



# Business, educators using games as training tool

## Gaming grows up

By Allison Bruce

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SANTA MONICA — The video game industry isn't just fun and games anymore.

A new category of video games is starting to hit its stride, making its way into education, military training and business use. These are the serious games — those that use video-game play to teach new information or test skills.

"Serious games is using game technology for other than purely entertainment purposes," said Jerry Heneghan, chief executive of Virtual Heroes Inc.

Video games are stepping into the world of training and education for the same reason they keep a gamer glued to the television or PC for hours: they're engaging.

Those in the serious games business said people are quicker to learn new things when they're involved as opposed to listening to a lecture or reading a textbook.

It's an approach that works for any age, from kids used to playing games on their Nintendo DS to adults who have never touched a console controller.

"The training using serious games is fully interactive and immersive, and ... if we do our jobs right, it's also fun," Heneghan said. "We fill a gap between textbook instruction and maybe higher-end simulations."

The first game Virtual Heroes worked on was "America's Army" for the U.S. Army. The company is currently working on a project called "Race to Mars," which can be used to teach kids about math, science and engineering.

It will come as bonus material with a DVD of a Discovery Channel program.

### Based more on facts

Serious games pay attention to details that might be overlooked in an entertainment game. Virtual Heroes uses data about Mars so someone playing its game will see what is at specific coordinates.

BreakAway Games, which has been around for 10 years, moved into the serious market as more organizations and companies became interested in using games for training. It started with a military contract, then medical, but now extends as far as the hotel and banking industry.

"Now, we're pretty much doing it for everybody," said Chief Executive Officer Doug Whatley.

The field was showcased last week at the Serious Game Initiative at the E3 Media & Business Summit in

Santa Monica.

Whatley said people get sucked into playing a game and learn things without realizing it. Games also let companies do practical training without juggling all the demands and costs of interrupting operations.

He talked about how emergency rooms have to shut down to practice a mass casualty, which takes time and money. If hospital staff can do that training virtually, it saves money and lets people repeat the training as often as they like.

Medical training doesn't have to start at the professional level.

Morphonix sells games that teach kids about their brains. In "Neuromatrix," kids play games in different parts of the brain. A game in the cerebellum deals with balance and coordination; a game in the hippocampus deals with memory.

The challenge is making sure that a game, while informative, is also fun.

"You won't play it if you don't think it's cool," President and founder Karen Littman said.

The approach reels kids into learning. Littman said research has shown that kids are more interested and learn more when playing a game as opposed to traditional methods.

"We would like to get it into schools as a supplemental learning program," she said. The company has developed curriculum that ties pieces of the game in with the national science and language standards.

Web Wise Kids gives games away to schools to try to reach kids with its message of Internet safety. The nonprofit company creates games based on true stories of cyberstalking, Internet predators, pirating software and cyberbullying. Kids have to help a detective solve a mystery.

### **Insideous learning**

"We've learned that gaming is their medium, and it's a wonderful way to teach them in a very fun and educational way at the same time," said Monique Nelson, executive vice president.

The games make it easy for teachers who might not know a lot about the issue to expose students to the topic and start discussion. One exercise has students create their own Internet safety rules and then take them home to discuss with their parents.

"That may be the first time that some kids actually talk to their parents about some of the dangers online," Nelson said.

While serious games cannot replace all instruction, it can replace a lot.

Whatley sees the use of games and simulations becoming more widespread as more people get cell phones that can handle running those games.

"It will allow us to put simulations in everyone's hands all the time," he said. "If you need to learn a new language, a new skill or prep for a sales call in half an hour, you're able to do it on the fly right then and there."

### **On the Net:**

<http://www.virtualheroes.com>

<http://www.breakawaygames.com>

<http://www.morphonix.com>

<http://www.webwisekids.org>



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