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U.S. Spies Use Custom Videogames to Learn How to Think

By Michael Peck 04.24.08

A terrorist watches over a hostage in the DIA's *Sudden Thrust* game. No, you don't get to shoot him.
Courtesy Visual Purple LLC

In the wake of the intelligence bungles that propelled the United States into the Iraq war, it's no secret that the nation's spies have been working to improve the quality of their analysis. Now the top U.S. military intelligence agency has come up with a new tool for teaching recruits critical thinking skills: videogames.

The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency has just taken delivery of three PC-based games, developed by simulation studio Visual Purple under a $2.6 million contract between the DIA and defense contractor Concurrent Technologies. The goal is to quickly train the next generation of spies to analyze complex issues like Islamic fundamentalism.

Given a choice between a droning classroom lecture or a videogame, the best method for teaching Generation Y was obvious. "It is clear that our new workforce is very comfortable with this approach," says Bruce Bennett, chief of the analysis-training branch at the DIA's Joint Military Intelligence Training Center.

Anti-terrorist forces land by helicopter in *Sudden Thrust*. The goal of the games is to focus players on epistemology.
Courtesy Visual Purple LLC

Wired.com had an opportunity to play all three games, *Rapid Onset*, *Vital Passage* and *Sudden Thrust*. The titles may conjure images of blitzkrieg, but the games themselves are actually a surprisingly clever and occasionally surreal blend of education, humor and intellectual challenge, aimed at teaching the player how to think.

All three games put the player into the shoes of a young, eager but sometimes hapless DIA analyst.

Rapid Onset can best be described as Zen Buddhism meets the National Intelligence Estimate. It begins with the rookie analyst dreaming of meeting a white-robed guru on a mountaintop. The guru proceeds to throw him off the mountain; clinging to a rope, the analyst can only climb back up if he recites the Eight Questions of Intelligence Analysis.

Young Grasshopper then wakes up and goes to the office, where his boss (who just happens to look like the guru) asks him to analyze the implications of a Chinese purchase of a rusting ex-Soviet aircraft carrier. He can only solve the problem by applying the eight analytical questions. For example, does a foreign news report on the sale have a bias or point of view that might color its conclusions? Does the article cite evidence, or does it rely on opinion and conjecture?

In *Sudden Thrust*, DIA analysts are confronted with terrorists piloting a hijacked liquefied natural-gas tanker into New York Harbor.
Courtesy Visual Purple LLC

The second game, *Vital Passage*, is a whodunit that begins with scenes of a tanker under attack in the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq war in 1988. The question is, who attacked the tanker and how? In a reminder of the dangers of jumping to conclusions, our young analyst finds himself in a conference room full of bickering colleagues, each stridently advocating his or her particular theory (It was Iran! No, It was Iraq! It was a missile! No, it was a torpedo!). Our hero must use the approved analytical process to analyze and choose among competing hypotheses.

Written by Hollywood screenwriter David Freed, *Sudden Thrust* is the closest of the DIA trilogy to an action-packed

videogame. Our analyst finds himself in a crisis situation when terrorists sail a hijacked natural-gas tanker into New York Harbor. Despite limited and inconclusive information, he and his colleagues must determine what the terrorists are up to, and send the analysis to the secretary of defense.

Sudden Thrust has scenes of helicopters and Navy Seals, but those are just atmospherics, like spooky music during a horror flick. The goal of the games is to focus players on epistemology, or how we know what we know. As our hero's boss puts it, "In our business, conjecture is a four-letter word."

The admiral from *Vital Passage*. Is he secretly working with the enemy? Nope. It's not that kind of game.
Courtesy Visual Purple LLC

Each game only takes about 90 minutes to three hours, and has multiple story lines that branch depending on a player's actions. All DIA analysts will eventually play them, from rookies to old hands who will use them for refresher training. The DIA has about 2,000 analysts, but the agency has been tasked with training another 2,000 in the U.S. military's combatant commands, many of whom work overseas far from training facilities. With classroom space and instructors at a premium, Bennett estimates that every hour spent training with a game saves one hour of classroom instruction, plus travel time and expense.

The DIA isn't alone in turning to videogames for training. The U.S. Army Intelligence Center is using a custom game to train interrogators, or "human collectors," as they are euphemistically known. Known by the staggering title of Intelligence and Electronic Warfare Tactical Proficiency Trainer Human Intelligence Control Cell, the simulation was designed by General Dynamics from the shooter *Far Cry*.

The Army game features a virtual detainee and interpreter; the player-interrogator speaks through voice-recognition software to the virtual interpreter, who translates the questions to the prisoner. Designed for rookie interrogators and more experienced personnel needing a refresher course, IEWTPTHICC teaches the player how to work through an interpreter, use culturally appropriate speech and analyze a detainee's body language, according to Lt. Col. Cherie Wallace, deputy head of the new systems training and integration office at the Army intelligence center at Fort Huachuca, Ariz.

A white-robed guru pushes the neophyte DIA analyst off a mountain in the DIA training game *Rapid Onset*. Only the Eight Principles of Intelligence Analysis can save him.
Courtesy Visual Purple LLC

The game does not teach coercive interrogation techniques, like waterboarding. But it may eventually be modified to show how offensive or abusive questioning will cause detainees to become less cooperative, says Dennis Mitchell, chief of the intelligence center's training devices branch. "One of the persons who helped us out on it was an instructor who trained people on what the current [interrogation] manual is, and what the rules of war are, and how you treat prisoners of war acceptably."

Intelligence videogames are an example of the way in which the government's training methods are changing. Traditional decision-making exercises have been done through the classroom BOGSAT (Bunch of Guys Sitting Around a Table). But videogame technology offers the possibility of running long-distance exercises with human- and computer-controlled avatars.

The National Defense University in Washington, D.C., for example, is experimenting with virtual conference rooms in Second Life. However, network security administrators are less then thrilled with videogames on their systems, which is why the DIA had to purchase standalone laptops so the games are kept separate from the main computer network. By 2009, the three games will be browser-based and capable of operating from classified servers. "In the intelligence world, we don't necessarily have the latest equipment," Bennett says.

A.J. Rossmiller, who served as a DIA Iraq analyst from 2004 to 2006, expects the games to be moderately useful. The classroom training he received as a fledgling analyst was "pretty weak," according to Rossmiller, author of *Still Broken: A Recruit's Inside Account of Intelligence Failures, from Baghdad to the Pentagon*. But videogames won't fix what he sees as systemic flaws in American intelligence, where conclusions by analysts are distorted as they work their way up the chain of command. "A lot of problems are stated as analytical when they're management problems," Rossmiller says.

The rookie analyst from *Rapid Onset* climbs a rope on the path of wisdom. Note the lack of firearms.
Courtesy Visual Purple LLC

And games as teaching tools are only as effective as the assumptions behind them, says John Prados, a designer of hobby war games as well as an historian who has studied U.S. intelligence. For example, prescripted events in a game will tend to reflect the biases of the game's designers as they steer the player toward certain decisions.

The next step is to figure out a way to use gaming technology for training in working with other agencies -- an oft-noted weakness within the intelligence community. "Maybe it's pie in the sky, but can we link multiple computers, so that I can have eight or 10 people in the room playing the same game," Bennett says. "I can be the DIA guy, someone else in DIA can play the CIA guy, and somebody else can be an FBI or a DEA person. If we don't share information, we lose the game."