

Documentation

Big-selling war games may carry bigger cost

By Mike Snider, USA TODAY, 6/9/2004 11:16 PM

"RPG! They've got an RPG!" hollers the team leader of a four-man U.S. Army infantry squad hiding behind a beat-up car on this battle-ridden street. Ultrarealistic: Full Spectrum Warrior, which takes place in the Middle East, is based on an actual Army training simulation. THQ

Pfsssst! KER-Boom! The rocket-propelled grenade overshoots the troops. "That's not the way it went in training," one soldier says, and they continue policing the streets of this Middle Eastern country. The scenario sounds like a report transmitted from a television crew in Iraq. But it's actually from Full Spectrum Warrior, a new video game for Microsoft's Xbox.

The game, out less than a week, is the latest in a stream of increasingly realistic war games. And it's likely to add fuel to the controversy about games and violence. Today's ultrarealistic games such as Warrior play like an interactive version of Black Hawk Down. However, some observers are critical of the combat-gaming trend, saying the games can mislead players into viewing war as fun, particularly among the target audience of young men. (Related story: War games launch all-out sales assault) Mary Spio, 31, who served in the U.S. Air Force during the first Gulf War, thinks video games can create a bloodlust. "What we saw in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal was the tip of the iceberg - it was a glimpse of a generation of war gamers coming of age," says Spio, now the pop culture editor for One2One Magazine.

"Video games that allow players to kill real human beings are desensitizing generations of American society," she says. Research into the long-term effects of video games remains foggy, although findings have long shown that watching violent TV and movies and playing violent games increases aggressive thoughts, feelings and, to a lesser extent, behaviors.

"It is probably more likely to be a vicious circle, where increased interest in war leads to playing these games, which leads to more aggressive feelings and increased negative stereotypes of other cultures, which just fuels more interest in war," says Douglas Gentile, an assistant professor of psychology at Iowa State University and director of research for the National Institute on Media and the Family.

Those who play the games beg to differ. "It's like playing a pickup game of basketball," says Sean Starke, 40, of Middletown, N.J., a member of the 60 or so members of Dads Playing SOCOM (www.dpsclan.org), a group of adults who play Sony's SOCOM II: Navy Seals games online.

He often allows his 10-year-old daughter to play the game on PlayStation 2 with him. "It's obvious that it's a game. I don't really have fears of her Columbinig." In another sign of the games' growing reach, the U.S. Army has its own online games,

America's Army, and a sequel, America's Army: Special Forces - recruitment programs played on PCs (free at www.americasarmy.com). The games have drawn more than 1.9 million players. Ubisoft, which publishes the Tom Clancy games and has Brothers in Arms, a World War II game, in the works, has a deal to publish America's Army for consoles such as the PS2 and Xbox.

Full Spectrum Warrior, which grew out of Pandemic Studio's creation of an Army training simulation, is "technically, tactically very real," says retired Army captain James Ytuarte, who served as a consultant on the game. His 13-year-old son has played the game, too. "He understands it's just a game. It's entertainment."

Starke agrees, but adds, "my wife jokes that when the school psychologist calls, she's handing me the phone."