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Training, simulation and social media are all about people. This was made abundantly clear during the latest workshop in a NATO Modeling and Simulation Group series titled "Exploiting Commercial Games and Technologies for NATO".

Held at the Norwegian Defence Research Agency FFI near Kjeller on 13-15 November, the workshop was well attended by participants from several NATO Nations. Led by Wayne Buck of Allied Command Transformation (ACT) and Stuart Armstrong representing the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, the workshop emphasised the speed at which technology and society are changing regarding simulation.

Three of the presenters chose to discuss trends. With one half of the world's population under the age of 30 and kindergartens now using iPads as instructional devices instead of chalkboards, there is no doubt that change is the order of the day. Social Media and handheld technology is allowing games to permeate our play and work. There is a revolution going on in the innovation domain and this revolution is in the form of serious games. A serious game is one which was developed not just for pure entertainment. In other words, there should also be a lesson being learned when the game is played.

Serious games present a relatively new approach to training and education for Defence. Although serious games are often used as stand-alone solutions, they can also serve as entry points into training content that is delivered via different media. The same "transmedia" storytelling used by entertainment and advertising to sustain audience engagement with memorable experiences can also be used effectively by the military. The workshop mentor,

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Elaine Raybourn of Sandia National Laboratories (currently on assignment to the Advanced Distributed Learning Network) says that, "Transmedia storytelling is the art and science of designing a consistent message that is delivered and reinforced across multiple media utilising diverse entry points into a narrative to generate audience involvement with content. ... Transmedia storytelling also provides a practical framework for developing media-rich training."

Peter Morrison, Chief Executive Officer of Bohemia Interactive, believes that the mix of simulation, Social Media and other more common media to produce enhanced effects is becoming quite natural. During his presentation he concentrated on reducing the distinction between virtual worlds and simulations. "For a game to be entertaining it requires immersive gameplay, but for a game to be effective in training it needs to facilitate learning. The relationship between gameplay and learning is complex and is a big area of research. In defence, we see a lack of education about the potential of games." This relates back to the "transmedia" theme and the need to ensure that games and other non-traditional media are also included in training efforts.

Providing an additional punch to the power behind social games, Stuart Armstrong of QinetiQ made it very clear that social games are unlikely a fad and are probably here to stay. "How do we harness the potential of these games and use them to our best benefit," was Armstrong's plea.

Started several years ago, this workshop was the 12th in a series of investigations to understand better how "Commercial Technologies and Games Can Be Used in NATO." This particular workshop focused on "transmedia" and its impact on experimentation, training, and other domains in NATO. Fifteen presentations exposed attendees to mentoring systems, standards such as SCORM, approaches to dismounted soldier training and many other subjects.

Workshop Chairman Wayne Buck stated that "The reason we hold these workshops is simple, we need to prepare NATO for the eventuality of games and Social Media invading the workplace. It will begin to happen quickly and when it does it will be fast and furious."

The next workshop is expected to be held 23-25 April 2013 in La Spezia, Italy and will concentrate on immersive environments related to the maritime domain.