

Friday, Aug. 31, 2007

Video games starting to get serious

Producers target military, medical, education clients

by Steve Berberich | Staff Writer

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“This is you,” says the voice in “Gator Six,” an interactive video filmed with live actors that’s used as a training tool for U.S. troops in Iraq.

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“You” — an Army artillery captain in the fictional nation of Ariana — “have just completed what turned out to be the last combat operation of the war,” the voice continues.

But before the troops can relax, “your” superior officer arrives by jeep and says he is “giving you a town”: Samara, population 13,000. He orders you to “pacify it, maintain order and prepare it for transition to democracy.” You have only 95 soldiers, who now must become town administrators.

The screen darkens. The voice asks you to make a pivotal decision: Do you set up outside of Samara and find out who’s in charge of the town? Or do you “roll in heavy,” to show you are in charge?

“Gator Six” is a leadership game that teaches adaptability and cross-culture cooperation, one of many “serious” games produced by Will Interactive Inc. of Potomac. The company produces such games for military, law enforcement, health care and corporate clients.

The company also has just received a grant from CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield to develop a program to reduce violence in various Washington, D.C., charter schools.

The video game industry, which topped \$7 billion in sales in 2006, is known for products that take players into fantasy worlds, such as outer space, auto racing or dragon fighting. Serious video games, which teach real-life lessons, are a fast-growing slice of the industry.

The term grew out of a desire of some video designers to apply their skills to more serious applications, said Marc Olano, assistant professor of computer sciences at University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Tracy Fullerton agrees. She left a career as a commercial video game designer to “get serious” as an assistant professor at the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California.

“There is a lot of research now on how we learn and how we can enhance learning in young people, people spending more time with video games than TV or film,” Fullerton said.

USC’s Electronic Arts Game Innovation Lab is working with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting on a game that teaches constitutional issues to middle and high school classes, she said. “We are seeing topics in social training moving into video space. Everyone plays a role.”

Real actors, true stories

Most video games use animation.

But Sharon Sloane started Will Interactive in 1994 to make “slice-of-life” interactive movies, using real actors with scenes shot on location and based on true stories.

“Cartoons don’t teach well except for jumping over buildings or coming back to life,” said Sloane, who holds a master’s in counseling. “We teach people how to think instead of what to think.”

In “Gator Six,” the action stops each time the Army captain faces a pivotal decision. The game player decides on one of two choices. As action resumes, the player experiences the consequences of that choice, but can return later to also live the consequences of the alternative.

The company produced another serious game, “Generation Rx,” with Kentucky River Community Care. Players take the roles of high school



Chris Rossi/The Gazette
Editor Mark Anduss (left) and Jeff Hall, chief creative officer, work on a video game for the Army at Will Interactive Inc. of Potomac.



students and learn the perils of prescription drug abuse.

Another game, "Hate Comes Home," made with the Anti-Defamation League, asks the player to "live" different roles in another high school to learn how to overcome prejudice and racism.

"Anatomy of Care," produced for Washington Hospital Center and MedStar Health, helps medical personnel, from physicians to technicians, understand how to cooperate to benefit patients.

Sloane and COO Lyn McCall, a retired Marine colonel who specialized in modeling and simulation, began their work for the military in 1998. The Pentagon needed a program to deal with sexual harassment charges following the Navy's Tailhook scandal, Sloane said.

Will Interactive produced "Saving Sergeant Pabletti" to teach proper conduct in different military situations. After U.S. soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq were charged with prisoner torture and abuse and were dismissed, the military required replacement soldiers to play "Saving Sergeant Pabletti" on their plane to Iraq, Sloane said.

Will Interactive has produced 11 serious games for the military. "It was a majority of our work this year. They were massive efforts," Sloane said.

She declined to disclose revenues or earnings for the privately held company.

Serious games reach 'the mainstream'

Another Maryland maker of serious games is Breakaway Ltd., one of a half-dozen video game producers in Hunt Valley. Until lately, the company, founded by Douglas Whatley in 1998, produced only entertainment games.

In one of its serious games, a tactical simulation of Baghdad puts the player in the role of an Army commander with the choice to plan military actions from above or at street level. The game is part of a video development platform called Modeling and Simulation Building for Everyone, which Breakaway is marketing to both the military and medical communities, said marketing director Lindsay Riehl.

"It is at the point where it [serious games] has reached the mainstream," Riehl said.

"Breakaway believes that gaming has the power to transform the world," according to its Web site.

The company's clients include the Air Force, Northrop Grumman, Rockwell Collins, the Department of Justice, Texas A&M University and the International Center for Non-Violent Conflict.

'The potential market is huge'

The serious game trend also circles back into entertainment video games, said Kelley Gilmore, marketing director for Firaxis Games, also in Hunt Valley. She has received more than 300 telephone calls from teachers who use the company's "Sid Meier's Civilization," a history game for entertainment, to instruct students in history, economics and communication.

"Usually, if there is a question between historical accuracy and fun, we choose fun. But, it's pretty cool that 'Civ' goes into classrooms now," Gilmore said. "This happened organically in the education community and we're thrilled.

"People are recognizing that the game industry is on to something in terms of engaging people, and the potential market is huge. People in training are starting to take notice."

Firaxis was acquired in 2005 by Take-Two Interactive Software Inc. of New York, which reported revenues of \$ 1.04 billion and net loss of \$185 million for the year ended last Oct. 31.

"If you look at the technology in traditional flight or military simulators, serious games have been around," said UMBC's Olano. But while that technology remained static, entertainment video games passed it by, he said. Now industries are "looking at advances in the entertainment field and pulling them into the serious side."

Starting this semester, UMBC is offering two degrees in video game development: one in art, the other in computer science.