

Green Up: Game time, Day 3

February 6 2006

In late January the development team of America's Army, the U.S. Army's free video game for the Mac OS X, Windows and Linux operating systems, arrived in Camp Guernsey 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've been given full access to some of the weapons, vehicles, physical training and technologies used in their game.

Along with them is UPI Technology Correspondent Chris Barylick.

Day Three: It's 5 a.m., pitch black out and I think I've slept all I can for the night. My body's still on east coast time and with the thought of the upcoming physical training session, I don't want to find out exactly what the Army is willing to do to get me out of bed.

After taking two Tylenol and bundling up in a coat, I walked down the stairs to buy a bottle of water and out the door to see if the developers were beginning to gather yet.

True to form, most of the group was there, waiting. With temperatures in the teens, we begin to wonder if this is going to take place or if someone's standing by, filming us and laughing as we shiver into our jackets.

Sergeant Doug Davidson rounds the corner a few minutes later, decked

out in a sweat suit, sneakers and hat. A shared internal groan circulates through the group. The moderate coup backed by buying Davidson extra drinks that had been attempted the night before had obviously failed. He was here to put us through the paces.

Gathering the group and having us run in a spaced circle, we take a head count and run over to the barracks to collect stragglers.

If I was apprehensive about what the military would do to jolt someone out of bed, it's a shared sentiment. The other members of the development group are found wandering towards the field and quickly absorbed into the exercises.

Between running, push-ups, side straddle hops (kind of like jumping jacks, but more vigorous), sprints and carry exercises, things don't go badly. I begin to regret throwing on anything more than a shirt, sweater and pants and while I don't wheeze, I begin to wish I had some food in my stomach, more water in my system and hadn't worn this warm a coat.

Perhaps the hardest part is the carrying exercises, which have Sergeant Davidson segment the group off into sections of three. The first exercise is to link arms, form a chair for the third person to sit in and race across as conjoined groups. When this is done, we move on to fireman's carry, which has us grab the other person by their legs, sling them over your back while controlling their weight by grabbing an arm and walking to a designated spot.

Despite their unassuming sizes, junior programmer Tim Ambrogi and 3D artist Clayton "Monkey" Montgomery manage to impress the group by hoisting team members much larger than them and carrying them respectable distances.

During the routine and cool down exercises, the Canadian documentary

makers circle the field, zipping in for close camera shots and facial lighting that contrast surreally with the pitch-black night.

An hour later, we're back on the bus and heading towards convoy training, the last demonstration and exercise for the training cycle. Ten minutes into the drive, we pull into a staging area that seems to double as Camp Guernsey's dumping grounds. Sorted piles of broken appliances, timber, shattered concrete and odds and ends greet us as the bus stops by several small storage bunkers and a tan Humvee pulls up and stops short.

In the middle of a raw Wyoming morning, Sergeant Neil gathers the group around him and begins to lay out the basics of convoy training, introducing us to the equipment and explaining the tactics of guarding a vehicle that may be in motion, stopping where necessary and how to deploy to cover a given area.

Handing out body armor, helmets and unloaded M-16s to groups of three at a time, he loads us into the Humvee, drives a few hundred yards, circles back and orders the groups to exit the vehicle and cover a given area.

When the first order is given to exit the vehicle, which has just stopped short so fast the air is slammed out of your lungs, there's almost no time to consciously think through the next step. Groping for the exit handle, I try to reach outside the window for the lever. Coming up with nothing, I hear Sergeant Neil scream at me to traverse diagonally from the forward passenger seat to the left rear passenger seat. Flailing my body across the middle of the Humvee, I manage to catch the flak jacket on something and lie on my back like a turtle that's been turned upside down. Finally breaking free, I stumble out of the vehicle several seconds behind everyone else.

"That's why I usually do that facing down," says Sergeant Neil, laughing.

The next run goes better and I'm able to cleanly deploy from the passenger side and run to a safe point when the Humvee comes to a stop. Dave Kozlowski, having taken the front passenger seat, reaches out the window to tear at the door handle after the stop and is out the door within seconds. We surround the vehicle, using the sides as cover, a part of me wondering how long it would take to get this down to some form of muscle memory.

Sergeant Neil had demonstrated the use of smoke grenades before the first run, unwrapping two and hurling them about 15 yards off. Where a video game's smoke grenade would ordinarily provide an immense cloud of concentrated smoke within seconds that could easily be hidden and maneuvered in, it takes a over a minute before a workable smoke cloud has been created. Wind also proves to be a major factor and has to be measured before each grenade is thrown.

A minute suddenly seems like an extremely long time to wait.

The rest of the runs go well, each group of three donning equipment and loading into the Humvee to practice the drills. Some groups take longer trips through the grounds, only to be met with almost deafeningly loud charges being set off to represent IEDs. The final group disappears over the horizon in the Humvee only to be met by a trio of charges, the grand finale of the exercise.

The training sessions over, goodbyes said and the bags loaded back on the bus, we begin the two hour journey back to Cheyenne. With the exception of a quick stop for snacks, which somewhat resembles our raiding a gas station's convenience store like a barbarian horde that's polite enough to pay, the entire bus is asleep for approximately half the trip.

Prior to putting my head down and closing my eyes, I notice several of

the developers poring over a video game magazine and discussing newly released titles. Physics, game engines, graphical effects, play style and what makes the game fun or original are discussed. It strikes me as strange that they mention their competitors' titles, especially when their own game is given away for free to anyone who wants to download it. They then begin to mention the exercises they've gone through and what they'll have to consider and implement in the next version of America's Army.

The truth of the matter is pretty simple. They're trying to make their own game that much better.

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