

WORLD OF SPYCRAFT IN VIRTUAL SPACE

The Guardian's latest Snowden scoop describes how they decided to infiltrate World at Warcraft and other virtual gaming environments. As they point out, there's no clear proof terrorists have used such space (though they were able to follow some credit card thieves into Second Life once). But what the heck? There's metadata to be collected, so why not conquer it. As the original document describes,

GVEs are an opportunity! We can use games for: CNE exploits, social network analysis, HUMINT targeting, ID tracking (photos, doc IDs), shaping activities, geo-location of target, and collection of comms.

I'm particularly interested in the treatment of the propaganda and training value of virtual space. There, they focus on Hezbollah's use of Special Force 2 to train potential recruits (and fundraise).

GVEs have been made that reinforce prejudices and cultural stereotypes while imparting a targeted message or lesson both from the Western point of view and in the Middle East. America's Army is a U.S. Army produced game that is free download from its recruitment page and is acknowledged to be so good at this the army no longer needs to use it for recruitment, they use it for training. The Lebanese Hizballah has taken this concept and the same basic game design and made its own version of the game called Special Forces 2 (SF2), which its press section acknowledges is used for recruitment and training in order to prepare their youth to "fight the enemy", a radicalizing medium; the ultimate goal is to become a suicide

martyr. One cannot discount the “fun factor” involved—it is important to hold your target audience’s attention— and makes ingesting the message not even noticeable. SF2 features multi-player, online text and voice chat for up to 60 players simultaneously, effectively acting like a VPN or private chat forum. SF2 is offered at \$10 a copy and so also goes to fund terrorist operations.

This was admission that we regard such games as legitimate war tools.

I immediately thought of Amir Mirzaei Hekmati, the Iranian-American ex-Marine sentenced to death by the Iranians while visiting relatives in 2011 (that is, well after this NSA document was written in 2008; his death sentence has since been overturned). At the time, public reports described the detention as a big misunderstanding over the role of Hekmati’s role in an online game company, Kuma Wars.

A Pentagon language-training contract won in 2009 by Kuma Games, a New York-based company that develops reality-based war games – including one called “Assault on Iran” – lists as a main contact Amir Mirzaei Hekmati, the former Marine from Flint, Mich., now on death row in an Iranian prison, convicted of spying for the C.I.A.

That \$95,920 contract, and Mr. Hekmati’s military background, his Iranian heritage and some linguistics work he did for the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, help explain why the authorities in Iran, increasingly paranoid and belligerent about perceived American threats, had him arrested last August while he was visiting Iran for the first time.

[snip]

“They don’t want to say anything that

might have negative repercussions,” said Michael Kelly, a spokesman for Mott Community College in Flint, where the father teaches. “Something that appears harmless here could be interpreted differently there.”

Sure enough, however, NSA treats Kuma Wars similar to the way it treated Hezbollah’s war game.

Kuma Wars is a U.S. owned company that offers realistic battle simulation of real battles in Iraq usually one month after they actually happened. The player can re-do maneuvers in a lessons learned way for training, or you can switch sides and see how it works from the opposite side. It also provides real terrain features, such as real road signs from real roads in Iraq, and a simulated night-vision goggles environment.

Meanwhile, the LAT reports the CIA’s NOC program has been a colossal flop.

If the US is going to treat all these platforms as the next battleground in the war against al Qaeda or Iran, we should expect Americans – innocent or not – to be treated as spies in that space.