

Will Wright and the art of war

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Lifting off in an Army-issue Longbow helicopter simulator, simulation gaming guru Will Wright, left, tested out the equipment the military uses to train its pilots without the danger and expense of real-world crashes. He toured a slew of high-tech and high-security battle simulators along the University of Central Florida's Research Parkway.

Photos by Isaac Babcock

**By Isaac Babcock
Sun Staff**

Twenty feet inside of a magnetically sealed door, Will Wright is already knee-deep in a mission briefing for recon work in Iraq. A few minutes from now, he'll be flying just east of Fallujah.

It's 1:35 p.m. as Wright, with his eight-months pregnant wife, Kim, in tow, walks into a dark briefing room. An Army major in full camouflage rushes to shake his hand, calling him "sir" by reflex.

Wright doesn't have the bearing of a military man. Sauntering into the room with an air of geeky confidence inspired by years of being on top of his field, he's casually at ease in tight indigo \$120 PPD jeans and sleek black button-down shirt.

Maybe that's because he's in his element here as he gazes from behind thin spectacles at a wall of widescreen monitors filled with schematics and video of a war zone, brought nearly to life in simulation.

"This is my Disney World," he said later on, halfway between quick puffs on a Marlboro Light.

Wright, 50, has lived his entire adult life in simulated reality. The realization of an interactive artificial world had only been joked about on TV shows such as *Maxx Headroom* in the technophilic 1980s, just before Wright, fresh out of college, showed what simulated reality could really do.

Name any video game with the prefix Sim in front of it, and chances are, Wright created it. It started in 1989. *SimCity* hit the gaming world like a bulldozer clearing the landscape. Stuck playing within strict parameters of simplistic gaming ushered in years prior by PONG 20, gamers suddenly could build their own world, and own it all.

Simulated reality became Wright's obsession. Over the course of the next few years, he released Sim titles that spanned genres. *SimEarth*, *SimAnt* and *SimCity 2000* soon followed. In 1996, he released *SimCopter* — a helicopter pilot program — and the military started to take notice.

"I've got 15 hours flight time in rotary wing," Wright says, mentioning almost off-handedly his pilot experience in helicopters and airplanes in a series of short half sentences. "But private flying got too expensive."

He doesn't talk much. Most of his words out of his mouth end in questions. Then he puts his hands on the controls and goes to work.

Back inside the L3 Communications briefing room on Monday, Major Jon Stevens is filling the air with warzone jargon interspersed with cutting-edge tech, filling Wright in on what the technology of simulated war can do these days, with a hint of what's to come. Wright sits with his wife in the front of three rows of seats. A handful of press and PR agents sit behind him.

All eyes are on Wright as he takes in the mission's PowerPoint slides in quick succession as Stevens rushes him toward the real fun. In a few minutes, he's going to be piloting a Longbow reconnaissance helicopter — the more heavily outfitted brother of the Apache.

Executives cutting off quickly, and the cavalcade of press and executives surrounding Wright is already heading out another well-guarded door after swiping yet another key card.

This isn't an ordinary tour. Security in this string of unassuming khaki office buildings along UCF's Research Parkway is so tight that you need an ID chip to get outside again, lest an unheard of piece of high technology leave the building with you.

Fifty feet across a parking lot beyond the back door of L3 Com, two thick white steel trailers larger than shipping containers loom ahead bearing heavily secured doors. One of them swings open, and Wright steps inside as a rush of cold air blasts his casually kept brown hair the other direction.



"Welcome to the cockpit," Stevens said. Then Wright begins the unreasonably gymnastic descent into a snug black seat bolted to the floor as he carefully avoids breaking the control stick between his legs.

For a few seconds L3 engineer Brett Newlin has the controls as he steers the Longbow helicopter across the Iraqi desert a few miles south of Abu Ghraib prison. Then his hands let go.

"It's all yours," Newlin says.

The roar of AC blower fans deafens the cabin to anything below a yell — almost like the wind noise just outside the rapidly spinning blades of a real Longbow. Wright steers the heavily armed attack helicopter east toward a downtown. Then a blast of wind sends the chopper sideways as he struggles to avoid broad siding a building. He saves it just in time.

"You might want to pull up a little," Newlin says.

A few seconds later, testing the hard deck as low as he can fly, Wright sends the chopper scuttling across the desert floor. Every screen in the cockpit suddenly turns red.

"You crashed," Newlin said.

"He's actually very good at this," Kim Wright says. "He has remote control helicopters."

Another of Wright's side hobbies he's developed while crossing the streams between reality and VR: He loves robotics. That includes anything built to scale to mimic the real thing. Remember the show *BattleBots* from the mid 1990s? He built those with his daughter and won with them. He's also put together his own tiny helicopters to show him the dynamics of flight in person, minus the risk of death.

Back in the cockpit, an engineer asks if Kim wants to drive. She laughs, though without her none of this would be possible.

"She's my manager," Wright said later. "She took care of all of this."

When Wright was scheduled to headline a conference in Orlando, she insisted he be allowed to tour Research Park's hidden corridor of military simulators first-hand.

Walking outside L3's office after successfully landing his VR chopper just outside enemy fire, Wright lights up another Marlboro and takes a few quick drags before tossing it and hopping into a minivan.

"So how'd you do?" Edwards asks him. "The army could use a good pilot."

The tour quickly rolls along to another large office building, this one half a dozen stories high with the words SAIC on the outside. Wright burns another 10 seconds of tobacco before ditching it as the doors swing open, held by executives on both sides.

"My son says hi," Vice President Sunny Taylor says, a nod to the youth draw of one of the biggest rock stars in the gaming world.

After a dozen handshakes, Wright is ushered into a long warehouse-looking room filled with six life-sized armored tank simulators. Hundreds of computer cables stretch along bare I-beam ceilings and drop to the faux tanks below. They can simulate anything on the battlefield, project director Darryl Williams says. The big advantage: If they crash, you don't have to destroy them on site.

"Can they simulate the Kobayashi Maru?" Wright quips, rifling off a Star Trek joke surrounded by a dozen engineers.

At 2:48 p.m., Wright straps into an Abrams simulator and it rises up on six Moog gas struts before the scenery begins blurring by on three 5-foot-wide screens surrounding the cockpit. Within just a few minutes this could simulate a completely different tank, with just the quick change of the dashboard, controls, and software, Williams said.

And they can simulate any war scenario, helping soldiers get first-hand battlefield experience without the worry of dying in a rookie mission.

"We've been able to mitigate the losses," Taylor says. "No kid should go out to Afghanistan without using this simulator. It's a very realistic simulator. When you're in there, you're in a 68-ton tank."

Tank drivers will amass 80 hours on simulators such as these before ever strapping into the real thing, saving the military millions of dollars in potentially lost hardware and spent shells.

They escort Wright to another simulator a few tanks to the left, and Williams makes his first stern order of the day.

"Absolutely no pictures of the inside of that tank cockpit," he says.

Wright's simulator rises up on powerful hydraulic struts again, and in seconds, he's at full speed heading toward an embankment. He hits it straight on, just as the simulator's nose launches upward violently and the screens ahead turn sky blue.

In the minivan again at 3:27 p.m., he's chattier now as he talks vehicle dynamics.

"I'd keep the gas down and hit the brakes to balance the understeer," he says.

"That sounds like how you usually drive," Kim quips back.

He burns another cigarette on the quick walk into the nebulously named U.S. Army Research Development and Engineering Command facility. It's a long name considering he's just here to fire machine guns.

Stepping into another dark trailer in back, he's in a 30-foot-long assault rifle range with a gas-powered M16 in his hands.

"Everything is the same as a real M16 rifle," Instructional systems specialist Chuck Amburn says. "You cock it the same way, it fires the same way, it even kicks back."

Wright levels his sight on an insurgent target projected onto a movie theater-sized screen in front of him, standing in a desert town. He squints his left eye and pulls the trigger in quick bursts. The butt of the M16 slams against his shoulder repeatedly as the insurgent turns red.

"Police can train here, Army, and they come here a lot," Amburn says. "This is as real as it gets."

Stepping outside into the afternoon light and taking his final walk along the backside of a building, he drags off another cigarette.

"It was a wonderful day," he said, forsaking insight for outward joy.

Just before departing, he passes off a handful of bills — former Belarus Rubles with his contact info stamped on one side — a unique business card for a man who thrives on strange reality.

With PR agents in tow, he hops into the driver's seat of a rented red Mustang and roars off toward Disney World for a conference, leaving his real vacation behind.



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