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Army enlists Hollywood in anti-terror war

By Karen Brandon
Tribune national correspondent
Published October 15, 2001

MARINA DEL REY, Calif. — In some respects the meeting was just another brainstorming session, with the entertainment industry's creative minds trying to concoct plausible yet unexpected disaster scenarios, the kinds of plot twists that drive the action-and-disaster terrorist movie genre.

But over the last two weeks, a group drawn from Hollywood's talent pool has begun imagining what possible terrorist attacks could befall the nation next, not for the sake of entertainment, but for the sake of national security.

The group, composed of what is said to be fewer than 100 entertainment industry representatives volunteering for the job, was convened at the Army's request to help the military "think out of the box" about terrorism and how to respond.

The idea of tapping fiction writers to dream up the possible parameters of terrorism, a move that once might have seemed far-fetched, no longer sounds outlandish to many. Before Sept. 11, who would have imagined that hijackers would pilot commercial airliners in coordinated attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon?

"The hope was that by tapping into this creativity, maybe they would come up with new ideas," said Richard Lindheim, executive director of the research center that assembled the group, the Institute for Creative Technologies, an unusual collaboration combining elements of Hollywood and Silicon Valley, the military and academia.

Lindheim declined to detail any of the scenes imagined by participants in multiple five-hour sessions he described as intense. "I think you can understand that if I discussed the content, the value of it would be diminished," he said.

Such sessions, which may continue if they prove valuable, represent only one facet of the collaborative work at the institute, created at the University of Southern California two years ago with a \$45 million investment from the Army. The institute was conceived after a report from the National Research Council, which serves as an independent adviser to the government on scientific and technical questions of national importance, called for defense and entertainment industries to collaborate on simulation technology.

'Virtual battlefields'

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Photo



An Institute for Creative Technologies editor dons "virtual reality goggles," which might be used to train soldiers against terrorism. (Photo by the Tribune by Stephanie Diani)

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From futuristic offices designed by Herman Zimmerman, the production designer for five "Star Trek" movies and the television series, "Star Trek: The Next Generation," participants essentially are combining their eclectic skills to create "virtual battlefields," capable of changing with the touch of buttons. When completed, these simulations will present soldiers with realistic training for the kinds of situations they might encounter in the new missions that the military faces.

The institute's creative resources also have been called upon to brainstorm about the next generation of military vehicles, the design of "smarter" military uniforms, and, most recently, the next wave of potential terrorist actions.

This is not the first time Hollywood has been recruited for war. During World War II, the entertainment industry was enlisted for government propaganda, with director Frank Capra, for instance, making a series of movies for the War Department.

Nor is this the first time the worlds of fantasy and reality have intersected in unexpected ways. Submarines were imagined by the science fiction writer Jules Verne before they patrolled the seas. Flip phones were ubiquitous on "Star Trek" years before they were carried in many people's purse or pocket. In 1996, author Tom Clancy envisioned a terrorist crashing a jetliner into the Capitol.

Against a backdrop of this history, the center is using show business' tried-and-true dramatic methods and its most advanced technological capabilities, many of them still being invented and perfected, to make training as engaging as the most popular movies, television shows and video games. The premise for the institute is that the military's new missions call for a new kind of training.

'Better decision-makers'

"The Army can teach a soldier how to fire a weapon, but making split-second choices in high-pressure situations requires another kind of training," said Lindheim, the former executive vice president of Paramount Television Group and the founder of its Digital Entertainment division. "Our mandate is to make all soldiers better decision-makers.

"In the virtual world you can do anything, and if you make a mistake, you hit the reset button and start over again," he said.

To that end researchers are developing artificial intelligence to allow digital characters on screen to react to situations like real people. Virtual reality systems are being devised to engage all the senses. The next generation of computer hardware, such as head-mount display screens, are being tried. And, scriptwriters are creating full-dimensional characters and compelling story lines for simulations training.

Take, for instance, the Mission Rehearsal Exercise System. In it, an Army lieutenant in training confronts a virtual peacekeeping mission in the Balkans. The other characters are computer generated, their images projected on a curved, 180-degree movie screen. The sounds "move" across the theater, so that when a helicopter lands, the noise of the rotors move along its flight path. Soon, there will be vibration sensations from the floor beneath the trainee's feet.

"The person is standing literally in the envelope of the experience," said Larry Tuch, a writer who is one of the institute's consultants and whose previous work includes writing for the television series "Columbo" and "Quincy" and creating interactive designs for Walt Disney theme parks. "You will eventually even have the smell of it."

In the scenario portrayed on the screen, a platoon sergeant stands in a Balkan village street, where a boy has been critically injured by an Army Humvee. The lieutenant, who is moving troops to aid other soldiers on a weapons inspection mission at a site where fighting has broken out, must decide what to do. If he makes the correct decisions, the simulation will conclude with a television report of the unit's heroic actions. If not, TV reports the boy's death.

"You find yourself in the middle of the story," Tuch said. "It compels you to do some complex thinking, to be able to quickly assess the situation and on your feet make the best possible decision."

Military exercises often try to accomplish this, he said, but they require either expensive on-location simulations with actors or are reduced to a series of events carried out as classroom exercises.

Another of the institute's projects is the Advanced Leadership Training Simulator, set up as a series of computer stations that can be connected, from sites all around the world with the use of the Internet, to simulate a military crisis and to allow trainees to test their decision-making capacities and ability to work together under pressure.

Though neither of these projects is ready to take to soldiers for training, another project that uses high-end video game technology is expected to be ready for soldiers' use within the next two years, according to Brigadier Gen. Stephen Seay, at the Simulation Training and Instrumentation Command in Orlando.

"We can re-create what went on in Operation Desert Storm," he said, adding that other "classic war scenarios" can be incorporated into a library of different types of video games that would be available to soldiers wherever they might be stationed.

Noting that some video games were modified and movie releases were delayed after the Sept. 11 attacks because their content had such striking parallels to the day's tragedy, Seay said, "That's the kind of realism we're trying for."

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