

**“THERE IS A SOLDIER IN ALL OF US”: THE USE OF VIDEO GAMES BY THE  
U.S. MILITARY AS A RECRUITMENT TOOL**

By

Daniyar Sadykov

Capstone Individual Project submitted to the Bard Global Studies  
of the Bard College  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Word Count: 6800

New York

2024

## **Abstract**

The video games industry has recently become one of the biggest entertainment mediums in human history, surpassing films, movies and music and that growth was not left unnoticed. The United States Department of Defense who has been involved in many parts of the American entertainment industry, wanted to boost their recruitment numbers by cooperating with video game developers. They have long identified the potential use of video games to recruit teenagers and young adults and had various plans on using video games as recruitment tool. The main goal of this Capstone project is to better understand the evolving relationships between a new type of entertainment media and the military. While having short successes to bolster recruitment numbers through video games in the early 2000s and 2020s, both campaigns could be considered a failure in securing a stable arrival of new recruits in the long term. Despite this, the US military branches have kept a keen interest in this new medium, due to the sheer size of the gaming industry and constant flow of teenagers and young adults. Constantly wondering how video games can be used in the service to the military, it seems that there are no signs of them stopping anytime soon.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Literature Review</b> .....	<b>5</b>
Other Forms of Entertainment .....	5
Why Gamers?.....	6
<b>Analysis of The Military Involvement in the Early 2000s</b> .....	<b>8</b>
How It Started .....	8
Government-Funded Shooter .....	8
Why the First Attempt Failed?.....	10
<b>Analysis of the Military Involvement in 2020s</b> .....	<b>11</b>
How It is Going Now .....	11
Call of Duty .....	12
Rewriting History.....	13
Ex-Government Workers in Charge of Making Video Games.....	14
Why Has it Failed again? .....	15
<b>Too Important to Give Up On</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>21</b>

## Introduction

The United States Department of Defense (DoD) along with all of the U.S. military branches have a long history of involvement in many parts of the American entertainment industry, collaborating with filmmakers, writers, and recently for the surprise of some video game developers as well. While the DoD has been involved in the filmmaking industry for as long as since the 1920s, for the past 20 years, they were pouring a staggering amount of money and effort to get in the video game industry as well. In the short span of few decades, video games have risen up in popularity with an incredible speed hitting major milestones and now representing one of if not the biggest entertainment medium in human history surpassing both literature and filmed entertainment (Richter, 2022). If only 10 years ago, video games were always a runner-up trying to keep up with the trends of films, and books than today the picture has completely changed with the number of movies and printed media based on video games suggesting they will be new trend in Hollywood (MacDonald 2023). The United States Department of Defense along with the military branches of the U.S. military have long identified the potential to use video games in order to recruit the huge share of the American gamers whose demographic just so happens to be dominated at the moment by the age group the military so wants now which are male teenagers and young adults (Gilbert, 2024). In the last 40 years, the U.S. government have shown a great interest studying video games and they can be useful for their military by spending billions of dollars into various training simulators, based on video games, creating their own games to boost recruitment numbers and even use their influence to rewrite some controversial parts of American history. Ever since the late 1980s, the U.S. DoD have long identified the potential of video games in a sense to recruit huge share of the American youth through it. Despite short success in the early 2000s, involving government funded military shooters, the project to bolster Army recruitment numbers through video games was deemed unsuccessful. Yet despite initial failures, the military branches have yet to give up on finding new recruits through this form of entertainment and are still seen involved in the games industry in

various forms. In the midst of the U.S. army constantly missing their recruitment goal by considerable margin, could their recent attempts pay off and find new soldiers through their love of video games or will it be another game over for them?

This capstone project will provide a comprehensive overview of the complex intersection between the military and the gaming world. It will conduct a comparative analysis between 2 strategies and examples by the U.S. Army's to recruit new people through video games: first attempts and start of their involvement in the video game industry in the early 2000s with the examples of America's Army game series, and more recent cases indicating evidence of partnerships with major video games corporations like Activision Blizzard and more. This project will also look into the army's involvement in other forms of entertainment media such as movies and TV shows by exploring the military financial and consulting support. This paper will look into their involvement in popular movie franchises like James Bond, Transformers, and Top Gun, to demonstrate how long the DoD have been in the entertainment complex. After that, this paper will attempt to compare the level of military involvement between movies with video games. In the end, this research's main goal is to better understand the evolving relationships between entertainment media and the military and how it should be reacted to. Since the first steps of the video game industry in the early 1980s, the U.S. military has kept a keen interest in this new medium, consistently wondering how these new tools can be used in the service to them. As interesting as it is, to look back at how video games have shaped the recruiting habits of the strongest military force ever assembled, the ethics of these actions have always been questionable at best. No matter, from what side this can be looked upon, the fact that the U.S. government has been actively targeting children and teenagers through this medium for more than 20 years in an attempt to make them the next generation of patriotic American soldiers is undeniable. This capstone project shows that despite the both failed attempts in the early 2000s and 2020s to adopt video games for military needs like with movies to boost their image and increase a number of recruit they are most likely going to be a much bigger part of the U.S.

military's recruitment strategy going forward simply because of the constant growth this part of the entertainment industry is showing and the number of young male adults who play video games is only rising. As long as the demographic of young male adults will dominate the video game industry it seems unlikely that the U.S. DoD will just give up and only time will tell as to how this thing will evolve.

## **Literature Review**

### **Other Forms of Entertainment**

Of course, video games are not the only entertainment industry that regularly receives generous funding from the U.S. military. In fact, before video games, Hollywood was and still arguably the main source of propaganda of the American military. Their involvement in Hollywood has been and still is extensive, with numerous examples showcasing their collaboration in film productions dating as far back as the 1920s. The list of films to which the U.S. army has provided financial, advisory, and/or scripting support includes many famous movies like *Top Gun* (1986) and its sequel *Top Gun Maverick* (2022) where in both cases the U.S. Navy and Air Force gave access to film their aircraft carriers and fighter jets, ultimately increasing the enlistment for both branches (Wilkinson, 2022). Similarly with several *Transformers* movies like *Transformers* (2007) and *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, the DoD have provided the filmmaking crew with the access to several military bases to shoot, letting personnel from said bases to work in scenes and provisioning and operating military hardware. (Mirrlees 2017). Many other, predominantly, military related movies such as *Red Dawn* (1984), *Independence Day* (1996), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Battleship* (2012), and *Midway* (2019), etc. were all cooperating with the DoD to some extent. In some cases, the armed forces would even grant filmmakers access to military bases and their equipment to take shots for the film and sometimes even giving advisory assistance from military personnel (Keegan 2011). These collaborations illustrate the close relationship between the American entertainment industry and the United

States military which provides all kinds of aid to filmmakers, showrunners, and producers that in return would willingly create pieces of media that boosts the image of the U.S. armed forces, increase the recruitment numbers, and create a narrative that would benefit them. While the support from the DoD can provide valuable financial resources and expertise to filmmakers which would allow them to create better pieces of arts, it is important to remember the intentions behind their generosity which in simple terms is to make more young people fight, die, and kill for the United States. The DoD has been trying to shape the perception of the military among the American citizens for the better through popular culture for decades by using movies, literature, as propaganda and relatively recently their hands have extended to the world of video games whose growth they have recognized very soon. It is clear why the military have been supporting local filming production for so many years and such collaborations has definitely proven its effectiveness multiple times, but there can be some concerns over why the DoD would want to expand their influence over the gaming part of the American entertainment industry.

### **Why Gamers?**

For some people, it might seem questionable to recruit gamers due to the stereotypical image of a gamer being a sedentary person with obesity and vision problems. Along with that, as it would evident later, the U.S. military often relies on one the most popular genre in the industry which consequently is also one of the most violent genres of video games – The First Person Shooter (FPS). This raises question why would the us military would want to recruit unhealthy portion of the American population with questionable anger management. Even though excessive gaming can have a significant negative impact on physical health (Grinspoon, 2020), there has been no concrete evidence that the majority of gamers in America have health issues. In fact, some researchers claim that professional players are not less healthy or fit compared to other athletes (Ketelhut et al., 2023). While video games do not directly cause any physical harm to gamers, there is also skepticism about how video games can affect young people on a psychological level. However, FPS genre in particular, implies exposure to strong violence in the game such

taking someone's life by pulling the trigger of an assault rifle even though that life was fictional. The idea that violent video games can cause violent behavior from the players has been debated among scholars for quite some time, yet no certain conclusion to this discussion exists at the time of writing this capstone. As an example, Tobias Greitemeyer in his article "The contagious impact of playing violent video games on aggression: Longitudinal evidence" concluded that violent video games not only "have an impact on the player's aggression, but—as the present study shows—they also increase aggression in the player's social network". On the other hand, the report "Violent video game engagement is not associated with adolescents' aggressive behaviour: evidence from a registered report" published by Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein suggests otherwise stating that "there was no evidence for a critical tipping point relating violent game engagement to aggressive behaviour" among adolescents (Przybylski and Weinstein 2019). What is important to mention however, here is that both studies as well as many similar ones were testing among youth who have not yet reached the adulthood while at the same time using video games that contain depictions of violence in them thus rendering them with the age rating of 18 years or older. This means that some of the adolescents that participated in these tests were not legally allowed to play these games consequently brings the question of accountability of these studies. The concerns over lack of any enforcements to prevent young gamers to play video games with depiction of violence are serious and require further studies from specialized scholar about the effects of violent games of youth who are legally allowed to play such games. Despite some concerns regarding the physical and mental health of young gamers, there are no concrete evidence suggesting the majority of them would be unfit for the military training, giving the U.S. military branches no reasons to not go forward with the idea. In fact, there is a high chance that they have come to the same conclusion very early and saw the potential of not only gamers, but the technology behind the video games themselves that could serve the military very well.

## **Analysis of The Military Involvement in the Early 2000s**

### **How It Started**

The first ever attempts by the U.S. Armed forces to use video games for their own needs, can be traced back as far as the early 1980s. A relatively popular arcade game “Battlezone” made by Atari, have caught the interest of the U.S. Army who wanted to find a way in which their new recruits could be trained to operate military vehicles without any risks and at the minimal cost. What emerged from this proposal in 1981 was a modified version of the Battlezone arcade called the Bradley Trainer named after M2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IFV) game depicts (Tony 2020). Much of the information about this trainer is vague since many aspects of it is still classified and the project itself was labeled as Top Secret when it was proposed. What is known however, is that a handful of game developers at Atari would refuse to work on the project on ethical grounds believing that video games should play no part in military activity and in the end only two prototypes were ever produced (Tony, 2020).

### **Government-Funded Shooter**

The First-Person Shooter genre has long been one of the most popular in the industry and team-based FPSs often require players to be cooperative and be part of a collective bigger than themselves. The U.S. military’s stand toward video games would once again be changed in the early 2000s. An army colonel by the name of Casey Wardynski was a professor of economics at the United States Military Academy in the early 2000s and realized that the medium of video games had an enormous pull on the youth of America and that games themselves could become a vehicle for recruitment (Salter, 2011, p. 369). Wardynski would propose that the army develop and publish a video game to provide the public with a way to virtually explore the army at their own pace. It would be the first video game developed as a recruitment tool and fully funded by the U.S. Government (Salter, 2011, p. 369). Appropriately, on the Independence Day 4<sup>th</sup> of July 2002, “America’s Army” was released to the world. An FPS that was distributed completely free

to anyone, meaning any young kid could download it from army's website and start playing it and the timing of the launch could not be more perfect since the game was released less than a year after the Collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11th. The game itself was a round-based tactical shooter where two teams of up to fourteen players would compete over a single objective. The entire game was, at the time, incredibly realistic, because to play as different classes in the game such as medic or engineer, players will first have to complete actual real-life training for each combat role. For example, to assume the role of a medic in the first place, players must pass a virtual medical training course based on actual training that would be taught within the Army. For just the control bleeding segment, players would be required to sit through a 10-minute demonstration voiced by a real army lecturer using real-world photographs who would explain the entire process of how to stem bleeding from a wound and then take a test based on that demonstration. This kind of in-game training was used for other roles such as paratrooper or special force soldier and much of the game's features were held back behind similar educational segments. "America's Army" was a critical success having more than 4.6 million registered users by 2005 (Salter, 2011, p. 368) and according to an MIT study in 2008, the game had positively influenced 30% of young civilians' views on the Army (Singer, 2010). Obviously, after such a wild success the Army would commission sequels to be produced, which were not as successful as the original but still caught the attention of many young Americans. The franchise would eventually die out after the third installment was published in 2009. The legacy of the world's first video game recruitment tool is very mixed. The game was described as "bold and reinforcement of American society and its positive moral perspective" (Salter, 2011, p. 373), while many condemned the game for contributing to the militarization of society and for targeting an increasingly younger audience. At the end of the day, the game was specifically targeted toward children with the intent to bolster Army recruitment numbers which likely didn't sit well with many parents of America.

## Why the First Attempt Failed

Part of the reason why America's Army had failed in the long run as recruitment tool many researchers indicates the controversies that surrounded the project which tried to increase the likeliness of the U.S. army in the eyes of kids and teenagers. But perhaps this was not the only reason why video games did not bring a lot of new recruits, which many writers seem to miss out on. One of the reasons could be due to the nature of video games as a whole. Unlike in books and movies where the reader or viewer simply read or watch about how some other people are killing bad guys and making hard decisions, in video games, where the player often times takes control of the main character and make fictional characters on screen do everything he has to and takes full responsibility for all the actions they made. The players are the ones who interacts with the virtual environment and kills the supposedly bad guys, and they are trying on themselves the military uniforms and all the consequences that it can bring.

Another possible reason for the initial failure of the gamer to soldier pipeline initiative that is overlooked is that while there are many games on the market that glorifies war and portrays the U.S. armed forces in an extremely great manner like America's army or Call of Duty franchise as a whole, there are also many video games that do the opposite. They portray war as a terrible event that ruin the lives of thousands or even millions of people and bring nothing but death and suffering. In other words, showing the war in a more realistic matter, which would make young gamers reconsider joining the military. Such a portrayal of war can be found in a lot of games, many of which saw commercial success and/or proclaimed culturally significant pieces of art. Some examples include several games of the Ace Combat franchise which despite being a game about piloting a multi-million-dollar fighter jets, feature storylines that have a strong anti-war narrative showing the destructive nature of war and by displaying both sides of the conflict as human beings with emotions, expressing that those participating or affected by war aren't necessarily good or bad, just on opposing teams. Another game with a strong anti-war narrative would be the 2012 military shooter "Spec Ops: The Line" in which the player is forced to walk

through the devastation they (unintentionally) caused by dropping chemical bombs on unarmed civilians, destroying the water supplies, and killing people who were just protecting themselves. “This War of Mine” is another example that shows what war truly brings to the people. The game provides an experience of war seen from an entirely new angle since here the player do not play as a brave soldier who saves the day, but instead the player controls a group of civilians trapped in a besieged city and trying to survive, struggling with lack of food, medicine, and constant danger. These and many other games with similar messages like ARMA 3, Valiant Hearts, etc. have most likely left millions of gamers around the world with the message of how horrific the war might be in reality. Although, it has to be acknowledged that both reasons here are very speculative since there is no concrete data about how many people who played a lot of video games have decided not to enlist into the military and for what reasons. Despite this, it is quite possible that such these factors could have been one of the many one why the DoD was not able to secure a foothold in the video games industry in the early 2000s. With this in mind along with the shuttering of America’s Army, some might be inclined to think that the age of using video games as a vehicle for recruitment was finally over, but the truth is that despite everything that said it never ended.

### **Analysis of the Military Involvement in 2020s**

#### **How It is Going Now**

In 2018, the United States Army missed its recruitment goals for the first time in 13 years (AP News, 2021). One of the efforts that was created to fix by modernizing the Army’s outreach, the U.S. Army Esports team was born. The Army concluded that many game enthusiasts tended to follow and idolize professional players at the highest level. By fostering their teams from their own ranks, they could compete against the best in the world and win some of that magic for themselves. The army even designed two 18-wheeler trucks to be mobile gaming trailers decked out with PCs, consoles, and even VR headsets (D’Anastasio 2018). Part of this outreach program

involved the creation of an official U.S. Army Esports Twitch channel, and the creators would face unique challenges that would never be a problem for regular streamers. Most notably the Discord server and Twitch channel were flooded with people making memes and comments referencing war crimes committed by the United States which led to a temporary freeze on new people joining the Discord server as well as many commenters being banned from participating (Gault, 2020). The American Civil Liberties Union would argue that their actions have violated the First Amendment (Gault, 2020) and in July 2020 a draft amendment was filed to the House Appropriations bill that would prohibit the U.S. military from having any presence on Twitch or any other video game streaming platform. The amendment was shot down (Gault, 2020), but the attention garnered from the controversy would hold the entire Twitch channel for nearly a month. As of the time of writing, the army's stint in Esports appears to have become much less advertised and their official Twitch channel hasn't been active for more than three years.

### **Call of Duty**

This section is going to focus entirely on relationship between the U.S. DoD and the video game franchise Call of Duty which ironically was one of the main reasons that why the America's Army failed in the long-term. It might seem strange for the U.S. military to team up with their biggest competitor in the gaming scene. However, it is important to note that the military was never after players. They wanted those players to eventually become soldiers and, in this case, partnering with the company that has incredibly big experience in making video games about war soldiers instead of creating and new video game from the ground and competing against other games seems more logical and less costly. In July 2021, Activision Blizzard - the owners of the Call of Duty franchise, would face the start of a lengthy workplace harassment scandal, which would lead to a loss of many of the company's sponsors (Peters, 2022). As it turns out, one of them were the United States Army which was supposedly planning an aggressive marketing campaign. According to internal documents obtained by Motherboard, the U.S. Army had planned to sponsor streamers, content creators, and Call of Duty games themselves as part of

a recruitment drive (Cox, 2022). The campaign plan revealed that \$200,000 would be allocated to Call of Duty Mobile which includes rewarding in-game currency to players who watch Army ads, \$300,000 would be allocated to sponsoring the Esports organization Optic Chicago and another \$150,000 was allocated to be spent on YouTube creators (Cox, 2022). All of these transactions have been documented and were intended to boost the recruitment campaign for the army and clearly show the commitment of the United States to invest in the video games industry. Have the Activision Blizzard would not have to deal with their numerous scandals, the deal with the military would be more likely to come through and we would probably see more banners in their games advertising to join the U.S. army.

### **Rewriting History**

What follows in this paragraph is a much-complicated area that leans towards more theoretical research based on known facts that will touch upon some of the content of the Call of Duty games in terms of creative directory. The reason for mentioning this is because a Call of Duty franchise has gained a reputation of always making America the very clear good guys in always all installments in the franchise. Although this isn't exactly new to the entertainment industry, there have been cases when the series has often distorted the truth and arguably attempted to rewrite history using written stories that are based on real events. In Call of Duty Modern Warfare that came out in 2019, there is a mission that is called the "Highway of Death" in which the player sets up an ambush along a key highway in a fictional Middle Eastern country and kills the bad guys. In the game's fictional story, the highway was heavily bombed by the Russian forces who killed many troops along with many civilians, but this is far from the truth when looking at the mission's most likely historical inspiration. The nickname Highway of Death was initially given to a six-lane highway between Kuwait and Iraq that got its name during the first Gulf War in 1991 whereupon spotting a huge number of Iraqi armored military vehicles, the U.S. and allied troops would bomb the road leading to the destruction of thousands of vehicles (Hall, 2019). The attack itself was incredibly controversial as the highway was also being used by civilians and

refugees and it was even argued that the soldiers themselves weren't even legitimate targets as they weren't in combat (Hall, 2019). Another example can be seen in Call of Duty Modern Warfare II (2022) where the game's opening mission gives the player an ability to assassinate Russian-backed Middle Eastern leader General Ghorbani by controlling the drone with an explosive payload. By looking at the photo of said general and the circumstances of his assassination in the game there is a striking resemblance to a real-world event when Iranian General Qasem Soleimani was also assassinated by a missile strike conducted by the U.S. military at the start of the year 2020 (Rasool, 2022) in a similar way his counterpart was killed in the game. It has to be pointed out that it is absolutely uncertain whether some of the creative decisions were on the part of the developers or whether there may have been military-related people pulling the strings, but the resemblance with in-game and real-life events in these particular cases seems unlikely to be simply coincidental. Whether or not these tactics would be useful to them, only time will tell.

### **Ex-Government Workers in Charge of Making Video Games**

One additional point that has to be raised here to show the commitment of both parties to cooperate is Activision Blizzard's hire management and what kind of people have worked there. First up we have the company's Chief Legal Officer Grant Dixon. He had previously served as the White House lawyer to the George W. Bush administration and worked for 15 years for the Boeing Company holding many positions including a Senior Vice President for some time (Grayson 2021). Then we have another George W. Bush appointee - Frances F. Townsend who served a variety of roles for Activision Blizzard since 2021 including Corporate Secretary, Chief Compliance Officer, Head of Government Affairs and Public Policy and oversee Communications. Prior to joining, Townsend served as the assistant for the President for U.S. Department of Homeland Security and counterterrorism (Gach 2021) and in 2017 she was shortlisted to the director of the FBI (Politico 2017). Townsend has publicly defended the use of torture as part of the Global War on Terror campaign (Gach 2021). The third member of this list

is Activision Blizzard's Chief Administrative Officer Brian Bulatao who before landing a job at the company was a captain in the U.S. army but would later become the Chief Operating Officer at the CIA (Grayson 2021a). There is an obvious pattern here with all three of these Executives coming from a government security background and all three of them having no previous experience in the video game industry.

Of course, it should be once again reiterated that there has been no concrete evidence that the U.S. government is paying Activision Blizzard to make these creative decisions within their games. After all Call of Duty stories offer a fantasy of fighting for the good guys with some of the best soldiers in the world and when Americans make the game for the American market it makes sense to make the story that portrays the United States and its allies as heroes and showing villains in the form of potential adversaries of American like Russia, China, or Iran. Regardless, the U.S. DoD has been the biggest employer in America with an enormous budget and has access to tools and resources that any other organization would only dream of having, so it would be natural for them to use any available tactics in order to shape public perception to their liking.

### **Why Has It Failed Again?**

The question here is how effective would those tactics be? Looking at the amount of money the DoD is ready to give large game publishers such as Activision Blizzard and how deep their influence in the company could potentially be, it may look like this time the military has done everything right and would be expecting thousands of new recruits in their ranks very soon. However, much like the last time with "America's Army" the recent attempts by the DoD to leverage the gaming industry for recruitment have faced unique challenges which they were not simply ready for that have led their overall lack of success. One key factor here could have been that in 2023 the overall confidence in the U.S. military among the Americans was at the lowest level since 1997 (Younis 2023) and at that time not only gamers, but all Americans citizens have

lost support in joining the military. Along with that, all mentioned above recent involvements in this paper have only proved the commitment of the DoD to use video games for their needs, but there were no signs suggesting that their efforts bring any meaningful result to them. With controversies surrounding ethical issues around Activision Blizzard, the marketing campaign of the U.S. Army involving Call of Duty was terminated and since then there were evidence of bringing this deal back. As of April 2024, all mentioned Activision Blizzard workers who previously worked in the government sphere have all left the company and a few attempts by Call of Duty to rewrite history did not seem to have any sort of impact on the players. The concerns over the glorification of war and violence have not gone anywhere. In fact, it can be suggested that today with more accessible internet even more gamers are becoming aware of the aggressive military-sponsored campaigns. Additionally, the competitive landscape of the gaming industry presents formidable obstacles, with countless games vying for attention and loyalty from players. In this crowded market, the messages from the military to join them could be lost in the constant void of advertisements for hundreds of different products. Overall, these challenges underscore the complexities and limitations of using gaming as a recruitment tool for the military, highlighting the fact that the U.S. DoD simply lacks the support not just from the gamers, but from the Americans in general, and lacks the experience to navigate themselves in the rapidly changing gaming environment.

### **Too Important to Give Up On**

Looking at the billions that were invested into the video games industry by the U.S. military in the early 2000s and other billions that they have spent recently on game developers, Esports, and content creators, it might seem that the U.S. army has been dumping taxpayers' money into what looks like a hopeless project to slightly boost their recruitment numbers. But the truth is that with the current state of the video games industry, the Department of Defense simply cannot afford to give up on it. Around 65% of Americans play video games 38% of which are between the ages of 18 and 34 with over half being men (Gilbert, 2024). By the end of 2022, the U.S. Army had

missed its recruitment goal by 25% and is expected to see declining enlistment rates for the foreseeable future (Thomas, 2022). Since 2021, the estimated global revenue from video games can be considered as the most expensive entertainment industry surpassing films, music, and any form of literature by miles (Richter, 2022) and there are no signs of this trend stopping anytime soon. In the previous year the global gaming market reached a total of \$184.0 billion in revenue in 2023 (Wijman, 2024), which is enough to fund the entire United States Military with its yearly budget of \$858 billion for more than 2 months.

Furthermore, as was mentioned before, one of the biggest differences between other forms of entertainment comes from their interactive nature. While with movies, the audience can only watch other people performing actions wishing to be in their place, the player has the luxury to not only be in the middle of the action, but also be able to perform anything the game allows them to do. As it was discussed earlier, during the gameplay, the player gets to see firsthand the horrible side of the war, it also allows them to see the glory winning the war can bring and even be the sole reason of that win by heroically charging straight into the battle. Games let people be the director of the story by controlling the characters creating an illusion that they themselves have slayed the dragon, saved the prince/princess, and have won the war. And that euphoric feeling that can only be obtained through playing video games is one of the reasons why the DoD is so persistent with the idea of creating a soldier from a gamer. The demographic of gamers and the immersion they can get while playing makes the entire video games industry a military recruiter's gold mine that the U.S. Army has been mining decades ago. It is just that they have yet to find the right tools for the job to dig out the precious resources.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the correlations between the U.S. military and the video games industry is a fascinating, complex, and constantly evolving subject that has been shaped by various factors over just the span of over 40 years. Only 20 years ago the main source of American military

propaganda was unquestionably considered the Hollywood. Financial support, help from military advisors, and access to film production equipment and locations the U.S. DoD was able to provide to filmmakers in exchange of promoting the U.S. Armed Forces cannot be understated. With films like Top Gun, Transformers, Independence Day etc. proving the value of such collaborations with increased numbers of enlistments and boost of the military's image. Now however, it is not so clear to which part of the American entertainment industry the DoD is giving more attention and support. The shift towards using video games in the early 2000s as the main recruitment drive for the Army reflects the changing landscape of the entertainment media with the Government-funded shooters "America's Army" game series, that even though showed promise in reaching potential recruits, did not achieve significant results in the longer period which consequently led to its shut down. The failure of these initiatives to sustain long-term recruitment goals highlights the challenges of translating gaming experiences into real-world commitments to military service. Recent cooperations with major video game corporations like Activision Blizzard has proven that the military still has a deep interest over this part of the entertainment industry with promoting campaign, hiring staff with experience in government work and even attempts to rewrite history.

Yet, even with the financial support of the almost bottomless defense budget of the United States, the recent examples may suggest that challenges still remain. With ex-government workers leaving the gaming companies, terminated deals due to constantly changing nature of video games world, absence of meaningful results to show it is questionable why the DoD seems to still believe that they could pull a major sum of gamers into different military branches. Not to mention the unending moral concerns over the glorification of war and bias towards American war efforts in gaming narratives and targeting kids and teens with such types of advertisements. Plus, it should be taken into account the unique nature of video games, specifically their interactivity. Because the player often engages in the gaming world, the actions they see in games have to be performed by them as well. Due to this fact, while playing, people perceive

actions far better than if they would watch a movie or read a book about the same action. In case of military shooters, the player controls the characters on screen and kill people with their own hands which is not a great experience no matter what. Perchance, because video games with very pro-military agenda like America's Army, Call of Duty, etc. cannot convince people to join military with the same effectiveness as movies do while at the same games that has strong anti-war narrative like Ace Combat, Spec Ops: The Line, This War of mine etc. can have a stronger impact on people. I acknowledge that this argument leans more towards more theoretical side, and it is difficult to prove due the lack the specialized study so future studies have to be conducted on how games with different narratives can affect the choices of the players to have more valuable data on the subject.

Despite these challenges, it is unlikely that the military would avoid their attempts and still will try to find ways to pull new soldiers in from the video games industry simply because that is where the main demographic will be for the foreseeable future. Their previous investments in the market display their dedication to the cause of engaging with emerging forms of media to reach audiences more effectively. With the global gaming industry surpassing other entertainment sectors in revenue and the interactive nature of video games despite being the setback at the same time can be the advantage the DoD just has to learn how to exploit, their pursuit of gaming as a recruitment tool is more than likely to continue.

The U.S. Department of Defense's involvement in the entertainment industry, particularly in the gaming world, has been multifaceted and strategic, aiming to shape public opinion, stimulate recruitment, and promote a positive image of the armed forces. The military just has to adapt its strategies to remain relevant and effective in reaching potential recruits. Ultimately, the evolving relationship between the military and the gaming world raises important questions about the intersection of entertainment, propaganda, and recruitment in contemporary society which is why it must be further studied by future scholars. Likewise, the gaming industry has become a crucial battleground for military recruitment in recent decades and it almost certain that similar cases of

players finding out that their favorite video games were funded by the DoD or learning that some narrative decisions in the game were approved by some branch of the US military would just keep showing up. After all, as the classic tagline of the Call of Duty series goes: “There’s a soldier in all of us.”

## Bibliography

- Baldor, Lolita C. 2021. "APNewsBreak: Army misses 2018 recruiting goal | AP News." *AP News*, August 3, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/4e920aef0ee41caa152a12df6d89600>.
- Cox, Joseph. 2022. "U.S. Army Planned to Pay Streamers Millions to Reach Gen-Z Through Call of Duty." *VICE*, December 1, 2022. Accessed April 19, 2024. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ake884/us-army-pay-streamers-millions-call-of-duty>.
- D'Anastasio, Cecilia. 2018. "The U.S. Army Has a New Plan to Recruit Gamers." *Kotaku*, December 5, 2018. <https://kotaku.com/the-u-s-army-has-a-new-plan-to-recruit-gamers-1830850297>.
- Gach, Ethan. 2021. "Activision Blizzard Hires Bush-Era Torture Apologist as Chief Compliance Officer." *Kotaku*, March 3, 2021. <https://kotaku.com/activision-blizzard-hires-bush-era-torture-apologist-as-1846398541>.
- Gault, Matthew. 2020. "U.S. Army Esports Team May Have Violated the First Amendment on Twitch." *Vice*, July 16, 2020. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/5dz58z/us-army-esports-team-may-have-violated-the-first-amendment-on-twitch>.
- Gilbert, Nestor. 2024. "How many active video gamers were there in 2020? There were 2.69 billion video game players worldwide in 2020." *Financesonline.Com*, March 1, 2024. <https://financesonline.com/number-of-gamers-worldwide/#:~:text=The%20evidence%3A%20while%2038%25%20of,games%20on%20a%20regular%20basis>.
- Goodpastor, Joshua. 2020. "How the Military Uses Call of Duty As A Recruitment Tool." *Game Rant*, August 7, 2020. <https://gamerant.com/call-duty-modern-warfare-recruitment-tool/>.
- Grayson, Nathan. 2021. "Activision Blizzard Hires Former Trump Administration Member Once Decried as 'Bully.'" *Kotaku*, March 30, 2021. <https://kotaku.com/activision-blizzard-hires-former-trump-administration-m-1846579115>.

- Grayson, Nathan 2021. "Activision Hires yet Another Former Republican Big Wig." *Kotaku*, June 4, 2021. [https://kotaku.com/activision-hires-yet-another-former-republican-big-wig-1847036330?\\_twitter\\_impression=true](https://kotaku.com/activision-hires-yet-another-former-republican-big-wig-1847036330?_twitter_impression=true).
- Greitemeyer, Tobias. 2019. "The Contagious Impact of Playing Violent Video Games on Aggression: Longitudinal Evidence." *Aggressive Behavior* 45 (6): 635–42. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21857>.
- Grinspoon, Peter. 2020. "The health effects of too much gaming." Harvard Health. December 22, 2020. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/the-health-effects-of-too-much-gaming-2020122221645>.
- Hall, Charlie. 2019. "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare's Highway of Death controversy, explained." *Polygon*, October 30, 2019. <https://www.polygon.com/2019/10/30/20938550/call-of-duty-modern-warfare-highway-of-death-controversy>.
- Keegan, Rebecca. 2011. "The U.S. Military's Hollywood Connection - Los Angeles Times." *Los Angeles Times*, August 21, 2011. Accessed May 2, 2024. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2011-aug-21-la-ca-military-movies-20110821-story.html>.
- Ketelhut, Sascha, Alex Bodman, Thomas Ries, and Claudio R. Nigg. 2023. "Challenging the portrait of the unhealthy Gamer—The fitness and health status of Esports Players and their peers: Comparative Cross-Sectional Study." *JMIR. Journal of Medical Internet Research/Journal of Medical Internet Research* 25 (August): e45063. <https://doi.org/10.2196/45063>.
- MacDonald, Keza. 2023. "Are Video Game Movies About to Take Over From Marvel?" *The Guardian*, November 8, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2023/nov/08/video-game-movie-legend-zelda-pikachu>.

- Mirrlees, Tanner. 2017. "Transforming Transformers Into Militainment: Interrogating the DoD-Hollywood Complex." *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*/*the American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 76 (2): 405–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12181>.
- Peters, Jay. 2022. "The US Army paused a Call of Duty League sponsorship after allegations against Activision came to light." *The Verge*, December 2, 2022. <https://www.theverge.com/2022/12/2/23490114/us-army-call-of-duty-league-sponsorship-activision-blizzard-allegations>.
- Politico. 2017. "Townsend: Trump Team Approached Me for FBI Director." POLITICO. May 24, 2017. <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/05/24/townsend-trump-team-approached-me-for-fbi-director-238731>.
- Przybylski, Andrew K., and Netta Weinstein. 2019. "Violent Video Game Engagement Is Not Associated With Adolescents' Aggressive Behaviour: Evidence From a Registered Report." *Royal Society Open Science* 6 (2): 171474. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.171474>.
- Rasool, Mohammed. 2022. "New Call of Duty Starts With 'Assassination of Qassem Soleimani.'" *Vice*, October 24, 2022. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bvmp34/call-of-duty-modern-warfare-2-iran-solemani-assassination>.
- Richter, Felix. 2022. "Are you not entertained?" *Statista Daily Data*, December 12, 2022. <https://www.statista.com/chart/22392/global-revenue-of-selected-entertainment-industry-sectors/>.
- Salter, Mark B. 2011. "The Geographical Imaginations of Video Games: Diplomacy, Civilization, America's Army and Grand Theft Auto IV." *Geopolitics* 16 (2): 359–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2010.538875>.
- Singer, Peter W. 2010. "Meet the sims...and shoot them." *Brookings*, February 22, 2010. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/meet-the-sims-and-shoot-them/#:~:text=By%202008%2C%20a%20study%20by,Army%20advertising%20combined>.

- Thomas, Ian. 2022. "The U.S. Army is struggling to find the recruits its needs to win the fight over the future." *CNBC*, October 26, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/26/us-army-struggles-to-find-recruits-its-needs-to-win-fight-of-future.html#:~:text=The%20Army%20missed%20its%20recruitment,see%20another%20decline%20in%202023.>
- Tony. 2020. "Bradley Trainer: Atari's Top Secret Military Project." *The Arcade Blogger*. February 4, 2020. <https://arcadeblogger.com/2016/10/28/bradley-trainer-ataris-top-secret-military-project/>.
- Wijman, Tom. 2024. "Newzoo's Video Games Market Estimates and Forecasts for 2023." *Newzoo*. February 8, 2024. <https://newzoo.com/resources/blog/games-market-estimates-and-forecasts-2023>.
- Wilkinson, Alissa. 2022. "Oscar winner Top Gun: Maverick and the relationship between US military and Hollywood." *Vox*, May 27, 2022. <https://www.vox.com/23141487/top-gun-maverick-us-military-hollywood-oscar-winner-best-sound>.
- Younis, Mohamed. 2023. "Confidence in U.S. Military Lowest in Over Two Decades." *Gallup.Com*, July 31, 2023. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/509189/confidence-military-lowest-two-decades.aspx>.