Chapter 7
Virtual Worlds and the Military

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ABSTRACT
The combined military forces of the United States are over 3 million strong; currently command a defense budget of $540 billion with an additional allocation of $306 billion for the Global War on Terror; and has spending power of nearly $14 billion. In addition to the impact this strong military presence has on our country and the world, these numbers underscore the influence the military has on technology trends, tools, and vendor offerings through its acquisition of various technology software and hardware components. One particular area of interest to this publication is the $8 billion that the military spends on virtual training. Additionally, the military spends $4 billion on recruitment efforts which include an increased emphasis on the use of virtual worlds to interest potential new recruits to join one of the military forces. Team Orlando, a joint military branch project that collaborates on training and development efforts, is also focused on finding new and better ways to train its soldiers through virtual worlds and simulation. An idea of Team Orlando’s influence on the virtual world industry is reflected in the $17.5 billion in contracts awarded to vendors in 2009 alone. Intelligence agencies and Homeland Security have also demonstrated an increased interest in, and use of, virtual worlds evident through various requests for research and development proposals issued recently requesting ideas on ways to use virtual worlds for internal training and collaboration. The Intelligence community is also interested in exploring behavior of virtual world inhabitants and relating them to their real world counterparts. Even the CIA has a presence on Second Life®, albeit not for general public use. In total, the influence that the military, intelligence and homeland security agencies have on the virtual world industry is significant and extends the reach of virtual worlds beyond its commercial uses.

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INTRODUCTION

The combined military forces of the United States are over three million strong; currently command a defense budget of $540 billion with an additional allocation of $306 billion for the Global War on Terror; and has spending power of nearly $14 billion (GlobalFirepower, 2009). In addition to the impact this strong military presence has on our country and the world, these numbers underscore the influence the military has on technology trends, tools, and vendor offerings through its acquisition of various technology software and hardware components. One particular area of interest to this publication is the $8 billion that the military spends on virtual training (Encyclopedia.com, 2009). Also of interest, is the $4 billion spent annually by the military on recruitment efforts which have recently included an increased emphasis on the use of virtual worlds to interest potential new recruits to join the military forces (National Priorities Project, 2007). These recruitment efforts have the added benefit of educating the public on the life of soldiers in the military while garnering respect and admiration for their efforts.

Evidence of the military’s recent focus on the use of virtual worlds was apparent in the fall of 2008 with the release of an Request for Proposal (RFP) by the U.S. Air Force for the development of MyBase, a three dimensional online training software (FedBizOps, 2008a). The following year, several U.S. defense agencies released RFPs for virtual world development efforts including the U.S. Army’s Federal Virtual World Challenge; the Department of Homeland Security Request for Information (RFI) for input on virtual world technology and web based systems; and NATO’s RFP for the development of virtual worlds to augment or replace existing technologies in use for the education and training of NATO staff (Betterverse.org, 2009).

The Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity (IARPA) agency is also involved in researching the use of virtual worlds in the intelligence community. Its A-Space virtual site was released in 2008, and is described as a social-networking site for analysts to collaborate and share information among the 16 U.S. intelligence agencies (Conway, 2008). IARPA also released a request for White Papers in 2008 requesting analysis of Cyber-Behavior Research. And in 2009, we saw IARPA approach participation in virtual worlds from a different angle. A new request from IARPA was issued for research on ways to identify behavioral indicators in virtual worlds and multi-user online games that are related to the user’s real world characteristics (Mountjoy, 2008).

The federal government is also utilizing the combined influence of its various agencies in the pursuit of virtual world technology. In 2007, the Federal Consortium for Virtual Worlds was formed. This consortium is made up of U.S. federal government agencies and contractors including the U.S. Department of Defense and the CIA, who, consisting of a group of U.S. federal government agencies and contractors interested in “exploring the use of virtual worlds in government, sharing best practices and policies, creating shared repositories, and networking. In the past year the Federal Consortium for Virtual Worlds has grown from a handful of agencies to more than 100.” (Harris, 2008, p. 1) The Federal Consortium for Virtual Worlds has held conferences each year since its inception drawing presenters and attendees from every aspect of the virtual world domain. The conferences were held in both a live environment and in multiple virtual worlds including Second Life®. In total, the influence that the military, intelligence and homeland security agencies have on the virtual world industry as evident by these Requests and activities is significant and extends the reach of virtual worlds beyond its commercial uses.

This chapter will focus on the use of virtual worlds by the U.S. military, intelligence, and homeland security sectors, although other government entities are using virtual worlds as well. For example, the US Centers for Disease Control and