

'A subtle' approach

Soldiers learn nuances of foreign cultures through video gaming

By KEITH BUTTON

The roots of a just-finished video game for exposing soldiers to cultural scenarios in countries where the U.S. is at war grew from a continuing failure to understand cultural nuances.

"I believe this came about because of the Army's recognition that they were in trouble," said Ken Robinson, executive producer for the video game, InVisM Inc.'s Army 360 program.

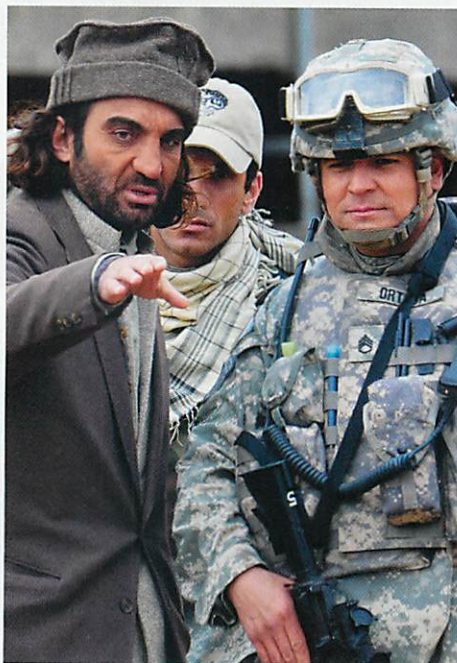
The U.S. Army's strong suit is force-on-force conflict, not understanding the nuances of foreign cultures, said Robinson, whose 24-year military career included Special Forces leadership assignments in Somalia, Bosnia, Colombia, Haiti and Iraq.

"It's the difference between kicking someone's door down at 2 a.m., and asking them to come to tea" in the afternoon to try to discover the same information, Robinson said.

In Iraq, for example, the Army soon realized that it needed to keep better track of the dangerous shifting alliances of the various tribes, and the rifts between Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds, he said. "Everyone realized that this isn't their grandfathers' war.

"You have an enemy taking refuge in mosques, food markets, schools and people's homes," Robinson said. "You need the cooperation of the people."

Maj. Gen. M. John Custer, commander of the U.S. Army Intelligence Center and School at Fort Huachuca, Ariz., which contracted for the Army 360 program, spent four and half years working under Gen. Tommy Franks, Gen. John Abizaid and Adm. William Fallon



INVISM

Actors film a scene for the Army 360 cultural awareness computer-based training program.

in U.S. Central Command.

The Army had a continuing problem with its soldiers understanding and interpreting cultural situations in Iraq, Custer said.

"Our Army, no matter what we wanted to do, we had a problem with culture," he said. An infantry patrol could hear AK47 fire and mistake a wedding celebration for an ambush, for example, which could result in sending a precision-guided weapon into a harmless situation.

EVERY SOLDIER A SENSOR

Every soldier can be viewed as a sensor, and a little culture and language training can have a huge influence on gathering information from the populace and the environment about the enemy, said Custer, whose intelli-

gence center has 10 mobile cultural awareness teams on the road every week, teaching about cultural nuances.

InVisM's Army 360 program is a series of 11 episodes, or missions, shot with real actors with a choose-your-own-adventure type of storytelling. The student plays a role and must choose from four or five possible paths at various points in the episode, leading to 20 or more possible outcomes for each episode.

The learning objectives are incorporated into the plots of each of the episodes, which take place in Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia. Each of the vignettes took about 60 days to complete, from their initial concept, with the last of the episodes wrapped up late in August. For the final episode, the teaching points of previous 11 are re-emphasized.

Copies of the program were delivered starting in late August, with the goal of eventually producing enough copies for every officer in training to have his or her own version in the format of their choice: to play as a DVD, Mac or PC program, or as an iPhone or iPod Touch application.

'AVATAR FATIGUE'

One advantage of the Army 360 episodes over more typical video games is the use of real actors instead of avatars, and the realism grabs the soldier's attention, Robinson said. To prepare their characters, the actors were provided the backgrounds of actual people who had been killed in war, which gave the work an added sense of importance for the production crew.

"The soldiers have avatar fatigue," he said. "You lose an avatar; just reboot the game. In real life, you lose your guy, you've lost your guy. And then you've got to bury him, and then you've got to call his wife."

"The avatar can't emote; it can't project emotions," he said. People from other cultures "read us like a book. Your face is revealing so much more than you may think. We're not good poker players."

"It's designed to save the soldiers' lives and innocents' lives," Robinson said. "You're showing young soldiers that every problem is not a nail and every solution is not a hammer. ... Sometimes you have to withdraw and come back to fight later."

The Army 360 episodes also include many of the high-octane, action-packed, sense-bombarding characteristics of a Jerry Bruckheimer TV production — rapid-fire storytelling, music and intercutting views at certain points in the story to enhance the drama, said Robinson, who has worked on Bruckheimer shows and movies. At certain points in the vignettes, the student can see the scene in 360-degree mode to get a "head-on-a-swivel" point of view, he said.

"You're able to achieve buy-in from the student," Robinson said. "He finds rich charac-

ters that he invests in and cares about. After a few minutes, he doesn't even realize that he's being taught."

At each decision point in a story, the student can choose one of the four or five most likely paths to take, and learn even from the outcomes of the "very, very wrong" decisions, Robinson said.

"The series conveys how important these small teams can be," he said. "They get to experience all these rope-a-dope tactics that these tribes do. Sometimes when they say 'no,' 'no' means 'yes,' or 'no' means 'maybe,'

or 'no' means 'no.'"

Because culture and human interaction requires the highest form of subtlety and reality, the InVisM decided that computer-generated characters weren't going to be realistic, said Russel Phelps, president and chief executive officer of InVisM Inc. But the company's team did want to use the power of interaction, measurement and immersion typical of the gaming world.

"We had long since come to the conclusion that most people don't want more virtual reality in training and education — they want

the highest degree of reality and believability in a virtual form," said Phelps, a retired U.S. Navy commander.

InVisM describes its RealityV software, which it had developed before the Army project, as a virtual sandbox that uses high-definition, "Hollywood quality" video and learning methods specifically developed for adults, including interaction with the learner and automated after-action reports. The software can use head-mounted goggles and "orientation-sensing" iPods for immersive video, along with motion-tracking audio. RealityV won several industry awards for its design.

RealityV also allows for images to include "hot spot" data to allow the tagging of important information or to test the student's identification skills. Also, the user's decisions can follow from one episode to another, affecting the subsequent scenes.

InVisM teamed with Combat Film Productions and Quest Pictures — made up almost entirely of military veterans working in Hollywood — and used ethnic actors to accurately represent the target culture.

Testing has shown that the Army 360 program has improved retention of the learning points over other methods of teaching, Robinson said. But it's not a panacea, nor does the program pretend to teach culture, he said, and soldiers need to take steps to learn about cultures on their own.

"They need to get out the computer, get out the books, work off this. Our allies are there to engage, and they'll give you an earful. Take them to dinner."

Video games are the best learning format for young soldiers, said Robinson, who has observed many times a soldier coming right out of a combat mission pulling out his Game Boy to play a combat game.

For soldiers born after 1985, video gaming and other digital formats are most often the best teaching pathway, Custer said.

"You have to realize what generation you're trying to teach," Custer said. "You know what? PowerPoint is not the way to go."

"They're incredible in a gaming situations, and that's how they acquire knowledge," Custer said.

The Army 360 video-game method of teaching could be applied to just about any subject, Robinson said. "It's not what you think; it's how you think. If you needed to know how to extract a bullet from a lung, we could do that. [The Army's] intent is to ask us for more."

Custer said he would like to see future episodes produced for "deep dives" into the cultures the Army 360 program has touched on so far, as well as with other 100 or so countries in which the Army is deployed.

"Just because we have four episodes [for a country], I think it's easy to agree that we haven't saturated learning in Islamic culture," he said. ■



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