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## Army gives new meaning to war games — on a PC

By Marc Saltzman, special for USA TODAY

This week, an unlikely exhibitor is unveiling a new video game at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles — the U.S. Army. *America's Army*, slated for a July release and given away at [americasarmy.com](http://americasarmy.com), is the first consumer product created by the military and designed to give an accurate depiction of army life.

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"We know that Americans love this type of electronic entertainment," explains Maj. Chris Chambers of the army's Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis. "It just made sense the army communicates its story where people like to spend time."

The computer game — for use with Windows PCs only — is actually two games in one:

- A strategic action game played from a first-person perspective, where up to 32 players can battle online in a heated military conflict such as an anti-terrorism scenario. To create graphics that can compete with today's blockbuster titles, army engineers licensed and modified the leading-edge core programming from the popular game *Unreal* for realistic-looking soldiers, environments and special effects.

One unusual aspect: "The person is required to train before joining a unit, which includes an obstacle course, rifle range, airborne school, sniper school and ranger school," Chambers says.

- A role-playing style game that challenges players to set and accomplish

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varied "life goals" such as making money for college, getting married or becoming an officer. "They must make decisions to keep them on their path," Chambers says.

While the action game is multiplayer-only and requires an Internet connection, the training missions and role-playing in *America's Army* can be played solo.

"Essentially, *America's Army* is a communication tool designed to show players what the army is — a high-tech, exciting organization with lots to do," he says.

But is the game also a recruitment tool, designed to appeal to video games' core young, male audience? "Definitely not," Chambers says. "There are no embedded messages. ... This is simply an entertaining and informative tool to connect with America about what the army is about."

The game is "more of a positive marketing tool than a recruitment strategy," says Michael Gartenberg, research director at market-tracking firm Jupiter Media Metrix. "Clearly the 18 to 24 male market that plays these types of games might find appeal in something that was 'authentic.'"

But Rob Smith, editor in chief of *PC Gamer* magazine, says the army may be trying to target those with technical know-how. "Modern warfare equipment requires a level of computer savvy that wasn't the case in years gone by. Many game players fit the demographic."

Will the game be a success? Smith notes that, since the game will be released for free (either via download from the Web site or CD-ROMs bundled with magazines, including *PC Gamer*), there are no barriers to anyone wanting to try it. "And from what we've seen, the game itself is actually really good."

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