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Why We Still Fight:
Adolescents, *America's Army*, and the Government-Gaming Nexus

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Abstract
This paper uses a political economic (Bettig & Hall, 2003; McChesney, 2000; 2004; 2008; Meehan, 2005, Mosco, 2009; Wasko, 2005) lens to examine the U.S. government's video game, *America's Army*. *America's Army* is a first-person shooter game available for free online that has military recruitment as its primary goal. The U.S. Army launched *America's Army* on July 4, 2002; it has been downloaded more than 42 million times and has a virtual Army comprised of 519,472 "soldiers." This paper studies the history of the government production of *America's Army* and uses industry and government records to explore the current ties between the public sector and transindustrial gaming conglomerates. The issue of the video game and its intended youth audience becomes even more problematic when one considers how the government combines its strength with powerful corporate interests to disseminate violent media to adolescents with military enlistment and commodification as primary goals. As a result, this paper conceptualizes the "government-gaming nexus" to explain the relationship between the U.S. government and private transindustrial media organizations to better understand how that structure functions in society. Praxis strategies focus on ratings, education, and regulation.

Why We Still Fight: Adolescents, *America's Army,* and the Government-Gaming Nexus

In an era of public relations sweeping government ranks (Rampton & Stauber, 2003), consolidated media ownership (Bagdikian, 2004; Bettig & Hall, 2003), and a diminished government watchdog role by the media (McChesney, 2000; 2004; 2008), the U.S. military is increasingly telling its own story through the use of targeted media, with dramatic results. Among its sharpest tools is the video game franchise *America's Army*, a worldwide entertainment phenomenon that is intended to recruit soldiers into a series of wars that for years were understaffed and unpopular (Hodes & Ruby-Sachs, 2002; Huntemann & Payne, 2010; White, 2005). With the ability to shape its own messages about the military, war, and what it means to be a soldier, the government is effectively using the Internet coupled with privately-developed gaming consoles to persuade a reluctant public to not just believe in war but to join it.

At the pinnacle of the *America's Army* franchise is the first-person shooter (FPS) video game of the same name, but the brand has been expanded and revamped since its first launch in 2002 through official YouTube and Facebook pages, as well as a graphic novel. *America's Army* versions are available for the XBox, Gameboy, and PlayStation consoles and mobile phone applications (Reagan, 2008), examples that highlight efforts to create and promote media synergy among various platforms (Meehan, 2005; Wasko, 2001). The game is designed as a recruitment tool but also serves a pedagogical function, attempting to train enlisted soldiers in the areas of marksmanship and desensitization to violent scenes soldiers may encounter on the actual battlefield (Belanich, Orvis, & Sibley, 2004; Nichols, 2010a; 2010b; Orvis, Orvis, Belanich, & Mullin, 2005). The game is like many other commercially available war video

games: Players communicate through an online network as they move through fictional battlefields completing military missions fighting and killing enemy combatants.

America's Army launched on July 4th, 2002, American Independence Day. By July 2010, more than 10 million registered users had played at least one version of the game ("Letter from Leadership," 2010). Official military materials ("Letter from Leadership, 2010) have claimed: "The game has exceeded all expectations by placing Soldiering front and center within popular culture and showcasing the roles training, teamwork, and technology play in the Army" (para. 3). In 1999, U.S. Army Col. Casey Wardynski was with his sons at the big-box retailer, *Best Buy*, when he noticed that military-themed games were popular. He wanted to use video games to connect to a demographic that the Army needed to reverse its lackluster recruitment. In a military report published in 2010, Wardynski with two co-authors explained that *America's Army* can recruit soldiers "at a cost that is 10 to 40 times cheaper" (Wardynski, Lyle, & Colarusso, 2010, p. 31) than traditional recruitment advertising. Wardynski explained that the game was designed so that players over time would experience a higher comfort level with the concept and visualization of an Army career.

A 2008 Massachusetts Institute of Technology study showed that nearly one-third (30 percent) of all Americans aged 16 to 24 expressed a more positive impression of the Army because of the game (Shein, 2010). Young men and women who played *America's Army* at sites set up strategically by the U.S. Army were 30% more likely than those adolescents who had never played to consider military service as a possible career option. In 2006, four years after its initial release, the active-duty Army had recruited nearly 73,000 new soldiers, almost 3,000 more than its target ("'America's Army' Video Game," 2006). By 2007, that number hit 80,000 new recruits, attributable, in part, to the success of *America's Army* video game downloads (De Avila, 2008). In 2009, the franchise anchored by a FPS video game resulted in the Army again meeting its recruitment goals, a trend started in the first years after the game's launch (Holmes, 2009). The government-private structure that produces, maintains, and promotes the game is working.

During wartime, the ability and force of a free press are tested and, unfortunately, those tests in the last decade have shown deep problems with U.S. journalism (McChesney, 2008). The government and powerful media industries, not a free press, tell their own stories and shape their own narratives about war in society. The issue becomes even more problematic when the U.S. government combines its strength with transindustrial corporations to create and to disseminate violent media designed to sway public opinion and to shape ideologies. What develops over time is a combination of publicly-financed and privately-created media so powerful that it takes on the same significance for Iraq and Afghanistan as Hollywood film propaganda did during World War II.

This paper will explain *America's Army's* production, which is a hybrid of public government propaganda and private video game capitalism, considering the intended target audience of this first-person shooter (FPS) video game. Using a political economic lens, this analysis will review trade publications, official government documents, and private industry records to explain why and how adolescents are the targets of a government-created FPS video game. In the case of *America's Army*, the reason children are the targets of the mass mediated messages is twofold. First, the government targets the youth market as a way to establish its messages about war and violence in society as it simultaneously attempts to recruit soldiers to join. Second, the corporate partners of the government also seek to cultivate violent and consumerist ideologies in the youth demographic, to establish brand loyalty early, to continue sales of military-themed toys and games, and to harness the power of this demographic's spending ability through government deals with private entities like Ubisoft and NASCAR. This paper begins with a brief overview of the literature about *America's Army* and militarized entertainment then moves to a description of political economy as the theoretical and methodological framework. Using that lens, the analysis focuses on the production of the video game as a function of the public-private structure. This analysis has led to the creation of a new model of critical inquiry that I am calling the "government-gaming nexus." The conclusion focuses on praxis strategies and directions for future research.

Literature Review

America's Army

Previous authors have examined *America's Army* though few have studied it through this framework examining the adolescent target audience with an emphasis on the private-public structure that produces the game. Andersen and Kurti (2009) explained that the game's emphasis on perceived realism and reality were prime goals of the U.S. Army's recruitment drive. Van der Graaf and Nieborg (2003) explained *America's Army* is an advertisement that shapes the target audience into a laborer in a system where production and distribution is blurred by technology. Nichols (2010a; 2010b) focused on *America's Army's* dual mission as recruitment tool and cultural adver-game, explaining the game's best success is the possible realization for other countries and companies to use similar technology to brand themselves in the video age. Li (2004) examined the game as a public sphere, interviewing players like a person identified as "K" from Ohio, who was in 2003 a part of the "Drunks with Guns" online clan and who eventually joined the actual U.S. Army (p. 16). Li (2004) conceptualized the game as an important part of the U.S. Army's shaping of public policy.

Barron and Huntemann (2004) equated the *America's Army* franchise to modern-day propaganda not unlike Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* films from World War II. The stark difference is that the military video games do more than explain the *why* of fighting but also act as a how-to guide as well, immersing players in a high-technology, low-realism setting. Stahl (2006) suggested that *America's Army* is one of a number of commercially-available games that re-constitutes civilian space into a high-technology militarized zone, a re-mapping of "traditional lines between battlefield and home front" (p. 125). Power (2007) explored the "entanglement" of the military and digital games sphere, while also noting that games like *America's Army* both validate and rationalize military involvement. Nieborg (2010) highlighted on the inherent messages of *America's Army*, calling the game's creation and free dissemination, quite simply, government propaganda. Payne (2009) used in-depth interviews to study the game, focusing on *America's Army's* production, explaining after his analysis of six hours interviewing three military game producers that the game is a fusion between the private sector entertainment gaming companies and state-funded government organizations. But, to date, little research exists that traces the history of the government production of the video game with its links to private capitalist interests. This paper hopes to add to the literature by examining the private-public partnership that produces and distributes the video game and targets adolescents by using government and private records to trace the relationship.

Militarized Entertainment and the State

Researchers have classified trends in the relationship between the United States government, media organizations, and the private defense sector in different ways. Today, researchers refer to the militarized gaming and simulators for public consumption as part of the military-entertainment complex (Andersen, 2006; Lenoir & Lowood, 2003; Leonard, 2004), the military-industrial-media-entertainment network (Der Derian, 2001), or as militainment (Stahl, 2006; 2010), a genre of entertainment-based media that blends military ideology with entertainment across platforms and through various mass media.

Authors (Andersen, 2006; Andersen & Kurti, 2009; Lenoir, 2003; Lenoir & Lowood, 2003; Leonard, 2004) studying the military-entertainment complex have explained the structures in place that have fostered relationships between the government and private video game makers, television networks, or filmmakers to tell militarized stories that often have anti-terrorism as a dominant theme while simultaneously celebrating the U.S. state and its hegemony. Writing pro-military scripts or removing language and characters the military sees as counter to cultivating its positive messages in society are just two ways that the government has control over content, but Robb (2004) also said that changing content to be more military-friendly helps military recruiters expand their pool of potential applicants.

Studying the military-entertainment complex or militainment is rooted in an academic basis for inquiry that seeks to chart and understand the relationships between popular culture and state action. The news media have their own role in the violence narrative. As Trend (2003) explained: "[Media] representations of violence play an important role in the legitimization of police and military action" (p. 302). Andersen (2006) explained in her analysis of the military-entertainment complex that the profit-motivated media,

including news organizations, are just as hungry for the war experience as civilians who have become accustomed to the technology that modern warfare provides.

Stahl (2010) also revealed that *America's Army* is not the first product of popular culture to blend war and entertainment nor does his analysis suggest that government-influenced, government-created and/or government-financed media that could shift a nation's ideologies regarding war, consumerism, and the identities of capitalism began with the modern wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He wrote that militainment is:

State violence translated into an object of pleasurable consumption. Beyond this, the word also suggests that this state violence is not of the abstract, distant, or historical variety but rather an impending or current use of force, one directly relevant to the citizen's current political life. (2010, p. 6)

The use of video games, Stahl (2010) suggested, is a strategic move by the U.S. government in the 21st Century to blur the lines between entertainment and the battlefield.

Such a blurring means that the government produces games for use with its own ranks of enlisted soldiers just as it provides those games to a civilian population eager to try an "authentic" war experience and participate in violent mass media. This paper uses the frameworks provided by militainment, the military-entertainment complex, and the military-industrial-media-entertainment network to study the video game production and intended adolescent audience.

Political Economy

A political economic analysis is meant to serve a normative function by explaining the role and structure of media and government in a democratic system. Analysis of the video game, *America's Army*, through a political economic lens is more relevant when one understands the public-private structure that targets the youth demographic. Traditional political economy of media (Bagdikian, 2004; Bettig & Hall, 2003; McChesney, 2000; 2004; 2008; Mosco, 2009; Wasko, 2005) focuses on the growing concerns of media concentration of ownership, conglomeration, and production that is focused primarily on commercialism and commodification of audiences at the expense of media that is vital to the maintenance of a democracy. As capitalism defines markets worldwide in an ever-globalized system and, specifically as the discipline relates to mediated communication dominated by companies that transcend international geographic boundaries, political economy remains a strong discipline. It frames both theoretical and methodological concerns with an emphasis on corporate and government structure and the ideological functions produced by that structure. Mosco (2009) said that political economic work focuses on the commodification of both the media and its content with an emphasis on who holds the power in such a structure—often the power lies with large media corporations or governments.

This paper argues that the U.S. government benefits from the structure by spreading its messages about war and recruitment unfiltered to a gaming audience. Private gaming corporations, too, have something to gain. Since its earliest entry to create a video game used as a recruitment tool, the U.S. government has turned part of the game's production over to corporate video game companies, which are expected to reap $13 billion in profits by 2013 (Reagan, 2008), a connection that further emphasizes the utility of political economy in the study of the video game industry. Other corporations gain subscribers or fans and potential audiences for their products. These adolescents become, as Marx (1904) suggested, laborers in the capitalist system.

Exploring the Government-Gaming Nexus
The Teen Rating
America's Army is rated "T" for "Teen," meaning it is suitable for children ages 13 and older under the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) system. An internal report created by the MOVES Institute, the game's military creator, reflects why the game received its younger-than-expected "T" for "Teen" rating. Report authors (Zyda, Mayberry, Wardynski, Shilling, & Davis, 2003) explained:

The army estimates *America's Army* is conserving some $700M-$4B per year. With respect to recruitment, actual results won't be known for four or five years, when the current raft of thirteen- and fourteen-year olds will be old enough to join. (p. 2)

The rating is notable because other popular FPS games--including those "depicting" war like *Call of Duty*--have ratings of "M" for "Mature," meaning they are suitable only for teenagers age 17 and older. Critics (Holmes, 2009; see Sinclair, 2008; Sirota, 2009) of the *America's Army* rating have said that the "T" rating coupled with the knowledge that the Army is unambiguous about using the game for its recruiting goals, means children are too young and face undue influence from game play. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) issued a report in 2008 titled, "Soldiers of Misfortune," that claimed the recruitment practices actually violate international law. The U.S. Army has a vested interest in keeping as many adolescents and teenagers playing as possible to maximize its recruiting and marketing goals as well as to benefit the marketing goals and bottom line of its corporate partners.

Increasing broadband connectivity in homes nationwide coupled with a reliance on computer gaming for entertainment provided Wardynski with further evidence of how the Army could literally connect to young men and women. There's a reason why the Army hopes to connect with this generation, typically identified beginning at age 13 in some Army documents (see Wardynski, Lyle, & Colarusso, 2010). Army research suggests that this age group born between 1982 and 2001, known as the "Millennial Generation," possess independence as a result of their technological familiarity while simultaneously showing a trust and respect for authority. Furthermore, Drago (2006) reported that Millennials prefer Internet communication, which allows them to feel connected while still allowing them to remain sedentary, just one part of their overly-entertainment driven lifestyles. Wardynski, Lyle, and Colarusso (2010) wrote in an Army monograph about recruitment of this Millennial generation: "In sum, their size, character, beliefs, behavior, and location in history make Millennials an excellent officer prospect population for the Army, provided the Army tailors its approach to attract them accordingly" (p. 18). The authors continued: "Because Army efforts to recruit potential officers do not go into full swing until young adults reach age 17, there is significant time for popular culture to shape beliefs and perceptions of military service" (pp. 23-24). In order to have the U.S. Army shape those beliefs before popular culture does, the government has created a video game meant to penetrate the youth demographic.

Corporate Links

With the directive to increase recruiting, top military leaders turned to gaming-industry insiders to position *America's Army* as the key voice providing war-themed entertainment to the public. As such, Zyda, Hiles, Mayberry, Wardynski, Capps, Osborn et. al. (2003) explained that the government's top simulation creators turned to the video game industry's top artists, designers, and computer programmers from gaming giants including Electronic Arts, Sony, and Kalisto. Sound professionals from Dolby Laboratories and Skywalker Sound helped game designers use state-of-the-art audio within the game that allows players to hear "a flash-bang grenade scud off the floor behind him just before being incapacitated by the roar and ring of tinnitus in the ears" (Zyda, Hiles, Mayberry, Wardynski, Capps, Osborn et. al., 2003, p. 29). These links to private industry were just the beginning.

In 2004, as the Army sought to once again pump recruitment ("America's Army: Rise of a Soldier," 2005), the U.S. Army turned to French-based Ubisoft to attract new distribution deals. Ubisoft considers itself a "leading producer, publisher and distributor of interactive entertainment products worldwide and has grown considerably through a strong and diversified line-up of products and partnerships" (Ubisoft Press Release, 2011). During the 2009-10 fiscal year, Ubisoft generated sales of €871 million, worth approximately $1.2 billion at December 2011 exchange rates. Ubisoft could utilize the vast resources of the U.S. Army, including visits to basic training sites where game developers received primary information about how and what a military career could and should look like on screen ("U.S. Army and Ubisoft join forces," 2004). Naish (2006) notes that a gaming company can spend between $15 million and $20 million to bring a commercial video game to the market--such a financial outlay was not required by Ubisoft to bring *America's Army* to console gaming because the U.S. government already had created the game basics.

The French company also detailed in a 2004 news release that by partnering with the U.S. Army, it could tap into the top military gaming market that accounted for the industry's most popular and profitable franchises. These partners become valuable for the Army because they provide the best and latest technology while they also receive the benefit of a vast teenage audience that plays _America's Army_ for free online. An Epic press release ("U.S. Army Licenses," 2005) said: "By harnessing the power of the Unreal Engine, America's Army produces extraordinarily engaging and realistic environments and experiences" (para. 4). The Army may use this technology to entice users who are used to sophisticated graphics in FPS games. The gamers get a free game if they choose to download it through the website and Epic and other Army partners get the free exposure associated with the Army game's millions of downloads and visitors. Also, these video game partners receive insight and instruction about how to create game terrain and game technology modeled after actual battlefield and military technology and terminology, an authenticity considered highly valuable for the corporate video game market (Andersen & Kurti, 2009). In the partnership between the government and private gaming companies, the creation of such authenticity is considered a hefty commodity.

The point was to translate that military access to the game features and try to outpace other military-themed FPS games. Ubisoft Vice President of Marketing Tony Key was quoted saying: "_America's Army_ is a strong brand…Ubisoft and the Army are set to deliver a solid and authentic Army experience" ("America's Army: True Soldiers Xbox 360," 2007, para. 4). A 2004 article published in _National Defense_ magazine explained the corporate benefits of the Army-Ubisoft partnership this way: "For its part, Ubisoft gets the marketing benefits of highly visible and valuable brand names" (Peck, 2004, para. 6). In its 2005 annual report, Ubisoft executives explained the benefit of taking an existing game and developing for a console gaming system like the Xbox and PlayStation2. The annual report stated:

By bringing out a title onto multiple platforms (home consoles, portable consoles and PC), while ensuring that each version respects the specificities of the support and offers novel features, the company reaches an ever-increasing number of consumers without a proportional increase in production costs. (p. 15)

After the U.S. government turned part of the production of the game over to Ubisoft, the company was expected to reap $13 billion in profits by 2013 because of its exclusive publishing agreement with the U.S. Army ("Ubisoft annual report," 2005; Reagan, 2008). The military benefits included yet another boost in recruitment and visibility. Partnering with Ubisoft allowed the Army greater distribution on home gaming consoles including the Xbox with little financial risk. The Army gets to spread its messages through the video game industry. Meanwhile, Ubisoft gets the benefit of an existing game brand and gets to license the game and ancillary products to a highly-coveted demographic. In this way, the corporate synergies (Meehan, 2005; Wasko, 2001) also take priority for an audience that is being commodified.

Although the aims of the private corporations and the government may differ, for both, the game is a branding strategy. Wardynski said of _America's Army_ in an interview with an advertising publication: "It's sort of a deep marketing effort—a branding tool" (as quoted in Oser, 2005, para. 2). The Army successfully branded itself, but in the process it also brought a key demographic to other companies and organizations, all of whom have made extensive profits partnering with the U.S. Army through the use of its popular video game.

Developing Synergies
Toys, product placements, and even clothing continue furthering the Army's brand and garnering revenue for corporate partners where the online and console versions of the video game may not reach, such as retail giant Sears' stocking an officialArmy brand clothing line in 2008 (Landman, 2008). Less than one year after the partnership between the Army and Ubisoft was sealed, NMA, a product placement firm, was hired to promote _America's Army_. Christopher Chambers, deputy director of _America's Army_, told _Brandweek_ magazine that: "We want it in dialogue, situations, content, things that bring up the essence of the game. We don't want it just in the background" (as quoted in Ebenkamp & Wasserman, 2005, para. 2).The push to further brand the Army and reach even more young people through targeted advertising came as the Army also was promoting a line of action figures. The Christmas season of 2002, just five

months after the game's first release, saw sales of military-themed toys and violent games outpace others, based on the success of the *America's Army* video game and other popular FPS titles (Goldberg, 2002).

By 2006, with its Ubisoft partnership in full swing and reaching more young people through the Xbox and online, the Army had turned real soldiers, dubbed "Real Heroes" throughout the gaming website and social media sites affiliated with the Army game, into action figures for sale at $10 each ("'America's Army' video game adds real soldiers," 2006). A toy website that promoted the dolls' release described them this way in an online news release: "Each Soldier's action figure includes a Real Heroes trading card highlighting the Soldier's heroic accomplishments and Warrior Ethos, authentic uniforms, weapons, unit insignias, and awards" ("Jazwares launches," 2007). In 2011, the Army still was promoting on its official gaming website several action figures based on those soldiers. The *America's Army* website promotes the heroes and playing cards, continuing the conversation from online game play to the real world and producing an outlet for young people interested in a military career. Just as traditional media organizations and conglomerates have relied on synergies (Meehan, 2005; Wasko, 2001) to increase profits, the military and private structure has turned to similar strategies.

Researchers (Calvert, 2008; Cook, 2004; Deutsch & Theodorou, 2009; Thomas, 2007; Wasko, 2001) have explored the trend toward commercialization of children with some suggesting that boys who are targets of corporate marketers are buying into a culture of war and violence through the consumption of toys and other violent media (Miedzian, 1991; Schor, 2004). Minority children and low-income children may be at an even greater risk of these violent marketing strategies because of the amount and type of media they consume (Levin & Carlsson-Page, 2003). Evidence of how the U.S. government has been coordinating its mediated Army recruitment drives targeted at adolescents emphasizes a troubling trend in the production of government-created media, its resulting ideological function, and its partnership with corporate video game companies beset on profiting from the same group that the U.S. Army hopes to persuade to serve. The synergistic environment takes on new meaning in *America's Army's* production: It becomes a vehicle to reach the youth demographic.

In 2005, more than three years after the video game *America's Army* was first launched, the U.S. Army under Wardynski's leadership took further steps to ensure teenagers could relate to soldiers in the game, and therefore in real life, as it set about a marketing strategy that would prove profitable by Christmas. In November 2005, one month before Christmas and a the start of the holiday buying season, the company Game Live, a California-based video game marketing company, announced that *America's Army* would be one game featured to "kick off the Xbox holiday retail tour" ("Game live," 2005, para. 1). Game Live promotes and markets "video game" experiences and counts both Ubisoft and the U.S. Army as its clients and as its partners for the holiday publicity stunts. To promote the Xbox in 2005, one year after the Army and Ubisoft partnered, Game Live targeted more than 300,000 shoppers at ten megamalls nationwide. Admission was free. Play time was unlimited.

Another marketing strategy that Ubisoft pioneered via *America's Army* included the use of Xfire, a free in-game instant messaging system that early in its development attracted both Mountain Dew, MTV, and chip maker AMD as advertisers that were trying to target the "elusive male demo[graphic]" (Bulik, 2004, para. 1). Xfire also allows gamers to see which games their friends may be playing when they go online (Gabbay, 2006). Fulton (2006) explained that Xfire "gives media providers a lucrative way to contact prospective viewers while they're certain to be paying very, very close attention to their screens" (para. 2). Media giant Viacom purchased Xfire for between $102 and $110 million in April 2006, a service that proved successful and profitable due to the success of the communication being bundled within *America's Army* (Brightman, 2007; Gabbay, 2006). As of March 2011, the company's website explained that more than 10 million registered users are playing video games online using Xfire.

Other corporate partners include NASCAR. The *America's Army* video game sponsors a race car and it is represented on the game web page. The Army website explained: "The U.S. Army team races with a dedication, teamwork and passion which is inspired by the Soldiers [sic] who defend our freedom. Led by

new driver Ryan Newman, the U.S. Army car thunders down the track with more than 850 [horsepower] under the hood" ("AA3&NASCAR," 2009, para. 1). The creation of the *America's Army* car is just one more way to reach an adolescent audience and target recruitment through this government-private partnership. Stahl (2010) wrote: "Extreme sports provide a storyline and purpose that enables the interactive consumption of state violence" (p. 72). NASCAR fans are 1.5 times more likely to serve in the military than the general population ("Democratic Rep. targets," 2011). Demographics of NASCAR fans also show key similarities to the Army's prime recruiting targets. This blending of racing and militarism helps to further cultivate the brand loyalty of both the young people who play and the NASCAR fans who watch. Newman and Giardina (2010) wrote:

More specifically, we contend that NASCAR is at once the corporate sport organism that best exemplifies the principles of this burgeoning free-market empire and the archetypal, if not centrifugal, sporting apparatus orchestrated by political and corporate intermediaries in the manufacture of pedagogies of consent in an age of global capitalism. (p. 1515)

This relationship also signifies another way that the audience of *America's Army* is being commodified by both the government and a corporate partner which have similar interests. For example, Spanberg (2011) quoted marketing executive researching fan participation:

We've got to get the 18-to-34s and to get them in the future, you better get the 12-to-17s,' says Mike Boykin, executive vice president of sports marketing at GMR Marketing, a frequent consultant to companies with motorsports sponsorships. 'They're looking at a lot of things, from the networks to NASCAR, things in social media.' (para. 8)

The partnership between NASCAR, private gaming companies, and *America's Army* then works to position adolescents as the targets of these mediated messages. The reason they are the targets is to make them a part of either a militarized audience or a commodified one, and possibly both. The effect is a boost in potential recruits as well as a way to increase corporate profits at the expense of taxpayers. The Army estimates that it received 46,000 recruiting leads because of that NASCAR sponsorship (Glucker, 2011). In an interview at the Daytona 500, a NASCAR race, Menzer (2011) asked a military officer how many of those 46,000 potential leads actually become recruits. Freakley answered: "A large part of what we're for is getting them to what we call the marketing funnel" (para. 6). The same interviewer asked Freakley "Why is NASCAR and the U.S. Army such a good fit together?" Freakley answered:

Have you ever watched a NASCAR opening? How patriotic is it? Flags, the national anthem, pride in country, pride in my guy….I just think there is a nexus of this is America's sport, and the Army is America's team. We are America's Army…We know this is having an impact on recruiting and helping our recruiters with their jobs…We have a great and, in my mind, treasured relationship with NASCAR because it gives us a great venue to tell our story as soldiers where people are receptive to it. (Menzer, 2011, para. 16-18)

As the U.S. military hopes to improve its recruitment and lower its recruiting costs, the military has turned over part of the production of the video game to private game company Ubisoft, which stands to make billions of dollars off console versions of the game, and partnered with extreme sports companies like NASCAR, which includes as its fan base some of the same demographics that the Army also craves. Through the partnership, the government gains access to the most cutting-edge technology, like Ubisoft's Unreal game engine, which savvy Millennials have come to expect from their FPS game play. The government is after all, competing against popular commercial titles like, *Call of Duty* and *Half-Life*, which also allow players to inflict FPS violence. By partnering with one of the world's largest video game makers, it stands to win favor in the eyes of video gamers.

The Army is able to also partner with NASCAR to target a demographic that seeks thrills and may already be geographically pre-disposed to consider a military career. The *America's Army* video game brand becomes tied with these others to reach the widest, most impressionable teen audience to help cultivate

loyalty, and perhaps recruitment, among the Millennial generation. Marx (1904) explained that the capitalist system attempts to create wants in a system where profit motivations are a key goal. In such a system, the wants for the generation are fostered by a partnership between the government and private corporations. By helping adolescents explore if they want to join the military through the use of a video game, the government through the use of *America's Army* has abused the very system of democracy that it says its soldiers fight and die for.

Such targeting of adolescents with the game that serves a propagandistic function helps to explain why we *still* fight much in the same way that Frank Capra films during WWII shaped American propaganda and the resulting public reception of war messages then. Both the military and the private corporations involved have a financial stake in keeping the adolescents as prime targets for their mediated messages. Political economy (Bagdikian, 2004; Bettig & Hall, 2003; McChesney, 2000; 2004; 2008; Mosco, 2009; Wasko, 2005) helps us to understand why and how that partnership is fostered and becomes an accepted part of state and corporate domination. This social relationship forms the backbone for Mosco's (2009) claim that political economy aids in the study of how this power is organized and how the ability to maintain that power remains.

Conclusion

This paper addressed the *America's Army* video game franchise viewed through a political economic lens. Through such an analysis, this paper has explored how the U.S. Army through its *America's Army* video game and corresponding website attempts to target an adolescent audience, a demographic also considered valuable by private corporations. Kellner and Durham (2006) wrote: "To properly understand any specific form of media and culture, one must understand how it is produced and distributed in a given society and how it is situated in relation to the dominant social structure" (p. xvii). This paper hopes to add to the literature on *America's Army* by addressing how and why adolescents are the key targets of both the government and private gaming companies through a synthesis of private and public documents. This research reveals what I am calling the "government-gaming nexus," a partnership between the government and corporations that seek to target adolescents using violent video games. Through an analysis of internal government and corporate reports, this paper reveals both the government and the gaming companies have powerful interests in targeting this vulnerable and valuable demographic with violent media.

A 2011 Army report said: "The 'America's Army' gaming project is a long-term commitment, focusing on the development of future products that will further the integration of CRM [risk management] and safety throughout America's Army gaming, simulation, training, and outreach products" ("Army Gaming," 2011, para. 3). The game seems to be part of the military strategy—and therefore the corporate gaming and branding strategy--for years to come. As such, it requires further attention focused on its production but also work examining the text that functions as an arm of that production. Also, documenting audience interactions with the text is needed. Furthermore, researchers may want to consider how the traditional media corporations—part of the military-entertainment complex—frame stories and issues related to *America's Army*.

The Army, through its successful *America's Army* franchise, produces this video game as a way to brand the military and target adolescents. To reach recruitment goals, the government uses a lower-than-expected-industry age rating to target adolescents as young as 13. The partnership with corporations like NASCAR and Ubisoft commodifies adolescents and attempts to sell them products and services while they are engrossed in militarized game play. Just as Capra effectively used the *Why We Fight* series to convince the U.S. public to support war in the 1940s, this video game franchise helps to convince Americans—especially young Americans—why we still fight.

When the government targets adolescents and teenagers with its mediated messages, understanding the process by which those messages are created and disseminated is crucial to developing praxis strategies that may lead to changes—changes either in how those messages are produced or changes in how media education campaigns are designed that can help the public understand the motives of that media.

The state working with private industry to disseminate virtual war acts to engage the civilian public. Such engagement as a piece of military public relations and advertising limits dissent and asks that public to become workers in its system of ideological myth. It also shapes how and what people think about military power, state authority, and the role of corporations. These tactics become a part of the military and corporate consciousness industry and function to legitimize military force, military spending, and the use of high-technology military machinery. Such legitimization is a result of the government and private structure that produced *America's Army* and its website, a portal to game play for many in the audience.

As political economists (Macek, 2006; Wasko, 2005) have suggested, the ultimate goal of studying these cultural products and the structure that produces them is to develop praxis strategies that help create resistance to the messages. Authors (Bettig, 2004; Kellner & Durham, 2006) have suggested that an audience may regain control of the mediated sphere with appropriate media literacy. To create praxis strategies for *America's Army* seems even more daunting when one considers the structure as a public-private hybrid producing a FPS game, a key component of adolescents' 21st Century media diets. When the messages are seemingly ubiquitous, questions arise about how best to reverse these trends. In order to develop these strategies, one must understand the cultural and ideological products that exist in such a system, one that is marked by militarism and corporately-controlled media. The structure of the government with private industry that benefits from the game's widest possible distribution means that praxis strategies may be difficult but not impossible. Praxis should focus on three key areas: Forcing the government to comply with current self-regulatory mechanisms to rate its video game appropriately, forcing the government to adhere to current advertising regulations about Internet marketing, and creating education and media literacy campaigns.

First, properly rating the video game according to the standards of the ESRB is one way to work toward educating parents about the content. The ESRB ratings system can help users and parents understand the content of the video game. The rating for the video game needs to be changed to better reflect not just the content that it includes but the motives that it serves. *America's Army* at a minimum should be rated "M" for "Mature," meaning that the content had been deemed unsuitable for children age 16 and younger. Such a rating would help to alter the target audience to one that actually is of age to enlist in the military. The rating change would help parents make more informed decisions about the content in *America's Army*. It should not just be rated "M" for its first-person shooter violence, but because it has recruitment as chief goal. Eliminating the "T" rating is one way to help stop the government and private targeting of the adolescent audience.

Still, such a rating may do little to stop minors from viewing the game when it is available for free online. The video game website, then, should be required to prominently display its intention as a military recruiter to better inform parents and players of its intended goals. In December 2011, the home website page of *America's Army* prominently advertises a new grenade that can be used for in-game play. The home page says of this grenade that it is: "A new weapon for the arsenal." The home page also includes a virtual likeness of Matthew Zedwick, one of the Real Heroes, poised for battle, carrying a rifle. Rather than navigating to the *America's Army* website and finding Zedwick and messages about grenades, the website should open with a disclaimer about its true intention as a military recruiter. Cigarette packs carry warnings. So, too, should *America's Army*.

Finally, related to the potential legal and regulatory remedies currently available related to stopping the spread of *America's Army*, the game should be treated as advertising and, as such, should be regulated according to the standards provided by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). These regulatory goals are especially important because of the adolescent target audience. The U.S. Army is clear in stating its goals that the video game and its corresponding multi-media franchise work as an advertisement and branding strategy to lure potential recruits. As such, the government should be forced to comply with the rules on advertising; these rules are even stricter when children are potentially part of the audience. *America's Army's* text qualifies as both deceptive and fails to provide adequate information about its intended use. The FTC rules on advertising state: "The Commission has determined that a representation, omission or practice is deceptive if it is likely to: mislead consumers and affect consumers' behavior or decisions about the product or service" (Federal Trade Commission, 2011, para. 2). Furthermore, the FTC requires

truth in advertising and disclosure of advertising, in print, television, and online advertisements. Advertisers must be truthful, accurate, and include information that is free of deception. The FTC rulemaking says that advertising must include a disclaimer but also demonstrate how a product "will perform under normal use" (Federal Trade Commission, 2011, para. 8). Demonstrating this product and showing the actual effects of war could work to help the audience resist messages and ideologies. And, of course, that could help to stop enlistment based on game play.

Opportunities related to media education and audience reception of the *America's Army* messages further can create praxis and work to overturn the dominant ideologies at work in the video game and website text. Leonard (2004) suggested actually turning the structure and video games' war ideologies around to teach students how and why government and manufacturers create the products they create. To educators, he makes the claim that such war themes in violent video games may be repurposed and deconstructed to show how governments and industries are attempting to create and foster militaristic and violent ideologies. Media literacy campaigns should address the institutional structure that produced and fostered the expansion of the game, examine the text related to military and corporate goals, and seek out an understanding of how audiences work with texts to create meaning in society. These strategies could come from the very audience the military and corporations are trying to target. Media-savvy Millennials could use social media sites to create their own responses to the production and text of the game and produce counter-representations. Sharing and re-sharing these encouragement of dissent could become viral antidotes to the messages that are such a key part of *America's Army*.

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