GAMES

Learn How to Win the Battle in the Conference Room

By CHARLES HEROLD

Computer games have taught players how to slay dragons, build empires and blow up tanks, but they can also be used to teach more mundane skills. Virtual Leader, corporate training software from SimuLearn, is designed to teach managers how to run a business meeting.

Players participate in a series of meetings with peers, superiors and subordinates, with the goal of resolving a crisis or dealing with a problem. You can suggest solutions (chosen from a list) or elicit ideas from others. You must also deal with the constant threat of everyone's agreeing to end the meeting and go to lunch before anything gets done.

Game characters have a range of attitudes and will yawn, get more coffee or shake their heads in disapproval, while making comments like "It feels like we're missing something." Buyers can customize the game by changing such things as employee attitude toward authority. A manager in the United States Army, for example, might be less likely than one from Ben & Jerry's to argue with the boss.

Players express approval and disapproval of ideas and participants by clicking on indicators, either frowning or smiling or saying something negative or positive. Thus, if two people disagree, you can encourage one, discourage the other and let them fight it out.

The goal of Virtual Leader ($249 for individuals @ www.simulearn.net) is to teach you how to push through ideas, encourage suggestions and create just enough tension in the room to keep everyone awake but not stressed-out. It may not be as much fun as slaying dragons, but that's something you can bring up at the next meeting.