US Navy recruits gamers to help in piracy strategy

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An armed Somali pirate stands along the coastline of Hobyo town in northeastern Somalia in 2010. The US Navy is turning to the wisdom of the crowd to forge military strategy, inviting the public to join an online game in which Somali pirates have hijacked commercial ships.

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The Office of Naval Research plans this month to launch the US military's first online war game to draw on the ideas of thousands of people instead of the traditional strategy session held inside the Pentagon's offices.

The approach "is designed to produce ideas and potential solutions to our

toughest problems and challenges," Lawrence Schuette, director of innovation at Office of Naval Research, told AFP.

"Piracy off the Horn of Africa has been an enduring problem that has many stakeholders. We selected this topic for the pilot scenario," Schuette said.

The scheduled starting date for the project had to be delayed by a month as about 9,000 people have signed up, instead of the 1,000 that planners expected, officials said.

The Navy hopes the project will take advantage of a wide range of expertise not only from military officers but also academics, politicians and technology specialists, he said.

"The hope is that via collective intelligence and the wisdom of many -- we'll be able to have a conversation about a tough, geopolitical problem and come up with solutions that would've never occurred to us," he said.

The game will have three rounds over three weeks, with players in the first stage faced with a piracy scenario and asked to propose brief, Twitter-length solutions.

Players will be presented with boxes labeled, "Innovate" and "Defend," with questions such as: "What new resources could turn the tide in the Somali pirate situation?"

In the second round, there are more scenarios to grapple with and then in the third, players are grouped in teams and will come up with a more detailed "action plan."

"In the action plan you'll be awarded innovation points and allowed to add more text and illustrations to your original idea," Schuette said.

The precise details of the war game scenarios are being kept under wraps for the moment by the game designers, the Institute for the Future, a non-profit group based in Palo Alto, California.

In true Pentagon fashion, the gaming platform has an unwieldy name, the Massively Multiplayer Online Wargame Leveraging the Internet, or MMOWGLI.

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