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Interview conducted by Justin Kreter T’03

What is the one thing your institution is doing that you think most people will say it will never work, only it is working for your institution?
Well, what really comes to mind is the fact that the whole idea of using games as a means of communicating the Army’s brand message to the American population is a whole new idea and had a lot of nay-sayers in the institution. In marketing, this is a fairly new idea, to reach demographics through a game as opposed to some other traditional means of marketing. It is working for us. We know that the numbers of players that we’ve gathered in the game in just seven months since we’ve released has been extremely overwhelming. We’ve got about 1.3 million registered users right now in about seven months. About 850,000 of those are active players that have completed our single-player mode, which we use as a basic training for the game. And so there are very active players and what’s great about this method of marketing or at least communicating our brand message is that while these players are in the game, they’re getting the Army message the entire time that they’re playing the game.

What is the biggest surprise that your institution has had this year, either positive or negative, and what events have least conformed to your expectations?
The marketing folks that we were working with at that time really tried to manage our expectations about this. They thought that in the game industry, and through experience they had with other game companies, that 500,000 units of a game is like a runaway hit in the gaming industry. And so they cautioned us not to think or not to expect that kind of response – 500,000 units in a year. We set our goal, what we thought modestly, at something higher than that. We thought about 750,000 units out there per year would be a reasonable goal, and then what we actually found in seven months into the launch, as I mentioned, we have 850,000 active players and the number of units out there is actually much greater. So, that was a big surprise. It was a big surprise at the outset too when we first launched on the Fourth of July. Our website for the game, not the Army’s website, but the game website that we established, was getting 150,000 hits per second. We had generated so much public relations hype and so much positive press about that game that, when it was time to launch on the Fourth of July, it just was this phenomenal success. What we did is we went to the opinion makers in the industry, the gaming magazines, there’s three large gaming magazines that dominate the computer gaming world. We went to them early on and demo-ed the product and they were very receptive to the whole idea of it and very impressed with the quality. So we started with the opinion makers and we started sowing the seeds that this product was going to be a very high quality product. Then we began targeting the hardcore gamers with our initial distribution because in this type of setting, if you impress the people that play the most with Internet communications.
the way they are, the word spreads rather quickly. So, we very early on, had impressed the opinion makers in the industry that viral effect, as the word got out very quickly, helped us to overcome the hurdle of having a free game.

**What is the most counterintuitive point you will present during your stay here at Tuck?**

A couple things there too. This has been a really interesting project to work on for me. It’s really been counterintuitive from the day we started it. First off, the fact that the government, again, could create and launch a successful commercial product is pretty counterintuitive. That didn’t come about by chance or accident either. What we needed to do, when we first recognized this as a viable project, is think of a way to do this quickly and react as quickly as commercial firms react in the marketplace, but do it in the context of the government. So what we did is we developed a small, nimble team. Of course, we answer to the senior leadership of the Army and we get our guidance and direction from them, but they have largely allowed us to react to the marketplace as we saw fit and we keep them apprised of what they’re doing. We tapped into that and developed the product ourselves in-house, but we bought key pieces of technology off the shelf. And the most important piece of technology is the game engine itself. We went ahead and purchased it rather than develop it, but everything that runs off of that engine, which is the game itself, is all developed by a team that we put together that we have linked up with our Army units, officers and soldiers, and we created this game by ourselves. So we overcame this kind of commercial off-the-shelf mentality. It took us a little longer, but we think the success made it really worthwhile. Another piece of this project that I think is counterintuitive is that we launched this product with no marketing budget at all. In fact, we still don’t have a marketing budget. We chose, instead, to go with an entirely public relations-based effort to get the word out about the game. We started at the Electronic Entertainment Exposition in May of last year by announcing, by surprise to the world, that the Army had developed a game and that the game would be ready in the summer on the Fourth of July. It really took the Entertainment Exposition completely by surprise. This is a very large industry, by the way. The electronic gaming industry is bigger than Hollywood now. It’s about a $10 billion industry. Hollywood is about $9 billion. The big players – the Nintendos, the Sonys, the Segas and Microsoft – those are major companies to compete with and we competed with them for public relations space at E3 by capitalizing on differences rather than similarities. We didn’t try to become a game company. Instead, we were the Army that developed a game internally and we had real soldiers, real equipment, real action, we had propelling in our booth, and we really just brought a lot of PR attention to our game. Everything from the front page of the LA Times to CNN and all the major networks, and then that grew from May when the E3 Exposition was to July 4th, when we launched. So with no marketing money, we were able to get the word out very effectively and it seemed counterintuitive and still is, to a degree, but it’s been really successful and the whole viral marketing has worked great for us. We’ve got a free game, we encourage copying and it’s just the opposite of any other game. We ask kids to give it to their friends and copy and that’s been really successful.
Currently the Army’s employing technology for message communication, specifically through this game. Do you think that in the future, or even right now there may be other applications as well such as virtual communities, such as chat rooms, what not?

Sure, the Army’s already working with chat rooms in a couple of places. One, in the recruiting environment, which I don’t work directly for the recruiting command, but their website has chat rooms with recruiters so that people interested in careers in the Army can chat live get questions answered and that’s a very, very popular part of their website now. In fact, they’ve set up a whole chat room down at Fort Knox, Kentucky where there are several recruiters on duty 24 hours a day answering questions. So that’s been very successful. But that actually existed before we launched our game. Our game also has virtual communities and we have chat and we have forms, we have IRC chat, we have in-game chat that is really successful in an unexpected way as well. We found that, not surprisingly, a lot of the young soldiers in the Army like playing these games as well as anybody else that likes to play these games, so we found that there’s a lot of soldiers online at any one time playing America’s Army with a lot of America’s youth. So what we did to try to take advantage of that situation is let the soldiers register for a little icon that we could verify their active duty status. They get a little icon when they’re chatting with kids in the game and it shows that they’re an active duty soldier and we know that our soldiers would be the best salesmen for the Army, not because they’re trained to sell or anything like that, but they’re just going to be honest about their experiences and when kids are in the game chatting with somebody’s that got that Army Star icon, they know that that’s a real soldier. So, we’ve been able to really take advantage of that and get good, honest information direct from the source in this entertaining environment as it comes up. It’s been kind of an interesting sidelight that we didn’t really expect, but it kind of popped up as an opportunity and it seems to be working out great.

Well it’s been great to have you here today and we’d like to thank you for sharing your insights and experiences.

Thank you very much. My pleasure.