Security heightened ahead of Ubisoft's 'Avatar' game release

November 13 2009, by Clement Sabourin

The offices of Ubisoft in Montreal on November 10. Security cameras in hallways, double locked doors and strict confidentiality clauses, Ubisoft employees are working in a veritable bunker in downtown Montreal to create their latest 3D video game.

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"I can't even enter myself without being accompanied," quipped a Ubisoft spokeswoman as she tried to reach the inner sanctum of Ubisoft's third floor offices on Saint-Laurent Boulevard.

Here, some 250 Ubisoft employees are hard at work on a three-dimensional game version of James Cameron's highly-anticipated "Avatar" film.

Cameron has not released a film since his 1997 blockbuster "Titanic," which earned 11 Oscars.

His latest project, a sci-fi opus that reportedly cost a cool 300 million dollars to make, is due out on December 18, marking the debut of a new 3D process the director of two "Terminators" and "Aliens" has been working on for a decade.

At Ubisoft, the "Avatar" video game development room has been isolated from the rest of the studio and its 2,000 staff, with Pentagon-like controls on entering or leaving.

Inside, a pirate's flag flapped above the arcade-laboratory littered with empty soft drink cans, superhero action figures and annals of scientific studies on animal mobility.

Most staff focused on their computers trying to work out last minute bugs. One seemed asleep on a sofa while another, game controller in hand, tested one of the game's three versions.

3D games are not new. Microsoft launched one last year for its Xbox console.

But this new release will be the first on a grand scale, its creators say.

The story unfolds on a magical planet called Pandora. In the heart of an immense tropical forest, strife erupts between an indigenous tribe and an Earth-based intergalactic consortium in search of rare minerals.

Using 3D glasses and a digital television, gamers are given the option of which side to play and meant to feel immersed in the action.

While based on the film, the plot is not a rehash of its storyline. Rather,

"Cameron saw the game as an extension of the universe he created," said Patrick Naud, the game's executive producer.

"It forced us to create new characters, a new mythology and new environments," he told AFP.

The highly detailed work requires a tremendous amount of concentration to, for example, design an animal with six legs that move in a "realistic" way, said Cedric Rang, a section project chief.

The collaboration between Cameron and Ubisoft's game designers led to some completely new ideas for both the game and film.

"In the film, there are costumes and vehicles and sounds that we had created for the game," noted Patrick Naud, suggesting that joint creative efforts by filmmakers and game designers is where the future lies for both industries.

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