

Wait! Wait! Don't Tell Me! (...what the U.S. military is playing at.)

By Jan Sage

You're a panelist on the popular National Public Radio (NPR) weekly current events quiz Wait! Wait! Don't Tell Me! and what follows is your challenge.

Host Peter Sagal: Today's military is really on top of popular culture when it comes to game playing. One of these four unlikely scenarios about games in the military is the real thing; the others are bogus. For today's grand prize — Karl Kassell's voice on your home answering machine! — which of these is real?

Announcer Karl Kassell:

- Joint Force Employment is a Pentagon-issued computer game that is shrink-wrapped like a commercial game with dramatic screen shots and eye-catching graphics.
- Microsoft's Flight Simulator game is the first stage of training for all student pilots in the Naval Reserve.
- Doctors at Walter Reed Hospital are ordering combat-injured soldiers to play video games. Rehabilitation using Nintendo's Wii gaming system is known as "Wii-Hab."
- The best players of America's Army, the online game with over 40 million downloads, are sent an official letter inviting them to apply for the real US Army.

Host Peter Sagal: Okay, panelist, which one is the real thing? You expect me to tell you? This is Wait! Wait! Don't Tell Me! Where's your gamesmanship?

Imagine you're faced with this training challenge: Your company needs to train 2.4 million employees in 150 occupational areas plus thousands of specialties and sub-specialties, around the world under high-pressure conditions. You're also responsible for another million non-employees and their dependents. You need to train executives to lead, manage, and command. Turnover is rapid and constant. Among those who stay, job change is fast, particularly at the executive level. Strategy, tactics, and equipment are all continually evolving. Extremely sophisticated technology is playing a greater and greater role. And your training has to be fast.

I've paraphrased from Mark Prensky's *True Believers: Digital Game-Based Learning in The Military* (2001), but you know what we're talking about. Prensky goes on to point out that

"...they need to train for war, yet increasingly they need to train for peacekeeping missions, as American's role in the world changes. Finally, their incoming recruits are not seasoned adults with work experience and habits on their resume, but typically high school graduates and non-graduates, most of whom have never worked before." (6)

The military's training challenge really puts our own training workload into perspective, doesn't it? Even if you had their combined training budget of \$18 billion, it's a staggering job. It should be no surprise to NASAGans that a lot of that budget is going into training games. Let's look at what kind of game-based training that chunk of change is buying.



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America's Army. You may have heard of the free online game the Army launched in 2002 as a recruiting and public relations tool. Progressing through 26 versions so far, *America's Army 3* is a first-person-shooter game with boot camp sessions that present a primer on Army life, optional medical training, and exciting multiplayer combat missions. (Boot camp is optional too but if you explore those sessions, you can unlock better equipment and gear for combat.) (4) You can play it online or experience live simulations at the 14,500 square-foot **Army Experience Center** located inside a mall in Philadelphia or at one of the Army's mobile **Virtual Army Experiences** touring the country since 2007. (1)



There are those who argue that *America's Army* "glamorizes the military." The official line is that the game promotes the Army's seven core values and uses computer technology to "...provide the public a virtual Soldier experience that (is) engaging, informative, and entertaining."(1) Here's a piece of uncorroborated evidence in its favor: two *America's Army* game players reported that they used emergency medical procedures they learned in the game to save lives. Whether you're pro or con, the reality is that the game is both popular and critically praised. *America's Army* has garnered a long list of gaming industry awards and five Guinness World records, one in 2008 as the most downloaded war game. (3)

America's Army recycled. The game has "...grown in ways its originators couldn't have imagined." (1) Dozens of government training and simulation applications have been built on top of the *America's Army* platform. Soldiers, sailors, pilots, and their leaders are gaming their training in some surprising ways. Most are online, many are multiplayer, but the bottom-line is that they are cost-effective and producing positive learner outcomes and satisfaction. Your teenager may be having a swell time taking out the

enemy with simulated AK-47's, but within the real military services, training games are serious business.



These are not your kid's games.

Michael Macedonia, chief scientist and technical director of the U.S. Army Simulation, Training, and Instrumentation Command, considers war gaming, modeling, and simulation "...essential to the retooling of the armed forces for the realities of the 21st century." (2) Every one of the service colleges are using commercial and customized as well as proprietary gaming software for a wide variety of training. We can reveal just a few examples (or they might have to shoot us.)

Combat Readiness, Strategy, & Tactics

- When the **Navy** realized that student pilots were using Microsoft's *Flight Simulator* at home and had higher flight scores as a result, they began issuing their own customized version of *Flight Simulator* to every student pilot. (2)
- The **Navy** has replaced reading technical manuals on board their subs with *SubSkillsNet*, which simulates surfaced bridge views, radar, sonar displays, fire control functions, and a periscope, to train teams or individuals on networked laptops. (6)
- After **Air Force** pilots accidentally shot down two Army Blackhawk helicopters over Iraq, the Air Force developed a rapid reflex game called *JVID and Finflash* that trains pilots to identify

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targets and aircraft markings.

- An **Army Reserve** survival training simulation based on the children's adventure game "Freddi Fish" models the consequences of forgetting critical survival supplies.
- A 16-man **Marine** squad can coordinate their movements to eliminate an enemy bunker on networked computers with *Quake*, a sequel of *Marine Doom* based on the commercial game *Doom*. In this fast-action game full of shooting, confusion, and chaos, the learning goals are actually teamwork, communication, and concepts of command and control.



Medical Training & Rehabilitation

- Instead of live simulations where participants carry pieces of paper describing their injuries, computer simulations can recreate every imaginable kind of wound with intense graphic realism. According to Roger Smith, Chief Technology Officer at the Army's Program Executive Office for Simulation, Training, and Instrumentation, "It's kind of gross, but that's the point. We don't want to find [the trainees] shocked and frozen up when they see real soldiers on the battlefield for the first time." (7)

- *Pulse!!* is a virtual clinical training tool financed by the **Navy** that requires quick thinking to handle medical emergencies under life-and-death pressure.
- In veteran's hospitals like Walter Reed, Nintendo's Wii gaming system is transforming PT ("pain and torture") sessions into "Wii-Hab" sessions that are entertaining, competitive, and motivating.

Cultural & Language Learning

- The **Army** has reduced 15 hours of values training to four with a simulation game called *Saving Sergeant Pabletti*; it deals with prevention of sexual harassment, army values, equal opportunity, and cross-cultural communication.
- ISLET (Integrated System for Language Education and Training) is a five-year project funded by the **Office of Naval Research** to develop an online culture and second language instruction system. It culminates in a multiplayer game where learners progress through game levels, earning achievements and badges. According to Jennifer McCune, Academic Programs Coordinator at ACGE, developer of ISLET: "...the online game uses leader boards, notes, bookmarks, forums, and blogs to create a community of learners in a competitive and collaborative environment. Social networking tools help create a competitive, participatory learning methodology that motivates students to learn and retain language in cultural context." (5)

The new Military-Industrial Complex? The updated version of that sixties-era Eisenhower-ism could now be dubbed the "Military-Gaming Industry Collaboration." Today's military buys or borrows most of its game technology from commercial games, (6) but the advanced computing systems, computer graphics, and Internet that make commercial games what they are

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today originated with military-sponsored projects and government-funded research. (6) And the collaboration continues:

- The Army established the *Institute for Creative Technology* at the University of Southern California. Working closely with the game community, their focus is on virtual reality technologies like “synthespians” and intelligent tutors that immerse trainees in “...engrossing stories with engaging characters which may be either virtual or real.” (2)
- The *Serious Games Showcase and Challenge*, a competitive venue for aspiring game designers, was originally army-organized and financed. Its goal is to identify innovative game-based technologies to improve training solutions. (6)
- *Connections* is an annual conference sponsored by Air University that brings together military and commercial war gaming communities for technical interchange and concept exploration. (2)

And, yes, all the scenarios in our opening quiz are real — but you probably knew that already. (Sometimes Peter Sagal lies.) When it comes to games and training, we may not be able to keep up with today's military, but their example can certainly inspire us, or maybe help to prompt more interest from the doubters in our own organizations about our training game proposals.

Meanwhile, watch for *America's Army: The Graphic Novel*, coming soon to your Kindle! Really.

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