

# THE FUTURIST

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10 Forecasts for the Next 25 Years  
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## Visions

### VIRTUAL HEALTH

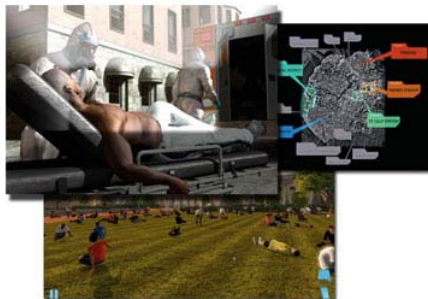
By Patrick Tucker

#### Games for Health conference shows the smarter side of video games.

Teachers may despise them, parents may loathe them, but video games are a fact of modern life. Global video game sales are estimated around \$12 billion annually and growing. The movement to harness the power of games for good has likewise been building and is gaining momentum in some unlikely quarters. A recent Games for Health conference in Baltimore played host to not only software developers but also health professionals looking toward a future where medical train training, even treatment for certain conditions, can be delivered in the form of playable software.

The Starlight Starbright Foundation is one of the emerging leaders in using video games as a component of patient education. The Foundation produces a game called Quest for the Code, which it has distributed to 1.5 million kids suffering from asthma. "With asthma, the problem was kids weren't managing the disease," according to Starlight Vice President Joan Ford. "Either they didn't know how to identify symptoms or were afraid of being stigmatized for stopping play to use an inhaler." Inside the game space, players can advance only by taking the necessary steps to manage symptoms.

On the other end of the spectrum, a 3-D immersive game called **Zero Hour** (from the Virtual Heroes company) is designed not for patients but for medical personnel and first responders. The player can try out different roles in emergency scenarios, such as an earthquake, bombing, or sarin gas attack.



Screen shots from the game Zero Hour: America's Medic, which allows first-responders to role-play various disaster scenarios such as an earthquake, bombing, or sarin gas attack.

VIRTUAL HEROES / WWW.VIRTUALHEROS.COM

In the future, game trainers like Zero Hour will replace formal instruction for most medical workers, according to Bruce Jarrell of the University of Maryland Medical Center. He predicts that doctor and nurse shortages will pressure health-care providers to find new ways to recruit and train medics faster and more effectively. That means allowing them to train wherever they might be and evaluating medics in training in real time outside of classroom settings. "How do you train 100,000 physicians, or even a million patients to care for themselves?" he asks.

Mark Baldwin of Mind Habits sees video games not only educating patients but also, in limited capacity, actually helping them to cope with psychological issues like low self-esteem, which can be a major contributor to stress. Players engaging in the Mind Habits game are rewarded when they click on positive images and confidence-reinforcing messages. The idea that simply clicking on pictures of people smiling could lower anxiety may seem specious, but Baldwin has conducted a controlled study on the hypothesis and published his findings in the *Journal of the American Psychological Association*. When repeated often enough, the trick works, he says. Because the game is online, players can also track their progress over time and even see how stressed they were on certain dates, as well as how their stress levels have improved.

The total market for what are being called serious games—as in games that exist for

more than entertainment purposes—is more than \$150 million, according to Ben Sawyer, one of the founders of the Games for Health initiative. He estimates that health-related games comprise 20% of the serious games space. In the future, he sees exercise gaming (also known as exerce-gaming) going more and more mainstream and teachers using games to channel the excess energy of their most rambunctious students—rather than sending them to a corner when they act out. But his real hope is that video games will transform public health.

"What we're trying to do is change the interface to health care," he says. "The interface to games — there's no argument about how great and fantastic it is. The interface to health care, no matter how you define it, the way you go to a doctor's office, the way you fill out a form, fantastic it isn't."

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