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Visual Purple simulates way to contracts

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San Luis Obispo-based Visual Purple got its first big break a little differently than most businesses — with a call from the FBI.



“I literally thought it was a joke,” said Ed Heinbockel, president and CEO of the firm, which designs and builds computer-based training simulations for businesses and government agencies. “They had actually referenced a couple of our [previous company’s] titles as exemplars of what they wanted in a training simulation to train their agents.”

That was back in 1998, and the firm went on to land a contract to build 100 hours of simulation training for the FBI. Heinbockel had just come from the entertainment gaming industry, where he had founded and sold Tsunami Media, a successful adventure game maker.

“We sort of had to leave our creative license at the door, along with our ability to make the game 20 percent funnier,” said Heinbockel. “This is serious stuff.”

The company has now expanded to 20 employees and built training simulations for the U.S. Army, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Department of Homeland Security and “just about everything for government entities that end on a vowel,” said Marketing Director Megan Rutherford.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, for example, the federal government mandated new terrorism training for first responders and new systems for responding to attacks. Visual Purple designed two simulations, one for teaching the new systems and one for applying them during a simulated event.

On the business side, Visual Purple produced a simulation for DIRECTV call center agents that helped that



Visual Purple designed a training simulation to help first responders complete terrorism response training requirements.

company meet its sales goals.

Visual Purple recently joined up with business consultancy firm BTS to take content from one of BTS’s games and adapt it to a virtual world environment. In the game, you enter a five-star hotel as a wireless communications CEO who has to prepare a board presentation in a hurry.

One thing that’s made Visual Purple a go-to for its clients is its ability to develop simulations quickly, especially important to intelligence agencies and armed forces that want to get the latest knowledge

into training programs. Over the years, Heinbockel said, Visual Purple has reinvested about \$12 million into building the infrastructure that allows it to put together simulations

fast, including several proprietary technologies for logics and visuals.

That infrastructure lets the experts behind the knowledge and skills in the simulations get

more directly involved in making the programs.

“We’ve been very pragmatic about reinvesting in our company,” Heinbockel said. “We don’t have program-

mers building our sims. Instead, we have bright people in their respective fields and technicians building the sims. We build simulations in months instead of years.”

Part of what makes Visual Purple’s training simulations “stick” is the storytelling, Heinbockel said. To make the stories engaging, the company works with a cadre of writers, including Pulitzer prize winner David Freed.

“We’re very big on story. As humans, we are extremely good at contextualizing information that’s presented in a story,” Heinbockel said. “If you just blast a bunch of data at us, there are very few of us capable of assimilating that into meaningful or actionable information.”

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in months instead
of years**

Ed Heinbockel
Visual Purple

IMAGE COURTESY VISUAL PURPLE