

Market Wars

James Flint Wired UK December 1996

It won't be long before stock market prediction overtakes fishing as Britain's most popular pastime. Now the military are getting in on the act. And if they get their way, the broker of the future will be wearing a VR headset and manipulating price data in full 3D. The Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA), a branch of the MoD that with 14,000 employees and a turnover of £1 billion per annum is the largest research organisation of its kind in Western Europe, has set up the Financial Laboratory Club. The club will bring together representatives from all kinds of financial institution in order to brainstorm new kinds of market trading technology.

DERA claims its military expertise will transfer well into the financial arena. They want to use dynamic VR environments to represent the huge amounts of price data that city traders have to process. But the real carrot they are using to attract partners is privileged access to the Cray T3D supercomputer at Farnborough Supercomputing Centre (FSC). Already interested are Sun Alliance, Silicon Graphics, City University Business School, the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists and the risk management consultancy Z/Yen. 3D information visualisation software already exists: companies like the Canadian firm Visible Decisions make software that will 3D-ify your graphs and pie-charts. But DERA are hoping for something much more radical, according to Corporate Development Director Michael Mainelli. Mainelli talks of representing market data as blobs in a multi-dimensional space. "This is Gibson," Mainelli exclaims. "You get into it, you're totally into it. You're not thinking about anything else." Of course the MoD are interested in the Financial Laboratory Club's results. The military has to process phenomenal amounts of data, and even evaluating fighter pilots for a mission can prove to be a huge headache. According to Mainelli, the City is the place to look for solutions to these kind of quantifiable risk-return problems. Remember - it's war out there.