Virtual Iraq

Virtual Iraq is a multimedia exhibition produced on location in Los Angeles at the Institute of Creative Technology (ICT), a University-affiliated research centre for the University of Southern California (USC). The project explores the use of interactive media and Virtual Reality (VR) programmes used by the US Army to recruit, train and treat military personnel before and after a tour of duty in the Middle East. Much of the imagery on display was documented on location at 'Flatworld', a facility run by ICT used to demonstrate to the US Army the diverse array of virtual reality technology created for their use. ICT are considered leaders in the international effort to develop virtual humans who think and behave like real people.

Professor Albert 'Skip' Rizzo, lead psychologist at ICT, describes the Institution as 'the unholy alliance between Hollywood, the military and academia'. Initially I visited Skip in Marina Del Rey to explore a program called 'Virtual Iraq' – soon to be a 'Virtual Afghanistan'. This is a program co-written by Skip to help returning soldiers suffering Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) recover from their symptoms. It was the connection this program had to the commercial Xbox game, 'Full Spectrum Warrior', - produced by Pandemic Studios in Los Angeles -which initially drew my attention to his work. This game was originally developed by ICT with close support from the Army Infantry School at Fort Benning -to ensure content fidelity- as a training aid for the US Army. The same program was the inspiration and the basis for Virtual Iraq now being used to *treat* warriors with PTSD while in and on their return from a tour of duty.

The complexity of the Virtual Media produced for the US Army at ICT and the connection to the gaming industry developed the project into the multimedia exhibition it now is.   Included within the exhibition is:

- Recorded HDV footage of a Virtual Human recruiting aid called 'Sergeant Star', juxtaposed with 'Raid', a Virtual Terrorist, used for training military in the cultural nuances of potential suspects of IED explosions. Both are interviewed by Josh Williams the lead demonstrator at ICT.
- Audio and HDV interviews with medium format photographs recorded at the San Diego Medical Centre of psychologist's and therapist's responsible for the treatment of returning soldiers with PTSD.
- HDV of programmers at ICT 'gaming'.
- HDV of the program 'Virtual Iraq' with myself being given a 'Virtual tour' by Skip Rizzo.
- Medium format photographs of the 'Sets' used to display the training and recruiting programs at FlatWorld.

All images and film, with an accompanying essay on the project by Gordon MacDonald, editor of Photoworks Magazine can be seen on my website at www.lisabarnard.co.uk.

Lisa Barnard

07796 374 237
lisa.barnard@virgin.net