New Virtual Training Approach Evokes Emotions to Boost Memory and Provide Practice in Building Relationships

To be effective, training systems should relate directly to real-world situations and be easy for users to recall and apply later on. In its latest system, "RAs Combat College Drinking," SIMmersion further refines an approach to virtual training conversations that evokes emotions to boost memory and give realistic experience at building strong relationships. *trigger warning: contains references to a fictional sexual assault*

Columbia, MD (PRWEB) February 26, 2014 -- College sophomore Alison Monroe dries her eyes.

"There was one night, at a party… We were having fun. And he seemed nice… at first. But then… I didn't want to, but I couldn't make him stop. I said no. I did say no…"

This emotional conversation could happen in any dorm in America, but it's actually taking place inside a virtual reality system called RAs Combat College Drinking, currently under development by SIMmersion. Alison is not a real student but a character powered by SIMmersion's PeopleSim conversation engine. The Maryland company is paving new ground in training by incorporating emotionally evocative content into its role-play conversations.

"When training only presents information, it can leave users unprepared for the complexities they'll face on the job," explains Dr. Dale Olsen, President of SIMmersion. "By including realistic, relevant emotional content, we give users a safe virtual space to experience some of the messy realities of their work."

Research on the interplay between emotion and memory shows that people are better are remembering details of content long-term if it arouses their emotions in some way. The same mechanism lets people recall emotional life events, like the birth of a child or where they were during disasters like 9/11, in vivid detail years after the fact. Since content that's emotionally evocative is easier to retain, training systems that elicit emotions will be easier for users to recall and apply in their real lives.

In RAs Combat College Drinking, the user is a Resident Assistant (RA) engaging Alison in conversation about alcohol and how it fits into her life at school. She has several personalities that vary from conversation to conversation, and a realistic emotional model that remembers and reacts to every user choice, good and bad. The different versions of Alison provide a realistic array of emotionally charged topics, both related and unrelated to alcohol, that users must navigate.

SIMmersion's approach to emotional content is evident in earlier systems, such as the Prescription Drug Screening and Pain Management Training System for doctors and the Hands-On Interview and Interrogation System (HIITS) for law enforcement.

Every day, doctors must navigate intense patient emotions in order to safely prescribe opioid medications to manage chronic pain. Tom Kramer, SIMmersion's virtual patient in the Prescription Drug System, emulates real patients' pleas:

"Please … I need them. The pain was so bad before I was on them. I can't hurt like that again."

When pain and emotions are real, it's hard to establish a safe course of treatment. Maintaining a compassionate working relationship while identifying the risk factors for abuse requires a delicate balance. SIMmersion's system lets doctors practice navigating these emotionally charged scenarios without the high stakes of real life.

Law enforcement officers experience similar difficulties during investigative interviews, where extreme emotions can mask guilt or innocence. In HIITS, Jennifer Lerner is the prime suspect in the theft of sensitive documents. Determining innocence or guilt is challenging because of the wide range of emotions she brings to the conversation and the unpredictable nature of her varied personalities. Sometimes the interview veers to the personal :

"I tried for ten years to make it work so that Carlotta and Gabriella would have a father, but he cheated all the time and when he hit me, I knew I had to end it… and I still miss him. It just doesn't make any sense. I was so unhappy when he was there, but I don't have anyone to share things with."

For an officer, saying the wrong thing at this moment could ruin rapport for the rest of the interview, while finding an appropriate way to express sympathy could build the trust that can lead to the truth. Practicing how to approach emotional moments without a real case on the line is one of the ways HIITS provides significant value to trainees.

HIITS, which was a finalist in the 2013 Serious Games Showcase and Challenge, incorporates emotional moments like these at natural but unpredictable places throughout the conversation. After completing the training, one officer said, "You forget you're talking to a computer because it's so realistic." This emotional realism makes the training stick with users long after the fact, building real-world proficiency.

Visit www.simmersion.com/portal to learn more about Tom Kramer and other systems that provide advanced virtual training for important conversations. Try a demo system for free. Learn more about HIITS at www.interrogation-training.com.

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