

Green Up: Game time, Day 2

February 3 2006

In late January the development team of "America's Army," the United States Army's free video game for the Mac OS X, Windows and Linux operating systems, arrived in Camp Guernsey, Wyo., for three days of hands-on training and demonstrations via the Green Up event. These people would ordinarily spend their days coding video games, planning the next release of the game, implementing bug fixes and planning future versions of the title or marketing. For a few days they will be given full access to some of the actual weapons, vehicles, physical training and technologies used in their game.

Along with them is UPI Technology Correspondent Chris Barylick.

Day Two: It's 6:30 a.m. and we're walking towards Camp Guernsey's mess hall in almost pitch-black darkness, a clear sky overhead showing every star imaginable.

Breakfast is mainly composed of starch and carbohydrates, the developers discussing the previous day's events and the demonstrations planned for the day. Weapons familiarization and the VBIED (Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device) are the anticipated highlights of the day, and the Army has advised us to bring heavy work gloves, as we'll be picking up the remnants of the explosion.

A 30-minute drive through the valley brings us to the firing range, where we step out of the bus to find several picnic tables laden with weapons and ammunition. Instructors and supervisors lead us over to high-school style metal bleachers, where they go over the safety rules again, pair the

group up as "battle buddies" and hand out ear plugs.

Down the range is something unexpected. Watermelon-green plastic silhouette targets on wooden stakes have been interspersed at various distances, the closer targets covered with black and white garbage bags that almost look like shirts on the figures. Where the bullets would normally tear through the target, leaving almost no trace of the round's hit except for a small hole, the bags allow the grouping to be easily tracked.

As the development team begins to move through its rotation firing different weapons, they begin to enjoy the experience. A sense of pure geek joy seems to move throughout the scene, despite its violence and almost deafeningly loud noise, even through the ear plugs. Air Force and Special Forces instructors work through the team, allowing each person a set amount of ammunition to expend, remaining patient and clearing jams when they arise. A gun dealer from the nearby town of Wheatland contributes some Russian machine guns and a Glock machine pistol to the lineup, offering what advice he can and calmly walking each person through the basics.

The most surprising moment of the morning comes in the form of watching as Susan Land, the development team's production manager, learning how to fire an M203 grenade launcher. The sole woman on the bus, she brings a sort of genteel southern charm to a group of programmers and techies out of their normal environment, handing out Gummi bears, Pringles and strips of beef jerky at a moment's notice.

And now she's getting tutorials on how to fire a grenade launcher (which, despite being loaded with paint rounds, still looks intimidating).

The VBIED has been set up a short bus ride away, the gutted remains of a truck serving as a staging ground for 500 pounds of ammonium nitrate

to be set off with multiple human silhouette targets nearby. As we arrive, several developers are throwing a football back and forth while the team responsible for setting off the device makes final preparations. Gavin Donnelly of the Wyoming Department of Homeland Security answers final questions about the bomb, which has been divided into two barrels that have been loaded onto the main truck.

Holding out a double handful of pink pellets, he explains how the charges will be ignited via a detonation cord and what to expect from the concussive force, which will affect everything in its blast radius and should knock down or destroy the nearby human silhouettes.

A short bus ride later we join a convoy of more than 40 vehicles on a valley hillside overlooking the detonation area. Local officials including police, fire and military personnel stand by to watch the event from a safe distance of 1,200 meters before leaving to begin cleaning up the aftermath.

Binoculars and cameras are pulled out, and we watch the device explode in the middle of a dry Wyoming field, the explosion surging upwards and mimicking a small mushroom cloud. Despite the distance, the shockwave tears along the ground and through the group, resonating throughout the body. The developers, who have time to kill before returning to the blast radius, pull out their MRE (Meal Ready to Eat) kits, compare the random items they've been given and settle down to an impromptu picnic, occasional fumes from the MRE's charcoal burners coloring the air with what appears to be white steam.

After the fires have been put out, we arrive at the blast site to be gathered into a circle and handed work gloves. We form a line and begin walking forward, picking up debris and creating small piles for a tractor to gather later.

At the center of the explosion a small crater about 15 inches deep has been formed. The three vehicles in the explosion have been thrown aside and completely gutted, their metal frames scorched and dented.

Perhaps the most impressive feature of the entire event is the burn that's been left behind. An area of dried, near-blond grass several hundred feet in diameter has been scorched black, the people walking around it providing a means of mentally measuring the damage.

Walking through the wreckage, we pick up everything we can get our hands on, sometimes forming satellite piles of debris and calling each other over to help with larger pieces of shrapnel. For the most part, we find ourselves picking up pieces of rubber, plastic and fiberglass, the insulation, seats and tires having been torn apart in the blast.

The worst moments come when we find the silhouette targets. More than knocked over by the concussive force and shockwave, they've been battered against anything solid enough not to move. Picking up a target made headless by a hot chunk of shrapnel that tore through its upper torso, you realize the human body isn't that much more solid than this piece of plastic.

This demonstration is fairly typical of campaign-based explosions like the ones in Afghanistan and Iraq, which typically use a payload of 500 to 1,000 pounds of explosives inside a sedan that have been created from widely available chemicals and/or recovered munitions.

A trip back to the firing range ensures that everyone has sufficient hands-on time with the weapons. With the sun setting to the west, Sergeant Neil picks up an M16 rifle and begins demonstrating how to engage targets while moving. Slowly walking through the target field, he raises the rifle to fire at targets as necessary while lowering it to take in everything around him. Handing the rifle off to Monkey, who is still covered in

camouflage clothing, body armor, combat helmet, goggles, gloves and A/V equipment, he lets him walk the course and fire. Once again, Monkey impresses the group around him, engaging the targets almost perfectly while lowering the rifle to use his peripheral vision.

During the final briefing of the day, Sergeant Neil takes center stage to discuss convoy training, which the developers will go through as a final exercise. Tying in with the "Real Heroes" program the Army intends to include for future versions of the "America's Army" game, Neil and other combat veterans' experiences will be used as a basis for missions and events within the title. The game is expected to grow like a role-playing title with a more customizable figure that can advance and unlock additional portions of the game after certain goals have been completed.

Convoy training is about the last thing anyone wants to think about but is the thing that needs to be discussed the most as Sergeant Neil opens his PowerPoint presentation on convoy tactics. The classroom dark, save for the light from the LCD projector, Neil begins to walk the development groups through dozens of slides as to the basics of convoy fighting, what's being done with IED tactics and what can be done in given situations.

The goal in these situations isn't necessarily to win every initial encounter, but to survive, keep equipment in running order, try to make sure there are no additional shocks after the first attack and that they can pull out and find an alternate route with as few casualties as possible. Tactics such as knowing how to plow through surrounding traffic, learning how to exit the vehicles under fire, covering wounded teammates with another person's body armor, angling the formation to return fire, setting up casualty collection points and calling in QRF (Quick Reaction Forces) personnel to help fight, are explained in detail.

It's a new school of combat and they're trying to make sense of complete chaos in these situations. As a result, this has become standard training prior to deployment and is practiced over and over again until it becomes muscle memory that can actually be relied upon when something like this does happen.

Walking into the evening's party, the developers and instructors have started a small pool tournament while a multiplayer game of "America's Army" is being set up. The topic centers on the upcoming physical training session at 6:30 a.m., which few people are looking forward to. As a result, people are approaching Sergeant Doug Davidson to ask him exactly what awaits them in the morning. Smiling, Davidson gives no specifics and focuses on talking to the people around him.

As I leave the bar and walk back to my room, I go over the day in my mind, 500-pound explosion included.

I then realize that in the last several hours, I've inadvertently learned how to fire a grenade launcher.

And I wonder where to put that on a resume.

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