

South Side firm seeks to maintain its funky style

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By Corilyn Shropshire, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Corporate is not the word you would use to describe Viz, the refashioned name for former South Side software development firm Maya Viz after its acquisition in April by a unit of defense giant General Dynamics.

There are no high-security name tags, blinding white corporate walls or high-brow furniture and art that often typify a corporate office. At Viz, it's still jeans and khakis, funky-colored walls, writing on windows and open work spaces. Its 60 employees -- including software developers and Ph.D.'s in rhetoric -- look more arty-techy chic than stodgy-stiff corporate suit.

"Nothing has changed, actually," said former Chief Executive Officer Steve Roth, who now serves as Viz's general manager.

The General Dynamics unit, Scottsdale, Ariz.-based C4 Systems, a maker of communications hardware and software for military and corporate clients, bumped into Maya Viz as it was deploying its so-called "Command Post of the Future" software for the Army in Iraq.

The software allows battle units to communicate with one another from disparate locations. On computers equipped with at least three screens, soldiers linked by a wireless network can map out logistics, solve problems and even leave each other electronic Post-it notes while simultaneously talking over the Internet.

General Dynamics was there when the software was first put in use, providing the network infrastructure the Army needed to run its battlefield operations. Its executives noted that the software, known as CPOF, was popular with the military for its user friendliness, largely because its design was intuitive -- that is, soldiers didn't have to think a lot about what to do when using it.

"What interested us a lot is not the application itself, but the approach Maya Viz took" in making it simple to use, said Manny Mora, vice president and general manager for C4, which stands for command, control, computers and communications.

General Dynamics said it plans to incorporate the less complex approach that Maya Viz perfected in all the software it develops and sells to the government. Its C4 unit is a part of General Dynamics' fastest-growing business, information and technology systems, that has seen sales skyrocket to \$7 billion since its formation seven years ago.

The Maya Viz deal -- terms were not disclosed -- reflects General Dynamics' approach to growth: It's happy to team with or gobble up smaller firms that can add to its already impressive offering of intelligence equipment and support to armed forces. Before Maya Viz, the company scooped up two smaller technology companies in 2004.

The team at Maya Viz is quick to admit they needed some help.

A project funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, better known as DARPA, the CPOF software had been in the making since Maya Viz's inception in 1998. It "got the call" in 2003 that the Army wanted to use the program in Iraq -- an enormous challenge for a small firm used to developing military software, not actually deploying it in the sand-swept desert.

"As a small company, you're just not prepared to field something to the entire army," said software developer Jake Kolejechick. "You'd have to hire more people for support than you'd have on your entire development team."

From October 2003 to March 2004, Roth, Kolejechick and the Maya Viz staff worked around the clock to ready the software for soldiers in the field.

"This software was only five months from prototype to production," Roth said. "It became very clear to us on day one, that we couldn't scale up. You can't keep sending Ph.D.'s in rhetoric to Baghdad. It just wears thin after awhile."

Maya Viz needed a partner, and while neither it nor General Dynamics would say who sought out whom, the acquisition was



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Employees at Viz work on software at the firm's South Side office.

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under way six months before the April announcement. Staff was informed an hour before the companies issued a press release.

Roth maintains that Maya Viz, which has subsisted profitably on government contracts, wasn't desperate for money. But it was desperate for the resources that come from being part of a corporate conglomerate.

Before CPOF and its meteoric rise in popularity with the military, "We didn't have an exit strategy," Roth said -- tech-speak meaning it wasn't seeking to be bought. Now that it has been sold, however, "I don't have to worry as much."

Small company obstacles such as finding staff volunteers to spend months at a time sleeping in trailers at an Iraqi base camp while they train soldiers on CPOF, or prepping 100 computers with CPOF for use on the ground during the war, are no longer his headaches.

Money, too, is no longer an issue.

Roth and his staff make melding into a huge company -- General Dynamic had sales of \$19.2 billion last year -- sound like a cakewalk.

But going from an upstart to a piece of a giant conglomerate will likely have its challenges, from being able to maintain its small-company creativity and autonomy to the quintessential computer geek-trait -- ponytails. So far, so good, Roth says. Corporate has yet to come down with a strict dress code.

"We want to leave them with as much Maya Viz culture as possible," said C4's Mora, adding that the company was acquired because General Dynamics liked its style and that it has no plans to move it out of town.

But some changes are inevitable -- including more spacious offices that are being built and will be ready in August at the nearby SouthSide Works.

And like it or not, what once was a funky-looking software firm is now a part of a behemoth supplier to the U.S. Department of Defense -- which means, given security concerns these days, Viz staffers will probably someday soon be sporting General Dynamics employee identification cards.

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