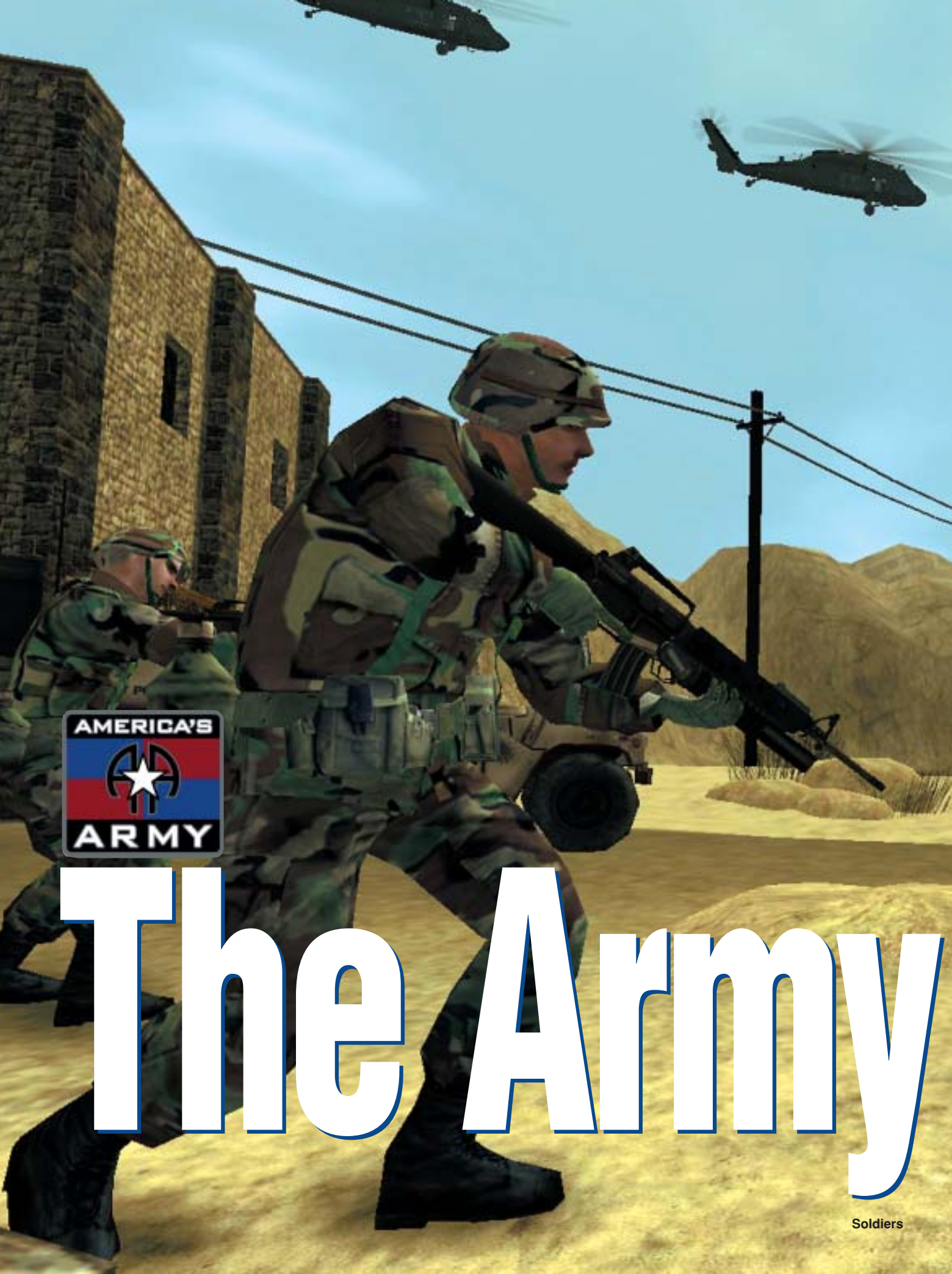

The Army

Soldiers

Game

The Next Best Thing to Being There

Story by Heike Hasenauer

ONCE, kids played Army out in their backyards with toy soldiers and G.I. Joe action figures, maneuvering toy tanks and other "weapons of war" around makeshift battlefields.

Their imaginations flourished, fueled by the combat films they saw and the war stories their fathers or other relatives shared with them.

The youngsters mimicked the actions of the actor-soldiers and provided their own sound effects to simulate weapons fire and bomb blasts. From the safety of their dirt-mound forts, the would-be heroes could —in a very limited way — experience what it was like to be a soldier.

Starting this month, kids and adults alike will have the opportunity to play a more realistic Army game, "America's Army: The Official U.S. Army Game." Copies of the two-CD computer game are to be distributed free of charge to a target audience over the age of 13.

The interactive game will allow players to "travel" through virtual Army environments and experience everything from the enlistment process at a recruiting station to jumping out of a C-130 during an airborne operation and retrieving stolen Stinger missiles from enemy forces, said LTC George Juntiff, the Army Game Project's operations officer.

The Army's intent is not only to enhance kids' — and adults' — Army game-playing experiences and spark interest in the Army as a potential career, but to reintroduce the Army to the population at large, said Paul Boyce, an Army spokesman at the Pentagon.

From standard office-environment scenarios to authority-based leadership training modules, "America's Army" provides players with real-life imagery of weapons, terrain and equipment.

Players in the Army game make the decisions that guide their characters. By electing to have the character attend the Primary Leadership Development Course, for example, the player can give the character those traits needed to advance his career as he moves through the game's various modules.

The idea for an Army game designed by the Army originated at the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., as an online outreach effort for the assistant secretary of the Army for reserve affairs two years ago, said MAJ Christopher Chambers, deputy director of the Army Game Project.

The estimated $7 million game will evolve over five years to cover all the Army's military occupational specialties, said Professor Michael Zyda, director of the Naval Postgraduate School's Modeling Virtual Environments and Simulation institute, better known as the MOVES Institute, in Monterey, Calif.

At press time, "America's Army" included 20 combat-arms missions in the action component and depicted most of the Army's Career Management Fields in the adventure component.

Faculty members, government contractors and joint services' personnel who are completing master's degrees in computer sciences at NPS created the game — with the help of countless Army subject-matter experts.

Recently showcased at one of the largest annual computer-game expositions in the world, the Electronics Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles, Calif., "America's Army" was favorably received by representatives from some of the foremost gaming companies in the country, Zyda said.

In one part of the two-CD game called "Soldiers," four toy soldiers appear from the top of the computer screen and fall in line in front of the player, then "morph" into real-life soldiers.

Players can choose one of the soldiers as their "game piece" or "create" their own soldier, said NPS Professor John Hiles, who designed the "Soldiers" software.

The four real-life soldiers are CPL Kemar Ebanks, PFC Joseph Boever, SGT Robert Miranda and SGT Patrick Curran, all of the 82nd Airborne Division's 1st Battalion, 504th Infantry, at Fort Bragg, N.C. Additional real-life "game pieces" include SPC Angela Romine of the 1/504th, and SPC Vivica Foxwell and PFC Kimberly Robinson of the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, Calif.

The soldiers posed in front of a blue screen and were videotaped as they performed PT, put on equipment, ran with full infantry gear, fired weapons, worked with various tools and spent time convers-

Players can observe nighttime operations through the same night-vision-goggle view their characters "see."

ing with comrades, said Miranda. Their movements were then computer-generated and incorporated into the game, so players can experience the Army vicariously through the soldier and the game options they choose.

The preselected characters will possess both good and not so good character traits, Hiles said. One will have great drive, but will be weak physically. Another comes from a poor family and isn't well educated.

"The player, given six resources and seven values to choose from, makes the decisions that guide his character," Hiles said. The resources include energy, strength, knowledge, skill, finance and popularity. The values are loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage.

If the player is headed for the Primary Leadership Development Course, for example, and realizes his map-reading skills need some work, he can opt to attend a refresher course rather than spend time with friends.

In the "Operations" portion of the game — a first-person-action game — players can enter any of 20 infantry-squad-related scenarios, said the segment's producer, NPS Professor Michael Capps.

Real-life imagery of weapons, equipment and terrain — including views through night-vision devices — have been coupled with an emphasis on training, Capps said.

"We want people to have a good time with this. But we want them to know, too, that when a soldier enlists in the Army, he's not simply taken to the top of a tower and told to jump," Capps said. "He's taught to jump safely before actually doing it." Players learn that they must complete airborne training before they can join an airborne unit, or ranger school before they can go on missions reserved for ranger-qualified soldiers.

Drill sergeants and instructors guide the soldier-players through training and provide guidance throughout the players' "careers." Players who negotiate an obstacle course will hear real-life drill sergeant SFC Rodney Gaskins, of the 172nd Infantry Brigade

In the first-person operations portion of the game players can enter any of 20 infantry-related scenarios, complete with small-arms fire and interactions with enemy personnel.

at Fort Wainwright, Alaska, bark commands. "At this pace, I'll be retired by the time you're done," he shouts at a few slow-moving troops.

At the end of ranger training in the Georgia mountains, players find themselves in the midst of a mountain ambush, looking down the barrel of an M-16 rifle while advancing through a forest or over a bridge.

In another scenario, players find themselves at a pumping station in Alaska, attempting to prevent a terrorist attack.

Players who perform well earn opportunities to advance. Those who undergo basic marksmanship training and qualify as expert marksmen, for instance, can opt to go to sniper school. At the same time, players face consequences for making bad choices. Negative behavior could land the player in prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

The multi-player "Operations" portion of "America's Army" will soon be available online, Army officials said, so a squad of soldiers could come up against other players.

The game's programmers and graphic-arts team visited 16 Army installations and interviewed more than 700 soldiers over the two-year game-development period to ensure its accuracy, Juntiff said.

"Members of the Army Game Project team traveled to Fort Lewis, Wash., for example, and fired every type of small-arms weapon in the Army's inventory," Juntiff said. "Their experiences helped them to incorporate realistic weapon-firing sequences into the game."

The roughly 30-member team responsible for developing the game's software — among them Defense Department employees, contractors, professors and students at the MOVES institute — spent two to three days at each installation.

They rode in helicopters with

Before players encounter the enemy in combat *(above)*, their characters first learn the necessary skills — such as how to handle an M-16 — during realistic training *(left)*.

soldiers from the 101st Airborne Div., fired tank main guns at Fort Knox, Ky., and visited Airborne School at Fort Benning, Ga., Capps said. Some of them even participated in a night-time training exercise with soldiers at the Air Assault School.

For the assault-on-an-insurgent-camp scenario, teams met with soldiers from the 75th Ranger Regiment to create a realistic camp, Capps said.

"I told the rangers, 'don't make ranger training easy,'" Hiles said. "'Don't let people think it's easy.'"

Consequently, characters won't always be physically fit and "running" a race on a smooth track in the sunshine. They'll be tired, dodging rain and sinking in mud.

The circumstances characters are exposed to "force their values — or lack of them — to surface," Hiles said.

The game also introduces players to the Army's amateur sports program, off-post housing initiatives and soldier episodes of financial difficulty and positive intervention.

Representatives from Epic Games, developers of "Unreal Tournament," the 2001 Video Game of the Year, play-tested "America's Army," as did 200 gamers and soldiers.

George Lucas' company, SkyWalker, which produces sound effects for the movie industry, and Dolby Digital Sound, helped create the sound effects for "America's Army." Additionally, sound effects from the "Terminator II" movie were given to game developers free of charge, Capps added.

"It's all resulted in a game that actually does what it promises to do, deliver a realistic view of the Army," Chambers said.

At press time, Army officials were considering distribution outlets, including inserting the game CDs in popular magazines. □

One scenario has the game characters capturing enemy troops *(left)*, while in another scene troops must undertake a reconnaissance behind enemy lines *(below)*.

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