

## **CWRU avatars to help patients talk to docs**

By SHANNON MORTLAND

4:30 am, January 4, 2010 | Visit [crainscleveland.com](http://crainscleveland.com)

Once used mainly for gaming, avatars are getting a more grown-up application at Case Western Reserve University.

The university is working with LogicJunction Inc., a Beachwood interactive software developer, to create three programs that will use avatars to teach medical professionals and patients to better communicate with one another. An avatar is a virtual person that can be programmed to interact with real people.

CWRU recently received a two-year, \$1.3 million grant from the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities to develop a program that will help patients practice asking their doctor questions through an avatar posing as a doctor, said John Clochesy, Independence Foundation professor of nursing education at CWRU.

“A lot of people come in and they maybe talk themselves out of asking questions,” he said. “Their confidence in what they came to the clinic for erodes away. If they practice (asking questions) enough, we're hoping they're more likely to do it.”

Dr. Clochesy said many people have a hard time communicating with a doctor who is of a different generation, age or ethnicity. Studies have shown, for example, an older black person prefers a white doctor because they believe a black doctor couldn't be as good, he said. However, he said young people prefer a doctor who is similar to them in age, race and gender.

In the coming weeks, CWRU will form eight focus groups of eight to 10 people each that will include blacks, Latinos, Russian immigrants and people from the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities.

“We want to find out what got in the way of communicating with health care providers in the past,” Dr. Clochesy said.

This spring, between 16 and 32 people will work with actors to test scripts written as doctor-patient conversations during simulated doctor visits. Avatar doctors of different races, ages and genders then

will be created based on the outcomes of the focus groups and simulated conversations, and kiosks featuring the avatars will be installed at local clinics by July 1, 2010.

Patients will be able to use those kiosks to practice interacting with various avatar doctors before their appointment, Dr. Clochesy said.

Two more avatar projects are under design to help CWRU students learn how to better communicate with patients, said Ed Wagner, director of sales at LogicJunction.

Three years ago, CWRU launched a virtual reality theater to help people overcome their speech impediments by practicing ordering at a virtual McDonald's restaurant counter.

The theater is being enhanced to use avatars to help speech pathology students learn how to more effectively communicate with children ages three to 18 from all backgrounds. The project will go live this month.

The CWRU dental school is expected this month to begin developing a similar program to the one to be used by speech pathology students, Mr. Wagner said. CWRU representatives from the dental and speech pathology programs did not return a phone call and an e-mail from *Crain's*.

“A lot of medical schools are looking at this because it really helps their graduate students with communication and proper diagnosis,” Mr. Wagner. “Those are things that can lower your outcomes and lower your chances of misdiagnosis.”