Video-game ideas grab spotlight in capital

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Although "Pac Man," "Grand Theft Auto," "Resident Evil" and "Tomb Raider" may be among the most widely recognized video games on the market, efforts are under way to develop new titles that can assist in professional training, simulation and education.

The second annual Serious Games Summit, held this week in Arlington, Va., brought together groups interested in expanding the role of video games beyond entertainment. Event representatives cited over 700 attendees for the two day conference.

"I'm trying to educate students on the roles of serious games as well as entertainment games and different career options therein," said Deborah Solomon, a professor of Computer Applications at Montgomery College in Maryland and founder of www.studygaming.com, a Web site focused on the video-game industry.

For others, the goal was to see what was on the horizon and how they could adapt to a changing environment.

"I'm looking for ideas of what types of techniques will be effective, and in my case I'm trying to build software for instruction," said Nadir Abdulhaqq, an educator.

For many firms, video games are now an important part of their business model.

The United States Army has had incredible success with its free video

game, "America's Army," which has been downloaded over 29 million times. It boasts over 6 million active users and serves as an informational tool for players interested in the service. The game also serves as the core engine for several other training applications such as vehicle and weapon simulators.

In one eye-catching example, a simulator places the player in the role of a convoy gunner who must fight off Iraqi insurgent forces attacking the vehicles as they roll through a virtual city. Similar real-world fighting has been responsible for a significant number of American deaths during the Iraq war.

"It's a good ice breaker and information base at local area network and cyber cafe events," said Lori Mezoff, a spokesperson for "America's Army."

"America's Army," which has been available for desktop operating systems such as Mac OS X, Windows and Linux, will be released for the Xbox and PlayStation 2 game consoles this month.

Other highlights of the show included PeaceMaker, a game in development by groups from Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh in which players must confront the Israeli-Palestine conflict from the role of either the Israeli prime minister or the Palestinian president.

Geared toward a high school audience and designed to be as close to the actual situation as possible, players use political functions similar to what might be used to attempt to resolve the issues while having to please eight major groups, each vying for influence. For example, a player's choice to decrease checkpoints throughout the country might win approval from one group while others might react negatively. The game, which was designed to be authentically difficult, rarely rewards violent

actions, which may work in the short term but create more obstacles for victory.

"If you go completely warmongering, we're going to stop the game and say you fail," said Asi Burak, the producer of "PeaceMaker."

"PeaceMaker" is due to be published for the Windows operating system this spring, with its developer group hoping to receive feedback, add multiplayer functionality, move the game out of the university environment and develop the title to be able to address other conflicts currently taking place.

"Hazmat: Hotzone," a firefighter training simulator by Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Training Center, demonstrated how video-game software could be applied as a department-wide training tool. Designed with the help of the New York Fire Department, the game works to continually train firefighters on how to deal with conventional, environmental, biological and terror-based incidents while functioning as a team.

The demonstration, which included several representatives from the NYFD, featured the players playing the game through networked laptops while communicating through headsets. An instructor program allowed the game's variables to be altered at a moment's notice while the group simulated the rescue performed in the event of a biological attack in a subway station. The group was later critiqued on techniques used during the simulation.

"We lost a lot of experience after Sept. 11," said Lt. Tony Mussofiti, who pointed out that video-game technology is something a younger fire department was comfortable with.

"They have to become as comfortable handling Hazmat and terrorist

incidents as they are at handling fires," said Mussofiti. "This is perishable knowledge and continual training becomes vital."

"A serious game changes the way we train, educate and how we interact with the real world," said Doug Whatley, CEO of BreakAway Games.

As of now, video games have moved beyond "kids' stuff" and into a more practical realm.

The idea appears to be catching on.

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