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The advertising game Adopting the latest thing in advertising, Army out to do some computer recruiting

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It may look like fun and games, but the Belcher boys are actually participating in a military experiment.

At his home in San Jose, Bill Belcher Jr., 15, reloads his grenade launcher and scans the mountainous 3-D landscape on his computer screen. "Lead Dad down to the bottom of the objective," he tells his 11-year-old cousin, Brian, who sits at another computer a few feet away.

A howl comes from the other room, where Bill Belcher Sr., 39, is playing along on yet another computer.

"I'm dead!" cries the dad.

The free online game is a hit, at least in this household. But the game's sponsor -- the U.S. Army -- is hoping for a much bigger score: new recruits.

In the latest form of advertising, the Army is hoping to attract promising young soldiers through an online video game that incorporates virtual versions of real infantry training exercises and simulated combat. Even the weapons match real Army equipment, bullet for bullet.

The military isn't the only one to use "advergames" -- Toyota, Nike, ESPN and Sony films "Men in Black II" and "Spider-Man" have also used online games in their marketing efforts.

But the military's \$7.8 million advergame -- called America's Army: Operations -- is the

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biggest attempt so far.

Army economist Lt. Col. Casey Wardynski said he came up with the video game idea as a way to reach more "kids who are college bound and technologically savvy."

So far, the game has attracted more than 400,000 players from all over the world. It's rated T, which means it's intended for a teen audience.

Bill Sr. said he has no problem with his son and nephew playing America's Army or other games of its genre, known as first-person shooter games.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON KIDS

But Gary Ruskin, who with Ralph Nader founded a Portland consumer advocacy group called Commercial Alert, worries about the game's possible effects on children and teens.

"There are some credible arguments that these first-person shooter games may be teaching our kids to kill. Is it the proper role of the Army to promote those games? I think not," Ruskin said.

Lt. Col. George Juntiff challenged the notion that violent video games can lead to real-world violence.

Juntiff is operations officer for the game's design team, a group of military and civilian personnel at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey.

When a character dies in America's Army, there isn't much blood. He just falls down, Juntiff pointed out.

"If you compare this to other games of the genre, it's not that violent," he said.

The game also has had some glitches. One ongoing problem is that there are not enough servers running, so it takes patience to find an available server to play on, Bill Sr. said. Some players also complain that there are no female characters available.

NO WOMEN ALLOWED

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They're aren't any female characters "because females are not allowed in the infantry," said Juntiff.

But the Army's other game, America's Army: Soldiers, will include female roles. To be released later this year, Soldiers is a role-playing game that shows potential recruits how their choices would affect their path in the service.

But most players say America's Army is even better than the popular Counterstrike, the shoot-'em-up game on which it's loosely modeled.

"It's got incredibly great graphics," Bill Sr. said, before darting back into the living room for another round.

The question now is whether playing America's Army makes young people more likely to consider a life in uniform.

"I'm actually thinking about it," said Brian, who is going into sixth grade this fall. But he was fascinated by the Army before the family downloaded this game, he said.

So far, the Army doesn't know if the game will get anyone to sign up. Data on that won't be available for three or four months.

But if the game brings in just 400 recruits a year -- one-half of 1 percent of the 80,000 recruits signed up annually -- the experiment will break even, said Wardynski.

NO HARD EVIDENCE

Companies that have dipped their toes into advergaming also lack hard data proving success or failure at this point.

"I don't know that we can measure any conversion we had from a non-show-user to a show-user," said Blake Lewin, vice president of interactive digital development for Turner Network Television, referring to a game that promoted its series, "Witchblade." "Hopefully in the future we'll be able to measure those things in more detail." Viewers who e-mailed TNT said they loved the game, he added.

Seattle advergaming developer Wild Tangent, which designed the Witchblade game and has made games to promote Toyota and Nike and

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the summer blockbuster movies "Men in Black II" and "Spider-Man," tends to measure the success of its projects by the number of players and number of games played. So does San Francisco advergaming startup Astromanic Studios, which made a game to promote the movie "Crocodile Hunter: Collision Course" for MGM Studios.

"That's how the Web used to be measured too," warned Nick Nyhan, president of the ad research firm Dynamic Logic. "There are lessons to be learned from the Web (crash), and one of the lessons is to not simply measure it by how many people show up or sign up."

However, some studies by Dynamic Logic confirm that ad-based games "can be highly effective at building brands," he said.

In the Army's game, players will have to meet a recruiter in order to access more advanced levels of the game.

NO RECRUITERS ABOARD

Although there are no recruiters stationed on the game's message boards,

some unplanned recruiting may be going on there nonetheless. An informal survey of the discussions at www.america.com

casarmy.com/forum shows that many current and former soldiers are playing the game and chatting online. Just as if they were sitting around the barracks,

they share their stories.

One player posted a message asking if any current or former Army Rangers or other special forces soldiers were playing the game.

"I was wondering how hard it is to become one," the player wrote.

A player with the screen name ForgottenRanger responded by describing his grueling training: hours of running, push-ups, and carrying heavy weights, all on little to no food or sleep.

"Is it worth it to be considered one of the most elite soldiers in the world? You bet your ass," ForgottenRanger said.

E-mail Carrie Kirby at ckirby@sfchronicle.com.



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