Role play answers role call

U.S. Army trains with vids, games

By DAVID S. COHEN

F rom the rise of Nazis to Vietnam and beyond, Hollywood and showbiz have lent their talents and skills to the war effort of the day. Today, all-out flag-waving movies are scarce. Yet the military arguably gets more help from showbiz nowadays than ever. Armed forces around the world, especially the U.S. Army, are using advanced technology from entertainment, particularly videogames, to help train personnel, say some, save lives.

"About 10 years ago, the Army realized that computer technology and computer simulation was something they'd better start paying a lot of attention to," says Raymond P. DuBois, senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and Intl. Studies.

DuBois says such simulations work in two ways: First, they can put a soldier, a helicopter pilot or a tank commander in battlefield situations. "That's coupled with the fact that the young people entering the military are computer literate and grew up playing videogames," he adds.

Emerging game tech in addition to field training was innovative for many in the armed forces. But graphics have simply become too good to ignore. The Army even has an office dedicated to "harvesting" such entertainment tech. The U.S. Army Program Executive Office for Simulation, Training and Instrumentation, or PEOTI. The office is located in central Florida - not coincidentally, in the vicinity of Disney World - which has become one of the world's centers for virtual reality tech.

"We're losing the war in Iraq," says "Ambush," and "Far Cry" was turned into "I.E.W.P.T. Technical Questioning." Sometimes, though, a game is built with the Army in mind, and sold commercially.

The Army cooperated with Sony Pictures Imageworks game developer Pandemic Studios on "Full Spectrum War," investing $4 million. The game was a hit with consumers but was less successful as a training tool, and the Army was shut out of the profits. Watching groups complained it was a waste of tax money. Repurposing a game can cost from $150,000 to $250,000, depending on how much of the original software is usable by the Army.

In fact, says Smith, an entire industry has grown up around delivering game-based products to the military.

Eric Hazlett, a former chief technical officer who worked in the U.S. Intelligence community and is now president of Hazlett Partners, notes this exchange of knowledge and technology - dubbed by some as "The Entertainment-Military Collab" - has gone on behind the scenes for years.

"Silicon Graphics was a perfect example," he says. "They had as much business with the military as they did with entertainment." Hazlett notes the entertainment biz and the military have different concerns, so sometimes the tech they share must be adjusted.

Entertainment needs to look realistic, even down to hair and clothing. "Those kind of exquisite details don't matter in the military world," he says. Instead, the military wants to know "How many soldiers can you handle at the same time? What kind of physics can you calculate? And, above all, what does the whole thing cost?"

A military or commercial flight simulator used by the Los Angeles area, the office spent $350 million to set up USC's Institute for Creative Technologies, which goes beyond virtual reality tech and taps into Hollywood's storytelling expertise.

"We refer to them as cognitive training systems," says Kim LeMasters, creative director for the I.C.T. '"We're trying to train the brain.'

The ICT recently was asked to create a mobile, interactive training system to teach soldiers how to defend themselves against roadside bombs - or, in military parlance, improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Rather than deliver a noninteractive training video that would likely bore 16-20-year-olds, the ICT created a story told from the p.o.v. of two characters, the bombmaker and a young soldier who had just survived an IED attack.

"To make this a compelling experience, you have to hook 'em," says LeMasters. "You have to have a story."