entertainment Software Association, 6. <https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Essential-Facts-2024-FINAL.pdf>.

¹⁶ The Entertainment Software Association, 28.

¹⁷ Pineda, D. (2024, December 18). Viewers watched 20.35 billion hours on Twitch in 2024. 'Stream Big' explores why. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2024/12/18/nx-s1-5230658/twitch-recap-2024>.

¹⁸ Schwartzburg, R. (2024, February 14). The US Military is Embedded in the Gaming World. Its target: teen recruits. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/feb/14/us-military-recruiting-video-games-targeting-teenagers>

¹⁹ Stahl, R. (2010). *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge.

popular form for military content. Named for their central activity and played from either the first- or third-person perspective, military shooters drop players into historical or fictional war scenarios, and they feature realistic weapons, tactics, and vehicles. Typified by franchises like Activision's *Call of Duty*, Valve's *Counter-Strike*, Electronic Arts' *Battlefield* and *Medal of Honor*, and Ubisoft's Tom Clancy-branded technothrillers, the shooter is a perennial favorite for players and producers alike.²⁰ For instance, last year's *Call of Duty: Black Ops 6* (Activision, 2024) enjoyed the largest opening weekend in that franchise's storied history, helping to grow the series' lifetime sales to 500-plus million units since its debut in 2003.²¹ Gen Z and Gen Alpha represent the biggest users of PC and console games, with 54% of Gen Z game-players identifying the shooter as one of their three favorite genres.²²

Figure 3. Call of Duty: Black Ops 6 is a prototypical first-person military shooter game that transforms players into virtual soldiers.



Credit: Activision Blizzard; screengrab.

A major selling point for the military shooter game is its commitment to visual and sonic verisimilitude—something I've termed "military realism."²³ Military realism is an

²⁰ Levi Petty, "Analyzing Video Game Genre Popularity Around the World," Medium, July 30, 2020: <https://medium.com/@deephavendatalabs/analyzing-video-game-genre-popularity-around-the-world-9a0dfce3884>.

²¹ Makuch, E. (2024, October 31). Black Ops 6 had a Record-Setting Debut, as Franchise Passes 500 Million Units Sold. *GameSpot*. <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/black-ops-6-had-a-record-setting-debut-thanks-in-part-to-game-pass/1100-6527498/>; and Statista. (2024, October). Most popular video game genres among internet users worldwide as of 2nd quarter 2024, by age group. *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1263585/top-video-game-genres-worldwide-by-age/>.

²² The Entertainment Software Association. *2024 Essential Facts about the US Video Game Industry*. Washington, DC: Entertainment Software Association, 14. <https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Essential-Facts-2024-FINAL.pdf>.

²³ Thomas Payne, M. (2016). *Playing War: Military Video Games after 9/11*. NYU Press.

aesthetic mode that aims to create a believable representation of military gear, operations, and soldiers' experiences. This includes visual assets that faithfully render weaponry, uniforms, and battlefields, as well as game engines that compute complex weapons ballistics and layered sound design to recreate the din of battle.

Amid the creation of military realism, one finds the influence of the military-entertainment complex. For example, game companies regularly pay royalty fees to gun manufacturers to include specific virtual weapons in their titles as these gun names amplify a game's perceived authenticity. It is telling, however, that video game producers are reluctant to discuss the particulars of these licensing agreements.²⁴ Additionally, game studios will often employ ex-military personnel as subject matter experts who can advise on a range of topics—everything from jargon to room-clearing tactics—lending an additional sense of realism to their interactive wars.

But this aesthetic realism obscures the fact that games do not reproduce the social realities of armed conflict. For all of their exacting detail, these interactive universes generally are devoid of non-combatants, children, and moral complexity. These games might feature high-definition graphics and stereophonic sound, but their politics are overwhelmingly black and white. This is likewise the case for the representation of players' enemies. Racially othered and presented as monstrous threats, shooters evacuate the humanity from these combatants to make them attractive targets for the business end of players' guns. These ambivalences are intentional. Games featuring military realism want to have it both ways: they need to remain culturally relevant by connecting to worldly strife and by representing it with visual and sonic fidelity, earning the approval of players and critics alike; and, on the other hand, publishers are quick to remind us that these are “just games” and to avoid more vexing questions about the politics of wars, military abuses, and inequitable social power. To be clear, military realism is *not* military reality.

Video Games as Spaces of Critique

None of this is news to those activists, artists, game designers, and players who have highlighted the stark differences between military realism and military reality. Alternatively, more socially realistic visions of playable warfare appear in the work of independent game-makers. Two such examples are *Unmanned* (Molleindustria, 2012) and *Killbox* (Biome Collective, 2016). These titles tackle the questionable ethics of drone warfare by showing the mental toll on an operator when he's away from work, and by diving into the experiences of drone warfare first as the pilot and then as the target, successively.²⁵ Joseph DeLappe's “Dead-in-Iraq” performance art project (2006) involved typing the names and dates of U.S. military personnel killed in Iraq into the text messaging

²⁴ Parkin, S. (2019, May 14). Shooters: How Video Games Fund Arms Manufacturers. *EuroGamer*. <https://www.eurogamer.net/shooters-how-video-games-fund-arms-manufacturers>.

²⁵ These games can be played online for free. See: <https://unmanned.molleindustria.org/> and <https://www.killbox.info/>.

system of *America's Army*.²⁶ Artists Anne-Marie Schleiner, Joan Leandre, and Brody Condon intervened in *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000) by adding "protest sprays" to the game's library of spray paint imagery with messages like "Hostages of Military Fantasy" and "We are all Iraqis now."²⁷ Political activist Jordan Uhl was banned from the Army's esports Twitch channel after asking its host about U.S. war crimes using the site's chat function.²⁸ Other viewers quickly piled on with similar anti-war messages, forcing the Army to change their channel settings to stem further public relations damage.²⁹ And Rachel Berger's *Bullet I* art piece is a copper and lead-covered Xbox controller that protests the military's adoption of game controllers in their remote-strike operations. These efforts are powerful for how they make the familiar strange, transforming militarized play spaces into moments for critical reflection on how technologies of play are usurped by war practitioners.

Figure 4. Rachel Berger's *Bullet I* is an Xbox controller that has been dipped in lead and accented with copper thumbsticks.



Credit: Rachel Berger; used with permission.

Games as a Source of Healing

Games can also be used for healing and growing social connections among military personnel and others. The Department of Veterans Affairs, for example, has used games to

²⁶ Craig, K. (2006, June 6). Dead in Iraq: It's No Game. *Wired*. www.wired.com/2006/06/dead-in-iraq-its-no-game/.

²⁷ Velvet-Strike. (2002) *Net Art Anthology* [webpage]. <https://anthology.rhizome.org/velvet-strike>.

²⁸ Uhl, J. (2020, July 8). what i learned here is the us army esports twitch account auto-mods the phrase "war crime" so you have to type it 'w4r cr1me,'. Twitter, uploaded by @JordanUhl. <https://twitter.com/JordanUhl/status/1280998753730789382>.

²⁹ Gault, M. (2020, July 9). The U.S. Army Twitch Channel Is Banning People for Asking About War Crimes. *Vice*. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/n7w38m/the-us-army-esports-twitch-channel-is-banning-people-for-asking-about-war-crimes.

combat mental illness and suicidal ideation.³⁰ This is the same government using games but for decidedly different outcomes. The spirit of human play fostered by games—whether it manifests as critical artwork, online protests, or simply veterans playing together—offers a counterpoint to the Pentagon’s steady encroachment into entertainment spaces whereby war becomes one more plaything to be consumed without regard to its material or human costs.

The Costs of Militarized Gameplay

The Pentagon’s steady encroachment into video game culture militarizes it in ways that are both overt and subtle. It’s clear that the military wants to harness the passion around computer and video games to grow favorable connections to player communities. To feed military recruitment needs, service in the armed forces must remain relatable to young, would-be recruits. The military, arms manufacturers, and militainment producers find common cause in casting American-led warfare as an inevitable and even natural state of human affairs.

Martial conflict’s effects on humans are long-lasting and indeterminate; soldiers bear visible and invisible scars of battle. Yet shooter games rarely, if ever, acknowledge the personal costs of war like debilitating injuries, mental trauma, and regret. Indeed, games are pleasurable precisely because they transport the player outside of the messiness of everyday life. They distill players’ actions into quantifiable scores and in-game achievements. Understanding war principally through such a lens risks mistaking gameplay logics and zero-sum win conditions for more nuanced, complex ideas about the diplomacy and shared sacrifices needed to forge lasting international alliances and peace.

³⁰ Andrejev, A. (2019, November 11). Dept. of Veterans Affairs believes games can help soldiers reconnect, reduce suicides. Here’s how. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2019/11/11/dept-veterans-affairs-believes-games-can-help-soldiers-reconnect-reduce-suicides-heres-how/>.