The MOVES Institute's America's Army Operations Game

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Abstract: America’s Army
If you go strictly by the number of young adults playing it at all hours, it’s a success. But how does America’s Army, the US Army’s free PC game strategic communications tool, fare in the real world of costs and benefits? The answer is gratifying and the quality is award winning.
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The game
America’s Army’s roots go back to 1997, when the National Research Council issued a report specifying a joint research agenda for defense and entertainment modeling and simulation [Zyda/Sheehan]. The MOVES Institute responded by realigning its research directions with the NRC’s agenda.

The idea for America’s Army originated in a discussion between MOVES directors and the US Army’s Office of Economic and Manpower Assessment (OEMA). The army was concerned with falling recruitment and the need to attract digitally-sophisticated teens to today’s cutting-edge army. Recruiters had noted that the dwindling availability of veterans with whom kids could talk about army life meant that a possible military career entered into few uninitiated what an army career entails. Piggybacking the armed-services message onto popular entertainment was pioneered years ago in movie newsreels, radio, and TV ads. Might today’s gaming technology provide an effective vehicle for the army’s strategic communication? The only way to know was to try.

Missions played since 4 July 02: 62M+
Players completing basic training: 800K+
Registered users: 1.3M+

How big is it?
Figures change daily, but as of January 13, 2003 (six months post-release), the following apply:

- Registered users: 1.3M+
- Players completing basic training: 800K+
- Missions played since 4 July 02: 62M+

Marksmanship training, Ft. Benning, Georgia rifle range

Operations was designed as a fully 3D, accurate, gaming environment well beyond any product on the market, with technological efforts vastly more complex than previous attempts. Funding was received in May 2000, and the game was built secretly for two years, until results had been obtained, approvals secured from the army, and the unveiling was made at the bellwether of gaming conventions, Electronics Entertainment Expo, in May 2002. Operations garnered critical praise and industry awards out the gate, and has since won an enormous following.

What’s it like?
Operations is a first-person mission experience. But the temperament of play contrasts markedly with the hormone-frenzied nuke’ems on the shelf. The game opens with a new recruit ready to train. He embarkson basic rifle marksmanship and combat training at Fort Benning, Georgia, where, as in the army, his scores determine advancement in firearms.

Weaponry is represented precisely; for example, rifles are loaded and cleared correctly, the load is finite, and breathing affects accuracy. The army worked shoulder-to-shoulder with Operations’ artists, engineers, and designers to provide guidance and detail, resulting in excellent verisimilitude. Fort Benning, Georgia, for example, is clearly to be recognized, its obstacle course timed and sequenced as in reality. The game’s audio vastly increases the quality of immersion through minute attention to sound effects, weapons foley, and ambience. The Operations game is the first game ever shipped with Dolby 5.1 sound.

On completion of training, the player joins other gamers for networked mission play in a variety of combat settings. In Operations, no one ever plays a villain fighting the USA. Both teams see themselves as part of the US Army and perceive the other team as the opposition. Players abide by the rules of warfare, including the uniform code of military justice, rules of engagement, and laws of land warfare. Reprisal for violation is instant, starting with a cell at Fort Leavenworth and ending (potentially) with expulsion from the game.

Privacy note: If a player requests information about an army career, a dialog asks whether his scores may be sent to a recruiter. But no cookies are set in the game and no information gathered or shared without express permission.

Spoils of War
Besides adrenaline reviews and features, America’s Army: Operations continues to collect trophies, including Action Vault’s Debut Game of the Year, Surprise of the Year, and honorable-mention Multiplayer Game of the Year; Frictionless Insight’s Best Business Model (developer) E3; IGN Editors’ Choice Award for first-person shooters; IGN’s Biggest Surprise of E3; Gamespy’s Best PC Action Game runner-up; Penny Arcade’s Best Misappropriation of Taxpayer Dollars Ever; Wargamers Best of Show; first-person/tactical shooters; Well-Rounded Entertainment’s Best of E3 2002, and Computer Gaming World’s Editors’ Choice.
Average missions played weekdays: 500K
Average missions played weekends: 600K
Hours of play since 4 July 02: 5.8M+

Operations desert mission

The real cost
To understand the dividends of America’s Army, a look at traditional recruiting is in order. The army spends $2B (two billion) per year to attract and enlist 120,000 recruits (80,000 army, 40,000 national guard). That’s $16,666 per soldier.

Twenty percent (or 24,000) of these recruits drop out during basic combat training with the excuse that the army was not what they expected and combat training was not for them. With them goes $400M in wasted recruiting expenditure. In addition, the army has spent $75K each for training; thus, the army’s loss per annum from this drop-out group is $2.2 billion.

America’s Army cost $7M to build, a tag equivalent to that of 420 recruits who wash out (if we count recruiting costs alone). If the game encourages only 120 potential waverers to stick with it, it’s broken even, counting recruiting and training costs. And of course, if it attracts those who would not otherwise have considered an army career, it’s worth $92K apiece.

In promotion, production and distribution, typically sizable sums in publication of any kind, the army has managed a free ride by authorizing gaming magazines to burn CDs for inclusion in issues, a cost avoidance to the government of $2.24M. The manufacturer of a popular graphics card has bundled the game with its product, and an independent publisher stepped up to produce a guidebook. In addition, the free availability of the game over the Web has saved the army $7M in CDs.

The army estimates America’s Army is conserving some $700M-$4B per year. With respect to recruitment, actual results won’t be known for four or five years, when the current raft of thirteen- and fourteen-year olds will be old enough to join. The hope is that through realistic role playing and exploration of a soldier’s job, the important work of the military will be among the options that compatible young men and women will consider when planning a career.

Reference and Reading

Links concerning the America’s Army project and the MOVES Institute: www.movesinstitute.org/aapress.html


The US Army’s America’s Army site: www.americasarmy.com

Down the road
Having a successful online game inside the MOVES Institute is like having your own particle accelerator. Lots of proposed applications and interesting research are coming in the door.