

Serious games for serious health problems

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Gamers caught a very early glimpse of the future of serious games aimed at the health sector during the PlayMancer project's demos at the latest Vienna Science Fair.

The European PlayMancer project is working hard to improve the technology for serious games engines and tools for 3-D networked gaming.

“We want to build actual games, serious games, around serious health-related problems like bulimia and chronic pain,” PlayMancer’s project manager Elias Kalapanidas tells ICT Results. “Using gaming in this way is really breaking new ground.”

It is very early days for this EU-funded project but it is already demonstrating a flair for the sort of press relations it will need to develop this fledgling market for games geared towards more ‘serious’ goals than

entertainment.

Early technical prototypes developed alongside initial work by PlayMancer partners at the Technical University of Vienna were put through their paces by hundreds of visitors at the latest edition of the annual Vienna Science Fair.

“We attended this very high-profile fair in Austria because we know the success of our final games and development tools will rest to a large extent on how well we can get the message out about them,” notes Kalapanidas of Systema Technologies in Greece.

The project has released a YouTube video of the demos in action. The short film shows a cross-section of the community trying to manipulate virtual objects in a 3-D variation of the old-school Pong game.

“It’s not just about developing the most fun and interactive games, or targeting particular groups,” adds Kalapanidas. “We want to seriously improve the accessibility of games, making them playable by all kinds of people, including the disabled.”

You’ve been punk’d

This is where PlayMancer will need to be very innovative because the concept of developing games that are more universally accessible is still in its infancy.

But you could never accuse the partners in this project of lacking vision. You get this even in the project’s name, which is a nod to William Gibson’s 1984 futuristic classic *Neuromancer*, widely considered the father of cyberpunk literature.

The team behind the project come from a range of backgrounds in academia and industry in Austria, Greece, Italy, Spain and Switzerland. Their goal is to develop the games from the bottom up, with health and therapy embedded into their make-up.

For example, people suffering from chronic pain could be playing games designed to ease their symptoms while their therapist monitors progress online. The therapist could interrupt the game any time to adjust the settings, or if there is an imminent health risk to the player.

“Health is embedded in our methodology and available from the game engine itself not as a service developed afterwards or some mash-up application added to attract the health market,” stresses Kalapanidas.

The market PlayMancer is aiming to enter when it ends late next year is underdeveloped. It falls under the umbrella of serious games, which though they are maturing, especially in business and training applications, are still by no means an easy market to break in to.

“Our games are aimed at specific health problems initially, which could make the market even harder to develop, but all the studies and analyses point to strong potential. So, it’s only a matter of time with the way computers and gaming are evolving,” concludes Kalapanidas.

If all goes to plan and PlayMancer’s games reach their target, you might expect a marketing slogan along the lines “Serious games, serious fun for serious health problems!” Watch this space.

More information: PlayMancer project -- www.playmancer.com/

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