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Virtual Reality Prepares Soldiers for Real War

Young Warriors Say Video Shooter Games Helped Hone Their Skills

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One blistering afternoon in Iraq, while fighting insurgents in the northern town of Mosul, Sgt. Sinque Swales opened fire with his .50-cal. That was only the second time, he says, that he ever shot an enemy. A human enemy.

"It felt like I was in a big video game. It didn't even faze me, shooting back. It was just natural instinct. *Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!* " remembers Swales, a fast-talking, deep-voiced, barrel-chested 29-year-old from Chesterfield, Va. He was a combat engineer in Iraq for nearly a year.

Like many soldiers in the 276th Engineer Battalion, whose PlayStations and Xboxes crowded the trailers that served as their barracks, he played games during his downtime. "Halo 2," the sequel to the best-selling first-person shooter game, was a favorite. So was "Full Spectrum Warrior," a military-themed title developed with help from the U.S. Army.

"The insurgents were firing from the other side of the bridge. . . . We called in a helicopter for an airstrike. . . . I couldn't believe I was seeing this. It was like 'Halo.' It didn't even seem real, but it was real."

This is the video game generation of soldiers. " 'Ctrl+Alt+Del,' " the U.S. Army noted in a recent study, "is as basic as 'ABC.' " And computer simulations -- as military officials prefer to call them -- have transformed the way the United States military fights wars, as well as soldiers' ways of killing.

"There's been a huge change in the way we prepare for war, and the soldiers we're training now are the children of the digital age who grew up with GameBoys," says retired Rear Adm. Fred Lewis, a 33-year U.S. Navy veteran who now heads the National Training Systems Association, a trade group that every year puts on the Interservice/Industry Training, Simulation and Education Conference, the military counterpart of the glitzy Electronic Entertainment Expo. "Live training on the field is still done, of course," but, he adds, "using simulations to train them is not only natural, it's necessary."

War is no game, of course, but games, in a big way, have updated war. The weapons Swales uses when he plays "SOCOM 3: U.S. Navy SEALS," for example, are virtual replicas of the weapons he used as a soldier in Iraq.

"The technology in games has facilitated a revolution in the art of warfare," says David Bartlett, the former chief of operations at the Defense Modeling and Simulation Office, a high-level office within the Defense Department and the focal point for computer-generated training at the Pentagon. "When the time came for him" -- meaning Swales -- "to fire his weapon, he was ready to do that. And capable of doing that. His experience leading up to that time, through on-the-ground training and playing 'Halo' and whatever else, enabled him to execute. His situation awareness was up. He knew what he had to do. He had done it before -- or something like it up to that point."

In the mid-1990s, Bartlett, an avid gamer himself, created "Marine Doom," the military version of the original "Doom," the granddaddy of first-person shooter games. The simulation was conducted in a lab with six PCs networked together. It served as a precursor for more expensive, highly immersive, state-of-the-art military simulation centers and PC labs. Some, like the Asymmetric Warfare -- Virtual Training Technology, largely train soldiers how to coordinate complicated missions. Think of it as a sort of military "EverQuest" that can be played by multiple people in multiple places at the same time. With the Indoor Simulated Marksmanship Trainer, soldiers train to effectively shoot their weapons by holding a rifle that looks like an M16, except it fires a laser and the target is a giant screen.

Lt. Col. Scott Sutton, director of the technology division at Quantico Marine Base, where the mock-up M16s are used, says soldiers in this generation "probably feel less inhibited, down in their primal level, pointing their weapons at somebody." That, in effect, "provides a better foundation for us to work with," he adds.

No one knows for sure whether Sutton is right. Since at least World War II, studies purporting to explore how readily troops pulled the trigger -- S.L.A. Marshall's "Men Against Fire," for example -- have aroused controversy and been scored as anecdotal. Indeed, collecting data in the swirl of battle is no less formidable a challenge today than in the past. As a result, comparisons to previous generations of soldiers are problematic. Nonetheless, soldiers today are far more knowledgeable about weaponry than their predecessors, Bartlett feels sure, and have "a basic skills set as to how to use them."

Retired Marine Col. Gary W. Anderson, former chief of staff of the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab, agrees. And he takes it a step further: Today's soldiers, having grown up with first-person shooter games long before they joined the military, are the new Spartans, he says.

"America's Army," a free online game with more than 6.5 million registered players, is being used by the U.S. military as a recruiting tool. "Call of Duty," "Medal of Honor" and "SOCOM," to name just three best-selling military-themed titles, are popular with soldiers, whether they're deployed in Iraq or back home in the States. A version of "America's Army" will be available on cell phones this summer.

"Remember the days of the old Sparta, when everything they did was towards war?" says Anderson, now a defense consultant. "In many ways, the soldiers of this video game generation have replicated that, and that's something to think about."

Swales, the 29-year-old combat engineer from Chesterfield, joined the National Guard in 1998 "as a way to get my life in track," he says. While deployed in Mosul, he mostly hung out with Sgt. Sean Crippen, Spec. Alfred Trevino and Spec. Mike Jones -- they were all in the Guard, all in their twenties, all from Virginia. They were dubbed "the minority squad" (Swales and Crippen are black, Trevino is half Mexican American, Jones is Korean American). To pass the nights, they watched such

classic war movies as "Full Metal Jacket" and "Apocalypse Now."

"Saving Private Ryan" was their favorite.

"That's gonna be us, man, when they first opened the doors on the boat, when they're hitting the beach, just watching guys get mowed down," Swales, the eldest of the group, the big brother type, would joke.

Even more, though, they played military-themed games, thumbing away into the wee hours of the night. "Sometimes we'd be up till 2 or 3 in the morning, and we gotta get up, like, 0900" to head out for a foot patrol through town, says Crippen.

"We're doing this stuff for real and we're playing it on our spare time," adds Swales. "And yeah, it was ironic. But it was so normal, we didn't think nothing about it."

Swales had a PlayStation2 that he brought from home in the portable trailer that he shared with Crippen. They became roommates after their former roommates, Spec. Nick Mason and Spec. David Ruhren, died from a bombing attack. Nearby, Spec. Idrissa Hill, who was rooming with Jones, had an Xbox and a PlayStation 2. (They can be bought online, as well as at the PX.) Everyone kept busy. Crippen, by far the best gamer in the group, got through the last levels of "Call of Duty" and "Full Spectrum Warrior," both military-themed games.

"The very first time I fired my rifle" -- it was an M249 squad automatic weapon, a machine gun -- "I was scared. I had never shot my gun before at an actual person. But once I pulled the trigger, that was it, I never hesitated," says Crippen, 22. He's now a sophomore at Virginia State University, studying computer engineering, trying not to get so distracted by his Xbox. "All I saw was the street where the RPG [rocket-propelled grenade] came from, and I just fired in that direction, maybe 20 rounds at most, and it felt like I was playing 'Ghost Recon' at home," referring to a Tom Clancy game.

"I've always had access to a shooter game. Ever since I could pick up a controller," he goes on. One of the first games he recalls playing as a little kid was "Commando," a shoot-'em-up game where the player's character, Super Joe, is dropped into a jungle and tries to fight his way out. "And over there in Iraq, I think playing those games helped. It kept me on my toes. It taught me what to do and what not to do."

Trevino's weapon was the M16A4 assault rifle.

"You just try to block it out, see what you need to do, fire what you need to fire. Think to yourself, This is a game, *just do it, just do it,* " says Trevino, 20, the baby of the group, recalling his first shot at a human enemy. He lives in Virginia Beach and works at nearby Bradco Supply, running a forklift. He's a hard-core gamer like Crippen, plays "anything that races," he says, "anything that shoots."

"Of course, it's not a game. The feel of the actual weapon was more of an adrenaline rush than the feel of the controller," he continues. "But you're practically doing the same thing: trying to kill the other person. The goal is the same. That's the similarity. The goal is to survive."

Still, many PlayStation-playing soldiers aren't as battle-ready as they think. Evan Wright, author of

"Generation Kill: Devil Dogs, Iceman, Captain America, and the New Face of American War," a stirring account of young Marines in Iraq, spent six weeks in early 2003 with the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion -- nicknamed the "suicide battalion" -- which traveled far ahead of the main invasion force. The soldiers he interviewed were "on more intimate terms with the culture of video games, reality TV shows and Internet porn than with their own families."

However, he says, "What I saw was a lot of them discovered levels of innocence that they probably didn't think they had. When they actually shot people, especially innocent people, and were confronted with this, I saw guys break down. The violence in games hadn't prepared them for this."

Sgt. Michael Stinetorf, one of those 1st Recon Marines, used three weapons in Iraq: a heavy .50-caliber machine gun, an M249 light machine gun, and a suppressed M4, "which is an M4 with a silencer," he says. He had played shoot-'em-up games, mostly James Bond titles and "Grand Theft Auto III" before he left for the war. But since returning home in September 2004, he can't stand watching his friends play those kind of games, much less play them himself.

"It just doesn't appeal to me anymore," says the 23-year-old, now a freshman at Grossmont College in San Diego who hopes someday to study medicine. "I found the easiest way to release all the violence, to walk away from it all, is not surround myself with it."

So he says no to violent games, no to violent movies, no to violent TV shows, and declines to talk about how many people he shot while in Iraq.

"That's one thing I don't get into. Even to my closest friends," he says. "It's kind of a way to separate yourself from it."

Unlike Stinetorf, Swales still can't seem to get enough of shooter games, especially military-themed ones. He got back from Iraq more than a year ago. A banner that reads "Welcome Home Que" still hangs in his cluttered room, upstairs in the two-story, four-bedroom home that he shares with his mom, sister, niece and a 7-year-old Labrador named Kim. Nearby, three commendation medals are collecting dust. Swales, who at 6 feet 3 and 225 pounds could easily pass as a linebacker, until recently worked two jobs -- in the produce section of Wal-Mart, from midnight to 9 a.m., and at Best Buy, from 3:30 to 10:30 p.m., with a sideline gig installing car stereos. He quit Best Buy a few weeks back. Too much work.

In his spare time, he's hunkered on the edge of his futon, or on the off-pink carpeted floor, reliving his days as a soldier in front of his 30-inch TV, playing "SOCOM 3: U.S. Navy SEALS." These days, it's the only thing he plays, three hours at a time. He's showing off the weapons in the game, describing them one by one.

There's the AK-47, the most common insurgent weapon in Iraq, he says. Here's the M4 carbine, the weapon a lot of the American infantry guys are running around with.

"This game takes place in Southeast Asia. I'm the commander of the guys here, in charge of three guys. In this game, you gotta try to be as quiet as possible. You gotta find the informer, the mole, and get intel and find out what's going on. But you gotta be quiet," explains Swales.

In the game he's playing, his character is in Army fatigues, crawling in the rice paddies of the village, gripping an M16A2 with a high scope. And outside of the game, he's sitting in his room, dressed in black sweats and Newport tennis shoes, gripping his controller. He's whispering, though the only person in the room, besides the reporter, is him.

"Can you hear the heartbeat? That's my heart. In the game. When you're trying to get a steady shot, you hear the heart beating. That right there felt like the real thing."

The game, of course, comes with a restart button.

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