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Gizmos

War games

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The US Army's new combat game is a recruitment drive packed with more strategy than blast-fest

Few of those attending the major gaming industry expo in Los Angeles last week were surprised by the long queues as security guards checked every bag. Post September 11, this is par for the course. The visitors to the Electronic Expo (E3) did, however, seem startled to find more than 40 authentic soldiers present in camouflage and battlefield make-up.

Yet the Army's presence had nothing to do with tightened security — the soldiers were there to promote Uncle Sam's new message: that he needs keen players of computer games to swell the US Army's ranks.

To achieve this end the military has developed *America's Army*, a new game due for release in the next few weeks. Major Chris Chambers, who is charged with spearheading the recruitment drive, explained that game players had particular talents sought by the military. "To create a premier land force you need a premier work force," he said.

"And in order to attract high-quality, highly educated, computer-savvy individuals, you have to get on their radar screens. Today's army is very high-tech and we need to find people who are comfortable with electronics and working with high-tech equipment. Games players are perfect."

America's Army can be played in two ways. There is a series of first-person combat missions in which players must employ cunning and stealth to stalk and kill enemies, although screens never run red.

"We reward mission accomplishment with the least loss of life," says Major Chambers. "When the enemy is shot, all you see is a small red dot." The game also employs a Sims-like challenge which "from soup to nuts takes a soldier character through army life in a photorealistic setting, on and off duty, to show that people can have a life in the Army and that it can be fun".

However, while the game may be a novel way of attracting recruits, it's not one which the Army Recruitment Agency in the UK plans to emulate, says a spokesman.

While Major Chambers and his military chums deemed their presence at the show a complete success, not all of the civilian games developers and publishers there were so happy. *America's Army*, developed by experts at the Defence Department, has been wholly funded by American tax dollars and will be given away free when launched to anyone who wants it, either on CD-Roms or via downloads from the Internet. No other high-profile game at the E3 show has had similar state funding or is due to be released free by an industry which now grosses more than \$6.35 billion in the US alone.

Combat games are an increasingly popular genre. More than 3,000 new games are released every year, and just as the Gulf War triggered a wave of shaky combat titles in gaming's embryonic days, so President Bush's present-day War on Terror has brought hundreds of new glossier combat games to the line-up.

Yet the trend these days is away from the "blast-fest" combat game towards more cerebral versions, such as *America's Army*, and *Medal of Honour* — the biggest commercial series around. For while *Medal of Honour* boasts many scenes based on Steven Spielberg's film, *Saving Private Ryan*, it is far less bloody than the film, says Larry Probst, chairman of Electronic Arts, the company which developed the series.

EA has many more similar titles in the pipeline compared with previous years, "but these are not 'blow their heads off' games," he says. "Instead, we employ keen strategy elements to the gameplay and go for authentic environments and experiences."

There are no losers in this sort of war.