

The art of the deal

Game trains soldiers to negotiate with Iraqi officials

By MICHAEL PECK

Let's say you're a U.S. Army lieutenant in Iraq, well-trained in battlefield tactics. Only, your battlefield this morning isn't house-to-house but an office table inside a house, where you'll be meeting with an Iraqi official. Your mission is to spur him into cracking down on insurgent activity in your sector.

When you show up for the meeting, should you greet him in Arabic first, or remove your helmet and body armor? What do you do if he is stubborn or petulant? Is it better to flatter him, cajole him with promises of aid, or threaten to have him fired?

Guess right, and you'll gain an ally. Guess wrong, and you'll end up with a sullen partner or a seething enemy that could jeopardize your mission and your men. Yet the art of negotiation has traditionally been neglected by the U.S. military. It's the softest end of the spear, the sort of touchy-feely stuff that professional armies traditionally disdain as a distraction from the business of efficiently waging conventional warfare. But with the future of warfare likely to be a succession of counterinsurgencies and security and stabilization



GAME PRODUCTION SERVICES

In **ELECT BiLAT** a player must negotiate with Iraqi officials without provoking a clash of cultures.

operations, diplomatic skill will be as vital as combat proficiency.

Hoping to prep its officers for warfare at the interpersonal level, the U.S. Army is looking at a serious video game. **ELECT BiLAT**, for bilateral negotiation, is a single-player game designed to teach junior officers and NCOs how to negotiate with Iraqis without provoking a clash of cultures. **BiLAT** is being deployed to all Army installations under the Army gaming handbook program.

Designed by the Institute of Creative Technology (ICT) at the University of Southern California and Los Angeles-based production studio Psychic Bunny, **BiLAT** won the 2008 Army Modeling and Simulation Award for Training. It is the fruit of a four-year demonstration project to develop tools that could be used to rapidly create scenarios in game-based simulations, said Tim Wansbury, a research associate at the Simulation and Training Technology Center at the Army's Research and Development Command (RDECOM). The project was sponsored by several organizations, including RDECOM, the Army Research Laboratory and the Army Research Institute.

BiLAT uses Unreal Engine game technology

and can run on a soldier's laptop. It offers a first-person view and plays as a story-based computer game. The player steps into the shoes of a U.S. soldier in an Iraqi town (the soldier's rank is never specified, though it appears to be a senior NCO or junior officer).

The heart of **BiLAT** is preparation. The game takes the player on a step-by-step process toward constructing a negotiating strategy. The overall campaign is set in an Iraqi town beset by sporadic insurgent activity,

as well as Iraqi soldiers and officials who are hostile, corrupt, scared or apathetic. There are multiple scenarios, including rebuilding infrastructure, dealing with a corrupt Shiite mayor in a partly Sunni town, or handing over security to Iraqi forces. Some scenarios are spiced with a little mystery to solve (so why exactly is the new town

marketplace suddenly deserted?), and each scenario has specific objectives such as gaining cooperation of local officials or reducing corruption.

Preparation begins with brief biographies of the Iraqi officials that the player will meet. There are assessments of the officials from Americans and Iraqis who have dealt with them. But the human sources never agree

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JULIA KIM
ELECT **BiLAT** PROJECT MANAGER,
INSTITUTE OF CREATIVE TECHNOLOGY

with one another; one might praise an Iraqi colonel as a competent officer, while another complains that he's lazy, corrupt and secretly supports Shiite militias.

"We deliberately set it up to have both good and bad paths," said Julia Kim, ICT's project manager for ELECT BiLAT. "So you can easily fail or be misled. Even within your organization, everyone is operating under incomplete information." Thus, even if the player formulates a logical strategy based on information from human sources, he can still fail.

The key tool in the preparation phase is the meeting prep sheet devised by a U.S. Army colonel. It's a series of boxes that lay out the player's negotiating strategy and objectives, including relationship-building and bottom-line negotiating positions, as well as possible impasses that might occur during negotiations. The sheet also includes the estimated negotiating positions of the Iraqi official.

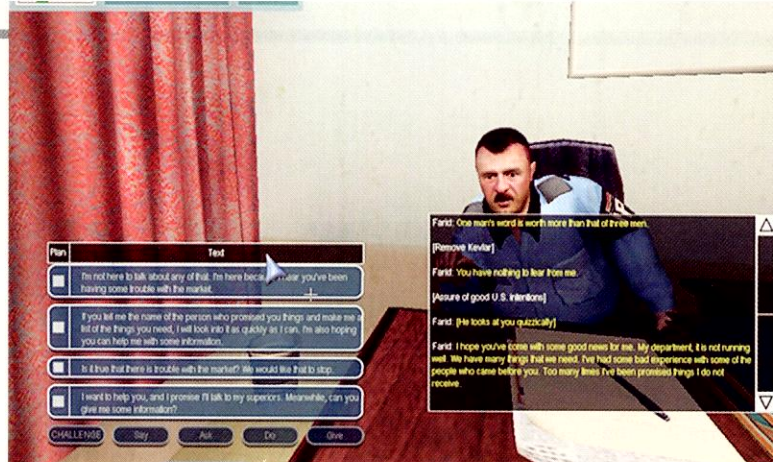
AVATARS

Then it's off to meet the Iraqi official in his office. BiLAT portrays the Iraqis as avatars who speak and have expressions. From a series of menus, the player can choose to say and do a variety of things. The tricky part is doing them in the right order. Want to blow the meeting? Get down to business before removing your helmet and sunglasses. Threaten when you should have cajoled. The BiLAT negotiation model assumes that trust makes or breaks negotiations in Middle East culture; some gestures — such as complimenting an Iraqi on his hospitality, or chatting about family — will increase the level of trust and the probability of successful negotiations, while others, such as getting straight down to business American-style, will decrease it. BiLAT uses a social science model called PyschSIM to control the behavior of the Iraqi characters.

Players are awarded a percentage score after each meeting, as well as an intelligent tutoring system that offers advice to players.

BiLAT is easy to play but tough to win, as discovered by this TSJ reporter who repeatedly had Iraqi officials abruptly end meetings because he talked business when he should have made small talk, or made small talk when he should have talked business. "The characters themselves are not all rational beings," Kim said. "They can wake up on the wrong side of the bed."

BiLAT has been tested by brigade combat at Forts Drum, N.Y., Campbell, Ky., Hood, Texas, and Riley, Kan., as well as the Army's School for Command Preparation at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., which requested a simu-



lation for training battalion and brigade commanders in dealing with civilians. But units in the field have also requested copies

for junior officers and NCOs; a 101st Airborne captain newly returned from Iraq requested 50 copies for his unit, Wansbury said.

Wansbury said he sees ELECT BiLAT as an alternative to role-playing with live "Iraqis" at the Joint Readiness Training Center. "It is a low-

cost tool that can be used at Camp Swampy to train in the basic blocking and tackling skills of negotiation." ■

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