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New Army Soldiers: Game Gamers

Noah Shachtman 10.29.01

Video-gaming armchair generals will soon get the same leadership and command training as combat-ready infantrymen.

The U.S. Army, working with a University of Southern California research lab and a team of game-making firms, is developing two games, set on urban battlefields, that will be used both to train grunts and entertain geeks.

Players will command a nine-person team in [C-Force](#), which is being developed for one of the "next-generation" gaming systems, like the X-Box, Game Cube or Playstation 2. [CS XII](#), the other game, is a PC title in which players lead a company of about 100.

Both games, available commercially within two years, will have Rob Sears -- the man responsible for the legendary combat titles Mech Commander and Mech Warrior 3 -- as the executive producer.

The armed services have a long history of adapting commercial products for training purposes. But this is the first time the military's ever commissioned a commercial game.

Military gamers are, to put it mildly, psyched about the prospect of an officially sanctioned war game.

"This shit looks hot," said Alex Roy, a New York City travel executive and military game fanatic. "Before, we've had to choose between realism and action. Now it looks like we'll get both."

But these games won't be the mindless, bloody shoot-'em-ups that clog shelves at stores like Software Etc. and Electronics Boutique.

"We know how to shoot. We've got that down. We've been doing it for hundreds of years," said Dr. Michael Macedonia, the chief scientist of the Simulation, Training and Information Command (or "[STRICOM](#)" in Army jargon), the military group funding the gaming effort. "The real challenge is developing leaders that can deal with complex problems, ones that involve emotional issues, political issues and social issues."

Among those leadership tasks: getting a team to clear a house, protect aid workers, or hold off a mob from a U.S. embassy, said Matt Norton, the producer of C-Force.

The making of these two games is the latest embrace in a decades-long relationship between the military and the gaming industry.

The association began in World War II, according to Macedonia, when Edwin Link's "Blue Box" flight simulation at the Coney Island amusement park in New York was turned into a training tool for military pilots.

Years later, Atari's 1980 tank-fighting arcade game, Battlezone, was adapted by the Army to school troops in the operation of the Bradley infantry fighting vehicle, Jennifer Olsen, editor-in-chief of [Game Developer](#) magazine, said.

In 1994, the Marines broke new ground by employing a modified version of the bloody Doom PC game, supposedly to teach teamwork skills. A flood of games followed. Now, the Navy relies on an altered Jane's Fleet Commander to train future captains, the Army uses Tom Clancy's Rogue Spear to teach special operations, and the Air Force employs Falcon 4 as one of its flight simulators.

By 1999, STRICOM had become interested enough in gaming to make a \$44.3 million Creative Technologies (ICT), a research center at the University of Southern California assigned to make military simulations as compelling as a Hollywood movie or a Silicon Valley game. John Milius, co-writer of *Apocalypse Now*, and Randal Kleiser, director of *Grease* and *Big-Top Pee Wee*, are two of the institute's higher-profile staffers.

C-Force and CS XII are ICT's first attempts to address both the consumer and military markets.

There will be little difference between the two versions, developers contend.

"Pretty much everything the infantry does is open already. So there's no need to create a declassified version," said Norton.

Stay-at-home players might find the ultra-realism of the Army versions a little drab, however, so there will be some cosmetic changes.

"We'll make the explosions have more flames, stuff like that," Norton said. "We'll game it up a bit."