

Kids Learn that Killing Is Fun at the Army's Lethal New Theme Park

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The Army Experience Center , located in the Franklin Mills Mall just north of Philadelphia , bills itself as a “state-of-the-art educational facility that uses interactive simulations and online learning programs to educate visitors about the many careers, training and educational opportunities available in the Army.”

Nonsense. The only thing they're teaching here is how to blow shit up. If it's state-of-the-art anything, it's state-of-the-art adolescent boys' wet dreams.

“Too slow! Do it again!” yells the voice in my earphones as a new sequence of armed figures in camouflage pop up in front of me. I — the player — am attached to the foreshortened barrel of an M-16 — and a little embarrassed by that. It's not my thing, really. And I wasn't expecting the game to involve having to tolerate some dickhead's personal opinion about my marksmanship.

But I didn't come here to get yelled at or to play games. I came because I was curious about the Army's latest marketing strategy. For \$12 million, this place has been dressed to kill: 15,000 square feet (about three basketball courts) done up in brushed steel, glass and low-light glam. But what this place is really about is the bling: strings of networked Xbox 360 pods and individual gaming stations. And the crown jewels: a UH-60 Black Hawk, an AH-64 Apache and a Humvee. Simulators. And it's all entirely free.

“Potential recruits are afforded a unique opportunity to learn what it means to be the best-led, best-trained and best-equipped Army in the world by allowing them to virtually experience multiple aspects of the Army,” says Pete Geren, Secretary of the Army.

Sir, give me a break, sir! You mean the “Career Navigators,” those fancy touch-screen installations where you can see all the different jobs the Army can train you for? No one went near them all day. Most of these kids can't reach them, anyway. It's the shiny toys and virtual adrenaline rush that brings them in.

Behind a glass wall, there are 40 more terminals facing a wall of plasma screens: the Tactical Operations Center , where local educators (principals, superintendents, school counselors and teachers) are given an earful about how misunderstood the military is.

“Accurate information about the military experience is often drowned out, or the information that does get through projects mixed messages or inaccuracies,” Lt. Gen. Benjamin C. Freakly recently complained to the Northeast Times. “The Army Experience Center provides hands-on, virtual-reality experiences and simulations for young men and women, their parents and others to see, touch and learn firsthand what it means to be in the Army.”

There are no mixed messages at the AEC: being in the Army is about getting to play with boy toys, 24/7. Freakly's tidy version of "what it means to be in the Army" fails to mention what can happen if your Humvee hits an IED, or how it might feel to be splattered with your best friend's insides. Or your own.

As I considered that grim thought, there's a tap on my shoulder. It's my turn — my Black Hawk awaits.

Our orders are to protect a convoy as it moves through enemy territory. The video kicks in with a roar of rotors; the chopper lurches and bucks as it turns to follow the trucks on the ground — the wind, the vibrations, the report of my M-4 and the staccato of incoming rounds make it hard to hear the screamed alerts coming over the intercom: "Enemy on the right!" "Look out, RPGs straight ahead!"

Bad guys are shooting at me from the alleys, the shadows, the rooftops, but I am wasting them. One after another, they get caught in my crosshairs and — bam! — their bodies lift and sprawl in haphazard death. We're slammed by an IED and momentarily engulfed in flame. My hand is getting numb from the rifle recoil, but my lizard brain has taken over.

Too soon, we emerge from the bedlam and an inspirationally oversized American flag indicates that we have successfully achieved our destination — a field hospital where rows of medics attend to ghastly luminous, very slightly breathing shapes, the bloodless bodies of the cyber-wounded.

It's a bizarre curtsy to realism, and almost is lost in the orgy of virtual pyrotechnics as American rockets vaporize a bridge in the background.

I rode the Black Hawk three times and the Humvee twice. My best score: I totally "engaged" 47 percent of the man-shapes that came into my crosshairs. I'm told that 27 percent is average.

And only a few Rules of Engagement infractions — civilians, the ones without guns who were running away. Didn't notice. Too bad. Mission accomplished.

Paul Boyce, an Army spokesman, "strongly refutes" the notion that any of the Army's initiatives glamorize war, adding that "great care" is taken to avoid portraying violence.

Again, nonsense. The drill instructor who was yelling at me earlier is a character in the Army's official game, "America 's Army," available at all of the AEC's game stations. "America 's Army" is unapologetically about realistic, deadly combat — minus the blood. A hit registers as a puff of red smoke. Four puffs and you are "engaged." Concerned parents can further sanitize the violence with controls that cause dead soldiers to simply sit down.

"We have a 'Teen' rating that allows 13-year-olds to play, and in order to maintain that rating we have to adhere to certain standards," Chris Chambers, a retired Army major who is now the project's deputy director, told the New York Times. "We don't use blood and gore and violence to entertain."

So, in the absence of blood and gore, there is no violence. And kids get that? They get the distinction between fantasy and reality? I found the blurring completely disorienting, and I have consumed decades of both real and virtual violence.

Lt. Col. Dave Grossman has written extensively on the psychology of killing, and he argues that it's not that people can't tell the difference between fantasy and reality, but that these games use virtual experience to systematically desensitize and condition.

Grossman cites hundreds of studies that reveal a direct correlation between exposure to media violence — especially interactive video games — and increased childhood aggression. A Stanford University study is particularly compelling: Over a 20-week period, third- and fourth-graders who limited or eliminated TV and video games demonstrated a 50 percent decrease in verbal aggression and a 40 percent decrease in physical aggression.

Grossman warns that Americans "are reaching that stage of desensitization at which the inflicting of pain and suffering has become a source of entertainment; vicarious pleasure rather than revulsion. We are learning to kill, and we are learning to like it."

Whose agenda does that serve?

Brian Mackey, a slight kid from Levittown, Pa., is working the front desk. He's wearing a white T-shirt sporting a U.S. Army logo, and although he doesn't have the bulk that comes with basic training (and age), I ask if he is active duty anyway. Brian says no, he plans to go straight from graduation in June into the Army. In the meantime, he has the ideal job for pre-induction skills training.

Brian has a 3.95 grade-point average in high school, but he isn't interested in the differences between policies or politicians or wars. And he isn't interested in any of the Army's fancy careers either. He wants to be in the infantry. When he says, "Sure I might die, but infantry is what I've always wanted," I can't help but wonder how much of his bravado comes from exactly that systematic desensitization and conditioning Grossman talks about.

His T-shirt, by the way, is part of the First Infantry Division apparel collection, the Army's first officially licensed line of clothing, on sale in the AEC and at Sears. Made in China. Available in boys sizes.

Despite the AEC's 13-year-old age limit, underage exiles are welcome to come for the free movies. Or to "Dining Army Style," featuring MRE (Meal, Ready to Eat) smorgasbords. Otherwise, they can watch — through the center's glass front from the video arcade or the skateboard palace, both directly opposite the AEC — while their older brothers compete in the Xbox tournaments.

A provision of No Child Left Behind, one of the first pieces of legislation proposed by the Bush administration, forced schools to open their doors to recruiters and provide contact information for students as young as 11.

J.E. McNeil, executive director of the Center on Conscience & War, calls such marketing tactics "an illegal tool in the recruiting arsenal" and a "violation of international law."

The Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, ratified and signed by the U.S. Senate in 2002, categorically forbids the Pentagon, or the militaries of any of the other 124 signatory nations, to attempt to recruit children 13 to 16 years old. The Pentagon simply chooses to ignore it, and Congress has neglected to enforce the treaty. (A meticulous documentation of the Pentagon's recruiting tactics explicitly directed at children can be found in a recent report by the American Civil Liberties Union, *Soldiers of Misfortune*.)

Staff Sgt. Kevin Haver is a recruiter, a 25-year-old native Philadelphian, pumped up, tightly wrapped in his uniform, and one of a score of active-duty soldiers currently assigned to the AEC. He's taciturn at first. Having ascended to the warrior class, he has learned to despise and distrust all that is not military. Or at least, to act that way.

Haver has completed five deployments (including two to Iraq and one to Afghanistan), and he describes them defiantly as "the most fun I've ever had." My question about stress gets a dismissive snort. He's a "flexible kind of guy." Being home is nice enough, but it's too laid-back. He misses the high energy, the focused activity, and especially, the comradeship.

In fact, here at the center, it is laid-back — nothing like the heavy-handed recruiting tactics that have caused so much public outrage over the past few years. Soldiers are standing around talking, watching TV. Some of Haver's buddies even jumped on the sims with me, inflating my scores. The place is filled with kids, but they are all playing games, ignoring the soldiers, who ignore them in turn.

"It's not a recruiting center," insists Ed Walters, the Army's first official chief marketing officer.

It is so, Ed.

For the past two years, the Army has proudly claimed to have met its recruitment goals. The economic crisis, unemployment, expanded educational benefits, grossly inflated enlistment bonuses, an array of medical, moral and criminal waivers, and relaxed weight, height, age and education requirements all make that achievement look considerably less impressive. The Army's efforts have cost more than \$4 billion a year, but a recent rash of recruiter suicides in Texas suggests that the ongoing stress of meeting quotas is becoming intolerable for some.

It seems the Army has come up with a unique strategy for the future: automation. For \$4 billion, they could build half a dozen experience centers in every state and let the machines desensitize, condition, train and even enlist America 's youth.

The Pentagon has been enjoined by both by national lawmakers and international institutions to stop pandering to children. When children's bodies are invaded, we call it statutory rape. Do we have a tidier phrase for the invasion of their minds?

Penny Coleman is the widow of a Vietnam veteran who took his own life after coming home. Her latest book, *Flashback: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Suicide and the Lessons of War*, was released on Memorial Day 2006. Her Web site is *Flashback*.

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