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NOT JUST A GAME: Marc Magdinec, left, department head, engagement systems, Naval Surface Warfare Center, in Dahlgren, Va., asks a question during a seminar at The Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey. The U.S. Navy is streamlining its administration and is using a simulation video game, above, to help high ranking naval officers hone corporate leadership skills.

Navy trains leaders on Monterey computers

BY ANDREW F. HAMM
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This June, the U.S. Navy finalized plans to streamline administration of its far-flung operations so it's more in line with that of a modern corporation.

Central to the project is a video game. The Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, is hosting one-, two-, and three-star admirals for 10 days of leadership training designed to help them operate in the modern Navy. The highlight of the project will be a day-long seminar built around a simulation video game developed by Toronto-based ExperiencePoint Inc.

The Navy plans to eventually have its entire fleet officer class — as well as a few Army and Marine Corps generals — take part in its leadership simulation game either in Monterey or at Wellesley College near Boston.

The video game exercise is designed to help fleet officers discover the best way to lead and otherwise motivate people to work as a team toward a common goal within a specific time frame and budget.

"These are skills that military people are not always asked to use," says Vice Adm. Phil Quast, who will be leading the Executive Business Course in Monterey. "These guys are warfighters. They haven't had that much experience in a business environment."

But these are skills that the Navy will be asking of its officers in the 21st Cen-

tury, Admiral Quast says.

The Navy has decided to streamline its operations into five core segments: surface ships, aviation, submarine, IT, and expeditionary forces. Traditionally, the Navy has been a very segmented institution, with groups divided by any number of categories, including ship size, type of aircraft and even by the power that a submarine ran under.

The goal of a streamlined Navy is to develop a clear line of command decision-making, save money and develop a more uniformed way of doing business.

"A lot of our procedures still need to be defined ... especially in our business decisions," Admiral Quast says.

The atmosphere at the Naval Postgraduate School will be casual, with nary a uniform, salute or ranked title to be found. The idea is to get the admirals out of the war room mentality and into the corporate one.

The computer video game the admirals will be playing is reminiscent of the popular Sims game.

The user conducts extensive interviews with a host of computer-generated characters within an office structure to get a sense of their individual skills and personalities. The user then develops a game plan by selecting from more than 50 choices to accomplish a given task. As in any work environment, some choices will be popular with some employees, while others will not. The admirals will have to figure out what motivates their work force and how to handle disgrun-

ted employees. The admirals will interview the computer-generated individuals alone but put together a game plan in small groups of five or six.

"It's interesting to see these high-ranking officers giving each other high fives like a bunch of 14-year-olds," Admiral Quast says.

The Navy is at the forefront of a growing trend of using video simulation games to teach corporate leadership skills, says James Chisholm, a games consultant with ExperiencePoint.

Such Silicon Valley companies as SAP, Baxter Pharmaceuticals, San Jose State University and others are using similar simulation games for their executives.

Video games aren't new to the military, which uses them to teach pilots dog-fighting techniques and Navy junior officers use video-game technology to develop warfighting strategies. The Army even has a "shoot-em up" video game on its Web site that it uses primarily as a recruitment tool.

"The tradition of developing simulation (war games) goes back 150 years in the military," Mr. Chisholm says. "Only now we are doing it in a risk-free environment on computers. The serious game movement — where you take serious scenarios and combine it with elements of a video game — is taking the best of all worlds to resolve problems."

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ALL BUSINESS: In a break-out session, Howard Fireman, left, a director with the U.S. Navy in Washington, D.C.; Rear Admiral Dan Davenport, center, from the Pentagon; and Rear Admiral Michael Mahon, Navy deputy chief of staff and commander Maritime Air Northwood in Great Britain, analyze video game scenarios.