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A Chance to Be All That You Can Be -- In a Virtual Army

Game Lets Civilians Play Soldier

*By Jeff Adler*Special to The Washington Post
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With his eyes locked on the screen, Sgt. Kemar Ebanks trained his M-16 assault rifle across a three-dimensional desert landscape, stalking an enemy hiding somewhere in this virtual world.

"Kids will love this," Ebanks said, never averting his gaze. "It gives them a real view of what we do."

At least, that is what the U.S. Army is banking on with this latest pitch to tech-savvy teens: Uncle Sam wants you -- to play his video games.

At the Electronic Entertainment Expo here today, the service unveiled "America's Army," a game designed for the personal computer that allows civilians to step into a soldier's boots and experience everything from training to combat. Hoping to launch a successful attack on the electronic gaming industry, the Army will release its game as a free download on the Internet this July.

Although the Army has used computer simulations for several years to train its troops, this represents the service's first foray into the civilian gaming world.

The Army is on track to recruit its goal of 79,500 soldiers this year, but fewer people have relatives in the military today, making it harder for teenagers to learn about careers in the armed forces. Maj. Gen. Michael Rochelle, head of the Army's Recruiting Command at Fort Knox, Ky., hopes the new game will change that.

"It's part of the Army's overall communication strategy to reach men and

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women where they are today, which is on the Internet and in video game arcades," he said. "Young men and women simply do not have, in both classrooms, at home, in church and elsewhere, individuals who can, in a contemporary manner, answer their questions" about the military.

The Army's game faces stiff competition in the \$6 billion electronic gaming industry, where it will go head-to-head with dozens of similar computer titles, not to mention popular games for Microsoft's X-Box, Nintendo's Game Cube and Sony's Play Station 2.

The Army seemed outmatched at this convention, where many of the 400 exhibitors use bikini-clad models to entice critics to demo their products. But at the Army's booth, where real soldiers stood by in fatigues and camouflage face paint, the military's game was impressing passersby.

"There's a lot of first-person shooters, and a lot of them have military themes," said self-professed "gamer" Tim Schule, 25. "But from what I'm seeing here, it's got incredible realism."

Indeed, the game's designers argue that its authenticity will separate it from the pack. With special access to Army field units, the animators studied training missions, fired weapons and watched paratrooper airdrops.

"America's Army," which cost \$6.3 million to produce, is actually two games in one. In "Soldiers," players guide characters up the Army's career ladder by controlling such intangibles as loyalty, honor and selfless service.

"What we tried to do is show how values function to make it more concrete for young people," said John Hiles of the MOVES Institute's Naval Postgraduate School, which developed the game.

"Operations" allows players to look out on the battlefield through the eyes of a soldier. It is designed for the Internet, with people logging on to join squads and battle other teams.

The game also comes with a built-in safeguard to discourage random aggression: If a player tries to sabotage a mission by indiscriminately killing his own troops, he will be bounced from the battlefield into a cyber-cell.

But the game's content could raise some concerns. Eugene Provenzo, a University of Miami professor who has written about the social content of video games, said youngsters can lose a sense of reality through romanticized views of violence.

"I think the danger of simulations is there is a point where we start believing that the simulation is real," Provenzo said.

But Rochelle defends the Army's game as a wholesome product. "It is not gratuitous violence," he said. "What it promotes are the values that the Army is all about."

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