

Saturday
 May 25, 2002

VIDEO GAMES

GAME MASTER: Army game to draft virtual soldiers

May 24, 2002

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LOS ANGELES -- The battlefield: A terrorist training camp, similar to the type U.S. Army soldiers might overtake in Afghanistan.

My team's mission: Defend the captured camp from a return onslaught by the enemy. Use lethal force as necessary.

This is a video game, but it isn't just any new video game. This is America's Army.

A closely held effort in the works for two years, America's Army is an official product of the U.S. Army. Real soldiers unveiled the game this week in a flurry of fatigues and thumping patriotic music at the Electronic Entertainment Expo.

Following a trend of video games as advertisements, America's Army is a recruiting experiment that to date has cost \$6.3 million in public funds to produce. Army officials said they hope the game will expose young people to the Army's potential as a career, though signing up for duty is not required to play.

"We're hoping that a couple of them will see this and say, 'Hey, maybe the Army's for me,'" said producer Michael Capps.

America's Army is scheduled for release in early July. It is a multiplayer online game for the PC, and will be free to download off the Internet. Up to 20 players can compete on two teams in realistic battle simulations.

On Wednesday in the Los Angeles Convention Center, young, able-bodied men and women walking up to the Army display booth were greeted by thundering helicopter sound effects and a giant

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video screen flashing the words: "Empower yourself. Defend America . . . You will be a soldier."

Army officials expect some controversy. Rated T for teens, America's Army is a violent shooter game along the lines of Doom or Quake. Players carry a variety of realistic weapons like an M16 with a grenade launcher.

"The gore is really, really mild," said programmer Stephen Superville. "When you shoot someone, there's a really mild blood splat."

Lt. Col. Casey Wardynski, a West Point professor who came up with the idea in 1999, said the game does not glorify war.

"I think it glorifies the fact that the Army works as a team. From the ground up, the Army is a values-laden organization," Wardynski said.

The Army hired about 30 people to make the shooter game at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif. They visited bases around the United States, conferring with soldiers and recording actual weapon sound effects to add realism.

Wardynski said the new recruiting tool wasn't created out of desperation, noting that the Army reached its recruiting goals last year. Rather, he said, it is a new way to reach a target audience. To break even on the cost, the Army needs to bring in about 300-400 recruits a year.

An outside company has been hired to manage the online servers, and personal information from players will not be shared with the Army, Wardynski said. There will be a link to connect interested players to www.goarmy.com, the official recruiting Web site.

On the trade show floor Wednesday, a young man who played a demonstration of the game said, "This isn't going to make me want to join." And then he turned his attention back to the game.

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