



"Boarders Ahoy!" wins People's Choice award at IITSEC 2010

While the Interservice/Industry Training, Simulation and Education Conference (IITSEC) is a serious venue for showcasing the latest in modelling and simulation and virtual technology, there was still time for a few games.

Allied Command Transformation's (ACT) game, 'Boarders Ahoy!', a 3D multiplayer game for security and search teams that looks at the boarding of suspect merchant vessels, won the 'Serious Games Showcase and Challenge People's Choice of Best Serious Game'.

The Serious Games Showcase and Challenge celebrates innovations in game design and instructional technology.

The showcase highlights a collection of cutting edge serious games consisting of three categories – business, government and student. Four awards were presented: 'People's Choice of Best Serious Game', 'Best Serious Game by a Student', 'Best Serious Game by a Company' and 'Best Government Developed Serious Game'.



The challenge for developers was to build a game that not only helps solve a clearly identified problem but also provides a technologically sound, challenging and rewarding experience to the user. The committee narrowed entries to the Top 12 Serious Games to present to IITSEC attendees. Games were evaluated on three key areas: Problem solving, technical quality, and playability and enjoyment.

ACT is currently investigating technologies that could be used to enhance or improve NATO's current training and education methods. In order to facilitate this need, ACT has partnered with Engineering and Computer Simulations (ECS) to develop a series of virtual worlds within the Nexus Virtual World platform.

In support of both Operation Active Endeavour and NATO's anti-piracy mission around the Horn of Africa, 'Boarders Ahoy!' is focused on Maritime Interdiction Operations (MIO).

"We have a lot of Nations involved in boarding operations, and they need to have a baseline training set up for them," said Wayne Buck, ACT's Modelling and Simulation Analyst and Project Manager for 'Boarders Ahoy!'. "What we have found is that so many students are coming to the centre that need to do some of their training online in a distributive manner and that is why we came up with this."

'Boarders Ahoy!' is a way to get threshold knowledge to the students before they actually get to the centre, said Buck.

"We have had great feedback from the centre that we are building the game for," said Buck.

First, students will learn the MIO material using courseware and live instruction in a virtual classroom. They will then participate in an immersive team-based mission to board and search a suspect merchant shipping vessel.

Students will be tasked with crew control and identification, as well as searching the vessel for weapons, IED components and other contraband or suspicious cargo.

Their scores will be tracked, challenging them to prove that they met all training objectives.

The advanced training will help teams better prepare for the live training at the NATO Maritime Interdiction Operational Training Centre (NMIOTC).

Buck explains how ACT first came to use virtual world technology to enhance training opportunities.

"For the past two years, ACT has been doing the investigation into virtual worlds," said Buck. "This came as a result of a study we had done that looked into commercial technologies and how we can exploit them. The study recommended that we start looking into virtual worlds, specifically how they can help us with training."

ECS has been working with ACT for three years and have built three virtual worlds. The first was a simulation of ISAF Headquarters, used to enhance Individual Augmentee training. The second was a virtual ACT headquarters. The third one was a ship boarding operation, 'Boarders Ahoy!'.

"We did a limited objective experiment at Virginia Modelling, Analysis and Simulation Center (VMASC) where we took a control group and an experimental group and gave them the same Advanced Distributed Learning (ADL) material," said Buck. "One group had the current form of a paper copy, listening to it being read and the other was in a virtual world where we had an instructor give the same information but in a virtual environment. The results were very encouraging that we were going in the right direction."

The students who participated in the course in the virtual environment showed a 23% improvement on learning retention.

Brent Smith, Chief Technology Officer for ECS, explains why virtual training provides greater benefits.

"Other than having the straight courseware, they were able to ask questions and the instructor was able to refer back to past experiences which then had the students refer back to past experiences," said Smith. "It allowed them to put the courseware into context."

It is an honour that we won the 'People's Choice of Best Serious Game', added Smith. This was a government submittal from ACT and they have put a lot of work into 'Boarders Ahoy!'.

"It has been a great partnership working with NATO," said Smith. "They really seem to understand the values of how virtual worlds can help training. We all agree that virtual worlds aren't always the answer to all training challenges but they certainly can play a part in the whole continuum of training."