The Pentagon, the university and the video game

Toby Miller wonders whether the line between a university ICT research centre and its role in training soldiers, is overly blurred.

Most of us probably think of electronic games in one of two ways. Either they are the newest means of rotting the brains of the young, or they are exciting new educational forms that will improve learning. In terms of the role that research universities should play in them, we perhaps imagine that scholars will evaluate the potential harm caused in real life by players of violent first-person shooters alongside the potential benefit of conflict-resolution gaming or peaceful virtual worlds. We might even think about those wacky folks over in creative industries making their own games as part of the entrepreneurial spirit of small business that is supposedly enabled by their work in universities.

After all, the grand bifurcation that put science at the physical and symbolic top of the campus and the arts at the bottom, with no interaction, seems to be over. Computing applications to narrative and art, and vice versa, are well known to professors from computer science to dance. As author Thomas Pynchon put it, "all the cats are jumping out of the bag and even beginning to mingle". Faculty at opposite ends of the university write the same codes, analyse the same narratives, go to the same parties, take the same drugs, and sleep with the same people. But here in the US, there is a much more powerful link between electronic games and universities. It's called the military.

In 1996, the National Academy of Sciences held a workshop for academia, Hollywood, and the Pentagon on simulation and games. The next year, the National Research Council announced a collaborative research agenda in popular culture and militarism. It convened meetings to streamline such cooperation, from special effects to training simulations, from immersive technologies to simulated networks. Since that time, untold numbers of academic journals and institutes on games have become closely tied to the Pentagon. They generate research designed to test and augment the recruiting and training potential of games to ideologise, hire, and instruct the population. The Centre for Computational Analysis of Social and Organisational Systems at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh promulgates studies underwritten by the Office of Naval Research and the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency. That agency refers to Orlando as Team Orlando because the city houses Disney's R&D "imagineers", the University of Central Florida's Institute for Simulation and Training; Lockheed Martin, the nation's biggest military contractor; and the Pentagon's Institute for Simulation and Training.

In Los Angeles, in Marina del Rey (the next suburb to Venice, where I live), the University of Southern California's Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT) is a means of articulating scholars, film and television producers, and game designers. It was formally opened by the Secretary of the Army and the head of the Motion Picture Association of America in 1998, and started with $US45 million of the military's budget. That figure was doubled in its 2004 renewal. ICT uses military money and Hollywood muscle to test out homicidal technologies and narrative scenarios – under the aegis of faculty from film, engineering, and communications.

Companies such as Pandemic (part-owned by that high-corporate moralist, Bono) invest. ICT also collaborates on major motion pictures such as Spider-Man 2, and its workspace was thought up by the set designer for the Star Trek franchise.

Most importantly, ICT produces Pentagon recruitment tools such as Full Spectrum Warrior that double as training devices for military operations in urban terrain: what's good for the Xbox is good for the combat simulator. These games have become crucial tools because fewer and fewer nations now allow the US to play live war games on their territory. The utility of the games continues in combat zones. The Pentagon is aware that off-duty soldiers play games. The idea is to invade their supposed leisure time, wean them from skater games, and direct them towards what are essentially training manuals. Defence boasts that Full Spectrum Warrior was "the game that captured Saddam", because the men who dug Hussein out had been trained with it.

Does anybody else think there is something troubling about this scenario? Or is it a fine example of collaboration between government, industry and education, working together in the national interest? And would that be a bit like psychologists helping out with torture when doctors won't, because they hope to be rewarded with the right to prescribe pharmaceutical drugs? Or akin to anthropologists providing cultural advise to occupying forces? Or am I asking the wrong questions entirely?

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