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# The Army's New Killer App

**The Pentagon aims to attract a new generation of recruits with video games that simulate grunt life from boot camp to the battlefield**

The 62,000 video-game executives flooding into the Los Angeles Convention Center on May 21 might have thought the security staff had gone overboard. Parked out front were a Bradley Linebacker fighting vehicle, an Avenger Humvee, and a cadre of soldiers. But they weren't there to deter terrorists. This convention was selected for the unveiling of a suite of video games called America's Army. These are 3-D action games like dozens of others, except for one thing: They're created by the U.S. Army.

Inside the convention center, site of the 2002 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), attendees sampled the games in a 1,400-square-foot Army command post, which featured real-live air-assault sergeants rappelling down ropes from the ceiling. Quite a show for the first-ever appearance by the military at E3. Fictional soldiers have long starred in video games. But unlike other publishers, the Army won't try to reap millions off its games. Starting in August, it'll distribute its titles free to young people considering military careers.

**SIMS WITH A MISSION.** To start the games, players create their own customized soldier characters, then guide them through boot camp and various missions -- kind of like The Sims but with barracks, M-16s, and stints in Fort Leavenworth military prison. The players can also participate in Web-based team missions with other potential recruits from all over the country. "We want to teach kids what it's really like to be a soldier," says Casey Wardynski, director of the Army's Office of Economic & Manpower Analysis.

America's Army is the latest link in the military's partnership with the \$9 billion U.S. video-game industry. The armed forces have long used computerized

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combat simulations to train service personnel. Now, they're relying on the game industry to add richer, more realistic graphics and countless plot twists.

In 1999, the Army teamed up with the University of Southern California to launch the Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT), a collaboration among entertainment executives and gamemakers committed to dreaming up new systems for training soldiers. America's Army was developed at another new institute called Modeling, Virtual Environments & Simulation (MOVES) at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif.

**SHOOT TO KILL.** The games-and-defense partnership makes sense in terms of both technology and recruitment, since most game fanatics are males in their teens and twenties. "We need to attract more people from this tech-literate group," says Michael Zyda, director of MOVES.

Clearly, realism is a big draw. Designed with \$6 million in Army grants for the PC, the games feature real video footage from Army sites, such as caves in Afghanistan and the obstacle course at Fort Benning, Ga. Bits of recorded speech add depth to the action: Smoke cigarettes in boot camp, and your drill sergeant shows up, barking reprimands. "There are millions of potential speeches and scenes," says executive producer John Hiles, a research scientist for MOVES.

When it comes to killing, the game doesn't pull any punches, which may alarm video-game critics. Warns clinical psychologist Jeanne B. Funk, a University of Toledo professor who writes about violence and the media: "Games meant for older audiences get into the hands of young children."

**ODD ALLIANCE.** Unlike Halo and Grand Theft Auto 3, however, where part of the fun is shooting everything in sight, America's Army uses death as a means of completing missions. "You don't get points for killing," Wardynski says. And trigger-happy players who hit fellow soldiers wind up at Leavenworth.

At ICT, folks look forward to more collaboration. "Hollywood weirdos, computer nerds, and the military -- what a combo," says Executive Director Richard Lindheim. "But it's changing the way the Army does business." Parents be advised: The situations in these games may be real.

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By Arlene Weintraub in Los Angeles

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