

Green Up Journals: Game time

February 3 2006

It is late January and 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 -- has arrived in Camp Guernsey for three days of hands-on training and demonstrations via the Green Up event. While the team 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 One: As I walk into the lobby/cafe of the Cheyenne Hampton Inn, the developers have already descended from their hotel rooms and are hunkered over breakfast tables, copies of USA Today and cups of coffee in hand.

Here's an event that trumps any corporate training, ropes course or team-building seminar: three days on an Army base in the middle of Wyoming with hands-on weapons familiarization, tactics training, explosives demonstrations, convoy simulations and mandatory physical training thrown into the mix. For a software-development team, this is the furthest thing from an ordinary day that could be imagined.

Sergeant Dave Schroder arrives 17 minutes ahead of schedule. Tall, friendly and in his 50s, he steps into the lobby clutching a sealed mug of coffee, greets the development team and begins to load luggage onto the

periwinkle-blue school bus that will become our primary mode of transportation over the next several days.

Once the boarding has begun, the characters around me become a bit clearer. The geeks have met the Army as Quality Assurance Lead tester Erich Blattner and Lead Designer Dave Kozlowski pass bags to each other, reluctantly admitting to having missed episodes of "Lost" and the current "Battlestar Galactica" series.

As the bus pulls along the highway towards Camp Guernsey, a certain order settles in. Jonathan Nascone, one of the game's 3D artists, settles in to play a Nintendo DS while others catch quick naps. Out the window, Wyoming passes by. Within an hour we've stopped for snacks and moved on, a brief Arby's breakfast in our stomachs to ease the journey.

Camp Guernsey sits about 90 miles away from Cheyenne and almost literally embodies the ideal of a military base being the epicenter of its small surrounding town. The gates open quickly despite Sergeant Schroder's having to jokingly tell the guard he lives there, and we quickly exit the bus to be greeted by a few uniformed staff members outside the billeting office. Here, the team is assigned rooms and given keys attached to pink plastic key chains that draw laughs. We are loaded back on the bus and driven over to the barracks to unpack before our introductory briefing.

During introductions, staff members cover the basics of the "America's Army" game, cite the 6 million registered users playing it and mention the firms interested in modifying the application to become individual training and simulation programs. Additional funding has been received for programs to be created from it, and multiple organizations have requested their own version of the convoy trainer. Where most free video games may not be guaranteed an audience, this has a loyal following and has become a property that can be sold in useful forms to

interested parties.

As I step out of the barracks, several developers are throwing a Frisbee along a stretch of gravel that seems almost impossibly long. When I turn around, I see several members of the team looking at one of their own with a sense of near-awe. Clayton Montgomery, or "Monkey," as he's known among his co-workers, is wrapped head to toe in camouflage gear, his entire head and torso covered by pocketed body armor, gloves, a green ski mask, goggles and a custom helmet, complete with audio and visual equipment. Where others have gone for camouflage pants and maybe an America's Army sweatshirt, he is living and breathing the clothing of the game, even down to the miniature satchel packs attached to his legs. A 3D artist by trade, he's been assigned to capture every frame of the experience from his perspective and seems intent on doing so, both through the technology and the clothing he's attached to his body.

Standing on the runway, two Black Hawk medical helicopters taxi towards the group, their crews disembarking and giving the development group a brief rundown as to safety and handing out earplugs. The group is split into two parts; each climbs into a chopper, sits down in modern, silver, skeletal seats with canvas covers and figures out their four-point shoulder and waist belts. Monkey, more than fully geared, sits sideways as opposed to our back or front seats as he takes the gunner's position. A part of the machine around him, he turns on his recording equipment.

Looking around, there's a shared joy and terror and uniqueness of the experience. Rising, we twist and dart throughout the valley below us, skimming the treetops at some moments. An almost mute flight thanks to the earplugs and shared silence, the only thing that can be heard is the sound of the rotor blades and soft cheers when a sharp curve or drop is taken.

Never let it be said that the military doesn't have a sense of humor. Stopping, the chopper slopes up and goes on a full drop to within a few feet of the tree line. My notebook floats up to rest against the ceiling before I grab it and continue, my stomach now around my throat. Nicholas Ray, or "Indy," a junior programmer who seems to be a physical cross between Kurt Cobain and the standard surfer character from a plethora of '80s movies, gives me two thumbs up and smiles ear to ear in response.

During the final briefing of the day, the rest of the training's events are described in detail. Rules for hands-on weapons familiarization are laid out ("everyone is a safety officer" being repeated multiple times to instill a sense of shared responsibility).

From here, we move to the heart of the matter: the Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device demonstration that is to take place tomorrow. Here, Gavin Donnelly of the Wyoming Department of Homeland Security steps up to explain what he and his group will be doing to recreate the explosives being used in Iraq. Donnelly then activates a laptop and plays back a series of controlled test explosions, stepping through each sequence while explaining factors like the ballistics of the explosion, outward pressure, shockwave effects and what happens to surrounding objects. Throughout the demonstrations of controlled explosions, the mood is light, the room laughing when an explosion has been spliced together in synch with rock music, yet also impressed as what's being shown.

This changes within seconds as the video switches to recorded footage of bombs being prepared from unused artillery shells, placed in cars and sent out into the middle of traffic. Jaws drop as the explosions tear across the scene, Donnelly pointing out that insurgent groups have become fond of taping and broadcasting their attacks due to the large amounts of attention they receive.

When the final recorded attacks are played, the feeling of the room seems straight out of "A Clockwork Orange." Explosions tear across traffic circles and highway intersections looking like small nuclear explosions. People, cars and objects are thrown as if they were made of twigs. When the movies are over and the lights have been raised, a brief question-and-answer period reveals that shaped charges with projectile systems are being used to blow through convoy armor and that an average IED can be built and deployed for under \$150 after materials and labor.

The America's Army video game is expected to incorporate user-controllable vehicles in 2007 and 2008. Somewhere along the line, the lessons of the evening may come into consideration.

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Citation: Green Up Journals: Game time (2006, February 3) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2006-02-green-journals-game.html>

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