

America's Army

Distance Education Through Gaming

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INTRODUCTION

Online gaming is an activity that many of all ages engage in to the point of obsession. Many online enthusiasts can tell everything there is about their particular games including terrain, controls, personalities, how to score points, and the methodology behind the games. Young and old alike can be quite passionate about their gaming experiences. If asked questions about their games, the answer is usually a 30-minute discussion. Do they learn anything through this gaming experience? Surprisingly, the answer is most definitely yes. Online gamers learn strategy about their games and tactics to

use in this strategy. They are quite serious about their gaming worlds and spend hours upon hours engaged in creating, developing, corresponding, and battling in this virtual environment.

DISTANCE EDUCATION THROUGH GAMING

Von Wangenheim and Shull (2009) define a game as "any contest (play) among adversaries (players) operating under constraints (rules) for an objective (winning, victory, or pay-off)" (p. 92). Game-based learning is considered a powerful instructional method. Serious games are those designed to teach certain subject matter, reinforce development, expand concepts, or used as a tool for drill or change attitudes as they play. Those games that ranked most important were the ones that allowed competence building from learning through failure, discovery learning, and situated learning. Games should be designed on the basis of learning theory, instructional design models, and game theory (Von Wangenheim & Shull, 2009).

The simple technology of computer vision is the mechanism video gaming industries are utilizing for virtual reality (VR) and three dimensional (3D) interaction (LaViola, 2008). The Horizon Report of 2008 "identifies game play as one of the seven metatrends that continue to affect pedagogy, evolving to include virtual worlds, augmented reality, and massive multiplayer modes" (Hlodan, 2008, p. 791). Gamers are able to construct, investigate, and interrogate virtual worlds through



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digital technologies. This enables them to simulate how they work and play. Squire (2006) notes that "Videogame players can lead civilizations, fly aircraft, lead squadrons of urban warriors in foreign countries, or participate in virtual societies with their own languages, cultures, and economies" (p. 19).

Squire (2006) notes that interaction in the social world is where gamers participate in problem solving. They participate in online social organizations such as learning communities. Hands-on or doing is a core characteristic of game organization. According to Squire, "legendary game designer Shigeru Miyamoto claims to design games around the verbs that gamers enact. The verbs are running, jumping, diving, punching, kicking, and swinging" (p. 22). All of these verbs can be used in some way to get through enemies and obstacles. Games have a "recursive cycle of perceiving and acting and thinking and doing" with the system (p. 22). Gamers adopt a particular avatar within the virtual world and learn the facts and procedures to "be" in that world as the character or avatar. Most gamers are so involved in the virtual online gaming world they are talking, sharing strategies, checking FAQs and participating in forums offered by the online gaming sites. Squire notes that "the most intense social learning is found in massively multiplayer games, games where players interact with thousands of other players in real time over the Internet" (p. 23).

AMERICA'S ARMY WEBSITE

One such game is America's Army. It was originally created as a recruiting tool for the Army, but has since turned into one of the most popular free online gaming environments existing today. Surprisingly, there are many avenues of training in the America's Army game experience. A few of the training experiences are basic training, medic training, basic combat training, gre-

nade training, and sniper training and testing.

The adventure starts here. The America's Army website consists of many links for information, support, and communities. The "Download" tab is the place to find the latest download of the game and available utilities. "Steam" is a link to a website that is very similar to iTunes. It is a community allowing gamers to download games and view demos and trailers of upcoming events. America's Army has a presence in Steam so gamers play wherever they are from any personal computer. "Deploy" is the link where the latest version of America's Army is found. It is available in multiple languages making it a diversified training experience. "Utilities" is a link where some of the latest utilities are found.

The "Community" tab is the place to find forums, chats, competition, and sites. "Forums" is the place to find all things about the game. Active members include the development team, subject matter experts, armed forces personnel, and civilians of all ages internationally. Documentation is found here and includes guides, how-to's, and FAQ support issues. "Chat" is an area that encourages getting connected. Gamers get connected by the desktop portal and the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) client. "Competition" is the place to find lists of online competition teams and sites. Virtual battlegrounds and competitive teams have links to join and information about when events will happen. "Sites" is the place where the "Fan," "Clan," and "Tournament" sites are combined for easy access.

The "Real Heroes" tab is where the stories of real heroes are told. Their dedication and gallantry in action are highlighted in this section. It includes all ranks and tells stories of soldiers that endure military life every day. This area also includes blogs where these real heroes can post the many activities they are involved in and let others know where to meet them. They tell of

their experiences, how they responded to their experiences, and how they survived. The many roles of the servicemen and women, such as medics, are noted here. Stories also include acts that resulted in medals of honor. The "Support" tab is the place to find support for all aspects of America's Army. Live game support is also available through this section. The "U.S. Army" tab is a place of recruitment information. This area references the Army doctrine and gives examples of careers available in the Army.

America's Army also has a graphic novel that is similar in appearance to a comic book. The name of the novel is *America's Army: The Graphic Novel*. Sherman, Penick, and Brown (2009) have illustrated and written this graphic novel for the gamers of America's Army. The story starts in the Republic of the Ostregals where the American soldier will fight to provide humanitarian relief and protection to civilians. The novel illustrates the many roles an American soldier must have in order to protect and defend a people. They must know teamwork to be able to work together on strategies. There are graphics depicting counseling sessions of questioning with the civilians. The graphics also include the role of medic who attends to civilians' physical needs. Finally, there are graphics illustrating soldiers in full gear out on a mission with all the sounds one would expect to hear on a mission.

AMERICA'S ARMY EXPERIENCE

America's Army game is all about the values the United States Army holds dear. These values include teamwork, strategy, tactics, honor, official weapons, precision, and rules of engagement. Honor is one of the most important values taught by the Army. It includes values of loyalty, duty, selfless service, and respect. These values are taught from day one and are important all through the Army experience and even into life. Honor is a value highlighted in

America's Army to engage gamers in the concept of ranks, so they realize getting the job done is more about the whole team than it is about individuals. The Army teaches teamwork from day one also. It is important to be a team member, which means more than merely doing one's own job. It is taking up the slack and making sure that others on the team have fulfilled their duties as well. Teamwork is about helping your fellow man and woman in combat as well as in the barracks. Honor and teamwork are celebrated in the America's Army gaming experience. The developers wanted others to really have a sense for what it is like for soldiers to depend on each other.

Strategy and tactics are an important part of the Army experience. These are mission critical. Without a well planned strategy, the team will not perform at their best, there will be missed opportunities and lives can be lost. Well planned strategies lead to being at the right place at the right time and deceiving the enemy, so victory is won. Tactics can include anything from securing a room or building to securing a region. They require organization of the soldiers and weapons to be used. America's Army developers want the gamer to make decisions while playing this game. What happens if a soldier throws a grenade the wrong way? What if the soldier is trying to throw a grenade through a door and it hits the wall and ricochets back at the soldier?

America's Army has developed and deployed some features that discourage bad rules of engagement. Shooting a friendly is not a value that is accepted in the U.S. Army and America's Army holds to this same value. Weapons training is a highlight for many soldiers, and the same is true for gamers. America's Army's developers have taken real weapons and transferred the detail into the graphics of the game. Any weapon the Army uses that has been developed and deployed in the America's Army game is accurate even

down to the sound effects it makes. The many rifles, machine guns, and grenades are present in the game along with training to use these weapons. Subject matter experts were consulted for the detail of the weaponry, their functionality, and their sounds. The sound effects include magazines being inserted and removed, and explosions. No soldier wants to make the mistake of shooting a friendly or an innocent bystander, so precision is key. America's Army offers lots of training for precision.

The medic training in America's Army is much more detailed than in any other game. The developers wanted to approach the medic training with more reality and show what soldiers really do experience. America's Army developers have access to soldiers who have recommended ways of making the medic training and other aspects of America's Army more realistic. The goal was to show the gamer what a soldier must endure when dealing with a wounded comrade or civilian. Some cases need more attention than others and it is important for the sake of reality that the medic scenarios are accurate.

The developers of America's Army experienced basic training up close and personal. What started out as the assumption that they were going to be spectators and watch others as they went through basic training turned into the reality of participation. The America's Army team spent a week at basic training and learned what basic training is all about. They learned how to move, interact and respond as a group. Rising in the morning for calisthenics, going out to the field to fire real weapons and doing the obstacle course were real experiences the group walked away with at basic training. As is true to the distance education experience, the group

took these experiences and applied them to the game so others could have the educational experience they had.

SUMMARY

America's Army's medic training was responsible for helping a man save two others' lives. A North Carolina man witnessed an accident in which an SUV flipped and rolled. He pulled the two passengers from the smoking vehicle to safety. He was able to use a towel to dress the wound of a passenger who had lost fingers and was bleeding heavily. He also knew enough to get the man's hand above his head so the blood flow would lessen. He learned this technique from playing the section on medic training. Distance education through gaming is not only possible, it is happening (Cavalli, 2008).

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