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Business & Money

Full Metal Joystick

Entrepreneurs: The U.S. Army's new recruiting videogame is an online phenomenon

By T. Trent Gegax
NEWSWEEK

Oct. 14 issue — Lincoln Hall rests close to the bottom in the ranks of West Point's most formidable buildings. On the edge of the stone-clad U.S. Military Academy's picturesque plateau, above New York's Hudson River, it houses policy analysts and administrative types. For the past two years it's also incubated a secret new weapon in the Army's arsenal.

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THE OFFICE OF Economic and Manpower Analysis, typically noodling over tasks like the recapitalization of tank fleets, has unveiled a gizmo to solve the Army's most pressing problem: recruitment. Once upon a time, the iconic Uncle Sam poster demanding I WANT YOU was enough. Today the West Pointers have created an

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online shoot-'em-up videogame (with some Dungeons and Dragons elements mixed in).

Called America's Army, it has seen early usage that's server-melting. For two days after its Fourth of July release, Web sites serving up the free, state-of-the-art videogame received 750,000 hits—per second. In the first two months, 2.5 million people downloaded it (a 14-hour endeavor on a standard phone line), while 120,000 people signed up to receive the CD version by mail. One online insomniac played 3,600 10-minute missions. “The expectation was that we were going to put out Pong in camouflage,” says Lt. Col. Casey Wardynski, the 45-year-old economist who conceived the game and oversaw its development. Instead, it was as if a Hollywood blockbuster had been hatched in a movie studio's accounting department.

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Newsweek

Army recruiting stations get millions of the CD version of the game this week. And Computer Gaming World magazine will package 400,000 CDs in an upcoming issue. Why the push? The Army's ranks have dropped 40 percent since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. A surprising early-retirement bulge after Desert Storm also hurt numbers. Things have stabilized, if only by fiat; since September 11, 2001, a “stop loss” policy has barred the Army's elite Green Berets from retiring. Overall, Special Operations units are down 9,000 recruits. So expectations for the videogame, developed at a cost of \$7 million, are high. It grows by 100,000 gamers every 20 days, which may be the fastest videogame growth curve ever.

The idea for America's Army hit Wardynski at a 1999 cocktail party in Los Angeles. While computer and entertainment executives chatted about the shrinking costs of producing digital entertainment, Wardynski mused to himself about the possibility of the Army's creating a game for America's living rooms. The old guard loved the pitch because it seemed to better target their recruiting audience. What better way than a “first-person shooter” and role-playing boot-camp game? As many as 26 players, operating independently, can simultaneously compete against one another. They graduate through training courses, learning everything from authentic military hand signals to the insults of drill sergeants. (Shooting the sergeant lands you 10 real-time minutes in Leavenworth.) Settling into famous divisions

like the 82d Airborne, players launch into missions against a vaguely Russian-looking force.

The Army aimed for verisimilitude. Designers at the legendary Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., visited 19 Army posts, digitally capturing everything that moved and made noise. Details are meticulous, down to chipped paint, the texture of sand at Fort Benning, Ga., and shell casings that impact differently on wood, concrete and metal. Designers also took online privacy seriously by not including “cookies,” the digital crumbs that help outsiders snoop inside your hard drive.

Gamer critics have searched in vain to find fault. “It sounds like a conspiracy,” writes Phineas on LANParty.com, before gushing, “The game is one of the public’s first opportunities to sample the next generation of computer gaming technology. To top it off, it’s free. You don’t even have to join the Army (but the menu makes it oh so easy to do so!).” This has the Army tripping over itself with pleasure. Were it sold at a competitive price, the game would have made the Army \$600 million in less than a year.



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The Army says it’s steering away from the impressionably young. “My son’s at the bottom of the target audience,” Wardynski says of Chris, 13. Whoever they are, they’re grasping the carrot: 28 percent of goarmy.com’s hits come from Web sites that host America’s Army. In general, many young men who go to that official Army recruiting site wind up enlisting. Still, not everyone is giddy about having the government wave digital candy at

youths. At UCLA, Daily Bruin columnist Shirin Vossoughi railed against the videogame. “Aimed mostly at youth of color,” she wrote, “the expensive recruitment campaign is a perverse attempt to draw America’s kids into an institution geared toward violence and obedience.” Overall, though, opposition is minimal. “We thought we’d have a lot more problems,” says Michael Zyda, the game’s coordinator at the Naval Postgraduate School. “But the country is in this mood where anything the military does is great.”

The Army sees a franchise. The Secret Service asked for a limited-release version that revolves around

the White House and a traveling president; Army Special Forces requested a game that focuses on medics and engineers; the Air Force wants in, too. Even the standard Army pitch may be commandeered. “Remember the old pitch ‘Be all you can be’?” says Zyda. “What if the game rebranded the Army into ‘America’s Army’?” Grander yet, he sees an entire new category of corporations with their own games. Is the world really ready for Where in the World Are Enron’s Books?

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