

# Inventor turns his laser tag game into anywhere, anytime iPhone sport

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George Carter III, the Dallas inventor who brought the world laser tag 32 years ago, wants to bring the still-popular game into the 21st century.

The 71-year-old entrepreneur has developed an app that allows combatants to play virtual shoot-em-up anytime, anywhere using iPhones and earbuds as the gun, map, scoring system and communication tool.

"You don't need to go to a paintball or laser tag center," said Carter, founder of Tactical Entertainment. "You can quickly gather a group of friends through social media and play. We're also going to find ways for meet-ups to happen."

Carter has named his laser-tag sequel Tzuum - pronounced zoom - as a tribute to Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese general, philosopher and author of "The Art of War."

"We're trying to make this game very tactical and strategic," Carter said. "He's the guy universally known for that."

Krasamo, an app-development company based in the Dallas area, has been working on the project for two years. These days, it's churning out slightly modified versions twice a week. With each adaptation, Carter and a small band of field testers have endured 100 degree temps to suggest further refinements.

Beta testing was, as of press time, slated to begin soon.

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The idea stems from a military project that Carter has been working on for eight years. He has three U.S. patents for systems that create live simulation training for soldiers using common digital camera optics mounted on actual combat rifles that shoot blanks. Smart devices and computers keep score.

When the military proved slow on the draw to buy his innovations, Carter switched his focus to a platform for games two years ago. He's used his military patents as stepping stones for a fourth patent and one that's pending that protect key aspects of the game. He's kicked in his those two patents and \$100,000 to get Tzuum up and running.

"I'm all in on this one," he said.

So are friends and friends of friends, who have invested more than \$700,000 thus far.

Among those is Fred Mullins, who previously directed the U.S. Army's procurement of live-training simulation equipment before he retired as a colonel in 2010.

"When I was on active duty, I was looking for someone like George who had a better system," said Mullins, who became a backer of Carter's military application after learning about it in 2013. "The military still uses a laser-based system that is 1970s technology and was first fielded to the Army in the early 1980s."

When Richard Osteen, a 61-year-old tax consultant and former neighbor, learned that Carter had shifted gears, he asked if he could be an investor.

"My high points are that it's an outdoor game that can be played in

teams, and it does require some strategy like all good games do," said Osteen. "And it's an opportunity to get kids back outside and away from audio-visual and electronic games."

Does Osteen expect to make gazillions with this?

"I don't know," he said. "I'm really excited about the variety of games that can use this platform. It's only limited by our imagination. It doesn't have to be a shooting thing. It could be more of a hide-and-seek or capture-the-flag type of game."

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Carter sees his competition as mainly outdoor laser tag games that use screen-based technology - which can be problematic in sunlight - or are smartphone based but require additional hardware to shoot an infrared beam.

Both types of systems usually require vests with sensors to score hits, he said.

Carter is figuring out who his market is.

"My experience with laser tag showed that only about 15 percent of the players really get into it as their main form of entertainment. Everybody else is a casual user. They play it once a year at a [birthday party](#) or they get exposed to it at some sort of team-building event.

"We're trying to determine who that 15 percent is going to be.

"So far, it comes down to young adults, mostly male and college age," he said. "But we think we're going to get a more female audience than laser tag, Airsoft, paintball or other combat games. It's just a phone, and you

don't have to wear a sweaty vest that someone else just wore."

Carter hopes to make money by selling virtual goods - like fantasy drones for missile air strikes - and more sophisticated versions of the game that have extended playing times or unlimited target ranges.

"I actually shot one of our early code developers who was in the Netherlands from a park (near Dallas)," said Carter. "It was more of a gimmick. We wanted to test whether we could do it, and we did."

One optional piece of gear will be a pistol-grip case your iPhone fits in. It doesn't add any software features, he said, just makes the phone easier to aim.

Players hear more than 30 types of battlefield sounds through a 3-D audio effects.

"The first few times I played it with the sound effects, and I'd hear a helicopter, I'd look up thinking it was a real one."

Each player's location is updated in real time using GPS and geo-pairing capabilities, Carter said. "Geo-pairing means I know where you are and you know where I am, therefore we can shoot at each other."

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Carter was, as of press time, recruiting 1,000 qualified players to do live-action [beta testing](#). Wannabe testers sign up on [playtzoom.com](#) and are asked a series of questions to see if there's a fit. Carter is looking for active gamers in specific geographic markets who can set up a squad of four players. He wants at least 300 to be in Dallas.

So far, 700 have met his requirements.

Carter hopes that the testing won't take much longer than 30 days.

"We're not trying to work bugs out like you are with a lot of beta tests," he said. "We're trying to get the playability right."

Figuring out what players will pay for is another aspect of the beta test. "We're considering a weekend pass where everything would be unlocked and available for 48 hours. We'll basically do what the players want."

So how many free downloaders does Carter realistically think he can convert into paying customers?

"The national conversion rate for apps is extremely low - single-digit," he said. "The good news is there are 400 million iPhones that will accept this app. So you don't have to have a huge conversion rate to make it work."

That's his game plan for making laser tag 2.0 even more lucrative than his original iteration.

In 1984, Carter opened his first Photon in Dallas. Laser tag quickly turned into a nationwide, then worldwide phenomenon. It's still a birthday party mainstay of family entertainment centers.

Even though Carter made several million dollars from laser tag, he feels he left tens of millions on the table because he couldn't ramp up fast enough to ride the crest. He tried to franchise but royalty payments proved hard to collect. An ill-timed IPO didn't come to market.

So Carter phased out of Photon and moved on to other things.

"I wasn't happy with the way things turned out," Carter said. "But this could be a worldwide thing very quickly. I ought to know better than to

do a startup at this age, but this is too good. I'm not going to pass it up."

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