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Your tax dollars at play

U.S. Army gets into the gaming business. You're paying for it.

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You might have heard the U.S. Army's getting into the video game business. You might not have heard how much you're paying for it.

Last week, at the [Electronic Entertainment Expo](#), the Army unveiled "America's Army," a new game series that's meant to serve as a marketing and recruiting tool for the gaming generation. Recognizing that the target audience knows a quality title when it sees one (and ignores and ridicules poor quality efforts), the Army has assembled a team of proven developers and licensed one of the premier engines on the market to make its games. Quality doesn't come cheap, though. The budget for the first titles in the "America's Army" series is in the \$7 million range.

That's not as expensive as it sounds. Publishers say the average PC game typically costs between \$2 million and \$6 million dollars and "America's Army" will launch with two titles - "Soldiers", a role-playing game that lets you live boot camp life, and "Operations," a multi-player first-person shooter that, developers say, accurately reflects rules of engagement and squad teamwork.

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The budget's likely to go higher, though. The "America's Army" project is in year two of its seven-year life cycle. Additional gaming products, offering different types of training and letting you slip into a special forces uniform, are already under development and will require additional funds.

The biggest hook for players is the price. "America's Army" will be distributed free via [the game's web site](#) in early July. The game will also be bundled with gaming magazines (most of which come with CD-Roms filled with game demos and patches). Combine that with the game's technical quality (the developers previously worked



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on hit games "Redneck Rampage," "Kingpin" and "Sim City") and you've got a sure-fire hit. **Attacking a POW camp in "Operations."**

From a propaganda perspective, though, the Army has seemingly hit the jackpot. (And the Army readily admits the games are a propaganda device.) "America's Army" was one of the most talked about titles at E3 and is starting to appear in the many "best of show" lists that are popping up on gaming web sites these days. Even game developers were singing the praises of "Operations."

Since their unveiling a little over a week ago, more than 45,000 people have signed up to receive the games when they are released.

Outside the gaming world, though, things could be a little more challenging. While more and more people are taking note of the gaming industry, few have a grasp on what it costs to develop and market new titles.

"I think it might be too much money, but it's the right approach," said Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform. "I applaud that they're thinking outside the box."

Concern over gaming violence is also on the upswing again, as titles such as "Grand Theft Auto 3" dominate the sales charts. A shooter, powered by the same graphics engine as the game "Unreal," could raise a few eyebrows – especially since developers won't be able to make the "it's just a game" argument to detractors.



Teamwork is a key to success in "Operations."

a puff of red, followed by the enemy falling to the ground. There are no pools of blood or dismemberment, both of which the game engine is more than capable of rendering.

You'll also never take the role of the enemy in "Operations". Whenever you play, you'll see yourself as the soldier and your opponent as a terrorist, while opponents will see themselves as soldiers and you as the terrorist. (Developers have been careful not to make enemy appearances as non-descript as possible to avoid accusations of profiling, garbing terrorists in ski masks and brown clothing.)

Proponents also point to the game's attention to realism. Since it's meant to spark teen interest in joining the Army, the game tries to show what service life is really like. Want to be a sniper? You'll have to train for it first in single-player missions. Planning an ambush? You'll have to learn how to do it Army-style. Guns jam and misfire. You can use actual military hand signals. Heck, shell casings even

To deflect criticism, the Army development team has toned down the violence, earning a "T" rating by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board. (A "T" is on par with a "PG" rating for a movie. Games carrying that rating are meant for players ages 13 and older and may contain violent content, mild or strong language, and/or suggestive themes.) Kills in "Operations" are depicted with

eject out of an M16 as they do in the real world.

There are consequences for actions, too. If you're killed, you don't automatically re-spawn and start over. You're out of the game until the next round (usually less than a 10 minute wait). Players who shoot their own team members will be booted from the game immediately – with repeat offenders being permanently banned.

If nothing else, you've got to give the Army credit for a keen awareness of its target market. Today's potential soldiers are typically teens who enjoy gaming. Clever slogans, such as "Be All That You Can Be" and "An Army of One" don't carry the weight they used to. ■

Morris is director of content development for CNN/Money. Click [here](#) to send him an e-mail.

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