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CSI: Second Life

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Second Life (<http://secondlife.com/>) is a virtual world. But unlike San Andreas, here users buy an online island, and create whatever they want on it - including the rules. At Teesside University, we designed and created forensic scenes in the countryside, jungle and desert, with skeletons buried underground and set the requirements for their discovery and excavation, but if you are trying to dig up the bodies with the wrong tool it's not going to work, meaning the students learn the appropriate investigative procedure in the correct order!

As a participant you need to create an avatar - a digital version of yourself. We then take 15-20 people in-world at a time. Each person takes a role, and for the participating students we have assigned prior wider reading in these roles before we start. The roles that our staff and splendid PhD students take tend to be the more supervisory ones. We can also role-play people causing problems - the media will always turn up, and this year we had someone play a really annoying member of the public who came upon the scene. Nonetheless, the virtual exercise runs the same way as a real scene would. Key to the success of the students' work in the scene is communication and planning – skills that are very much emphasized in virtual worlds where you cannot just talk face-to-face with someone else.

We need a three hour tutorial, to get the students used to working in Second Life - and to get the excitement out of their system! It all sounds easy, but the scenes are very complex and take months to create and prepare. While the exercise is underway, we're communicating constantly behind the scenes to make sure everything is moving forward smoothly, and

identifying any issues or problems. It then takes about three hours for our students to complete this role-playing exercise. It is important that this fact is not forgotten – this is a role-playing exercise and the benefits of which for learning applied skills have been discussed extensively elsewhere.

Overall this provides a novel way to teach, and it allows students to develop and enhance different transferable skills to those used in more regular teaching. It also allows our students to interact with people from all over the world - we can have a pathologist being role-played by an experienced pathologist from another country. The students can even take part while at home... It also leads to some interesting pedagogical questions, and forces you to question the appropriateness of the traditional lecture-lab teaching model when faced with the current digital native generation. There are also new research questions to explore – such as determining the level of engagement with such activities (something we have measured through recording our students' physiological responses to immersion).

Its success in transforming the student learning experience was part of the reason that I was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship from the Higher Education Academy (UK). Without doubt a fantastic accolade, but one based on the success of collaborative work – which is the very ethos of virtual worlds.

Editors

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