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War Play: Video Games And The Future Of Armed Conflict



Synopsis

A behind-the-scenes look at how the military uses video game technology to train soldiers, treat veterans, and entice new recruits. How does the U.S. military train its soldiers for new forms of armed conflict, all within the constraints of diminished defense budgets? Increasingly, the answer is cutting-edge video game technology. Corey Mead shows us training sessions where soldiers undertake multiplayer "missions" that test combat skills, develop unit cohesion, and teach cultural awareness. He immerses himself in 3-D battle simulations so convincing that they leave his heart racing. And he shows how the military, which has shaped American education more than any other force over the last century, fuels the adoption of games as learning tools "and recruitment come-ons. Mead also details how the military uses games to prepare soldiers for their return to the home front and to treat PTSD. Military-funded researchers were closely involved with the computing advances that led to the invention of the Internet. Now, as Mead proves, we are poised at the brink of a similar explosion in game technology. War Play reveals that many of tomorrow's teaching tools, therapies, and entertainments can be found in today's military.

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Customer Reviews

The military has always been a driving force behind technology, from the Radarange to digital photography. It seems only natural that in the new millennium, video games have become an integral part of military training. I knew very little about the military's previous efforts before I started reading "War Play", but Corey Mead did a fantastic job feeding my interest over the course of his

book. Today's military trainees have a better familiarity with video games - as mentioned in chapter 3, "Junior leaders have never known a world without cell phones and video games, so they're very predisposed to being receptive to virtual learning." Video game training scenarios are cheaper, safer, less time consuming than creating a live fire exercise, and less boring than a "death-by-PowerPoint" presentation in a classroom. There are several games discussed in War Play including Flatworld, America's Army, Virtual Battlespace 2, among many others. While these games have portions about first-person shooting and tactical responses, they also they cover a wide range of topics including language training, cultural training, medical training, military career courses, and many more. These games don't have a moral vacuum - America's Army drives this point home with an honor system, which detracts points if you fail missions or have incidents of friendly fire. During the Virtual Battlefield 2 trainings, it was mentioned that "...the same hierarchies that would exist on the battlefield soon emerge in the classroom." If someone wasn't able to handle the keyboard input, the more seasoned gamers were able to assist their fellow soldiers, which in turn, shows which soldiers are good for leadership roles in and out of the virtual environment.

The military is an always has been a universe of its own. Whether training Macedonian peasants three thousand years ago how to hold their ground against attackers or Soviet farm boys how to drive T-34s and fly IL-2s just 70 years ago, armies, navies and other forces have always been educational institutions of a kind. War for technologically advanced nations has become incredibly complex. Political pressures make combat even more onerous for some militaries, like those of the United States. This fascinating study focuses primarily on how the United States Army has become a major proponent of using video games as a training vehicle. The author makes it very clear that he is using the term "video game" very broadly to cover everything from simple combat situations to highly involved simulations. The U.S. Army faces numerous problems, beginning with attracting recruits, both male and female. Without a draft, they are dependent on volunteers - for a life of discipline, frequent disruptions of family life, petty politics and for many, very real dangers to life and limb - and the job doesn't pay all that well. To become a successful soldier, one must become at least minimally proficient in a number of skills, depending on the occupational specialty they are assigned to. In short, the need to educate tens of thousands of young men and women annually in skills they may have no prior exposure to is immense. Likewise, there is a need to make the military attractive to young people to the point they volunteer for service. The American army has had to educate on a large scale since World War I.

In this book, Corey Mead tells the story of training in the military, and how modern innovations such as video games improve both the speed and effectiveness of training. To explain the importance of video games, he goes back to the founding of military. It turns out that much of our modern educational system was originated by the military, most notably standardized testing. Mead explains that the proportion of soldiers needed who can solve complex problems and serve in higher capacities has increased in each war since WWI, and with it comes more of a need to quickly assess and train incoming recruits. In fact, Mead goes all the way back to Valley Forge, and describes the need Washington had to train his troops in methodologies of war that they would need to fight the British. Flash forward to today, military planners have found that the immersive nature of a video game actually teaches key training skills faster and more effectively than normal classroom training. All of that being said, the book fell a little short for me. First, simulation scenarios from the 1980's are discussed alongside modern software. Presumably the software of the 1980's wasn't quite as realistic. It would have been nice to have some images or context to understand exactly what they were using. I had to search YouTube to find many of the software packages he mentioned just to understand what they looked like. In fact, much of the book's difficulty is that it is not thorough enough to be an academic tone on military education, but really too dry to be a general interest book. The most complete section of the book is the chapter on the game America's Army, a popular first-person shooter game released by the Army for recruiting purposes.

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