NOT JUST FUN & GAMES

Center Develops Video Games & Cell Phone Applications for Public Health Training

Photo below from left to right:
Mark Goodman, Programmer
David Uryasz, Programmer
Alpesh Kapadia, Senior Programmer
David Woodin, Asst. Project Manager

Not seen in photo:
Colleen Monahan, CADE Director
Jason McGovern, Project Manager

The POD Game starts by describing that a small airplane has released Anthrax over the city. PODS (points of drug dispensing) are being set up to treat all citizens. You are about to be transported into the middle of a drug dispensing center with all the distractions of a frightened and confused public. Stay calm and focused as you get as many people treated through the center as possible. Hundreds or even thousands could have been exposed and mortality could reach 100 percent.

The game's designers chose this scenario because it could really happen and it is the exercise required of all health departments. The good news is they hope that if it ever did happen public health workers could save many additional lives because of the game.

The Center for the Advancement of Distance Education (CADE) at the UIC School of Public Health and staff from the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) created the POD Game as a training exercise for CDPH, aiming to replace traditional tabletop training simulations and provide enhanced training before expensive drills that require the coordination of hundreds of staff and volunteers.

The game's action unfolds in a treatment and vaccination center on the day of an anthrax attack. Players take the roles of screeners and drug dispensers as the city attempts to vaccinate or treat all of its 2.9 million citizens within 48 hours. An evaluation of the game was conducted in August 2007 and CADE expects the game to be rolled out to Chicago Health Department staff and the nation, through the Web site, http://www.thepodgame.com, by late fall 2007.

CADE's director, Dr. Colleen Monahan, believes the game won't just be cheaper than staging a drill, it will also provide better training.

"In a real-life drill, you can play only one role, but the game allows you to practice all the roles," she says. "Because it's on the Internet, it allows people to practice together across city lines - even in different states. And you can make mistakes and start over again."

CADE's staff - a group of about 70, which includes game developers, web designers, videographers, audio technicians, database programmers, researchers, and information technology analysts - specialize in public health and training tools that use an eclectic group of new technologies.

"We're always looking for what the next big thing is," Monahan says.

For example, you may someday get a call on your cell phone from the Chicago Department of Public Health telling you to get out of a neighborhood where a pandemic virus is spreading.

"Mobile PanFlu Prep," released in early 2006, aims to help citizens prepare for a possible pandemic virus like avian flu. Available as a free download to many mobile phones, it includes information on symptoms, advice on how to avoid infection and checklists of supplies to have on hand in case a flu pandemic strikes.

"We started thinking about ways to get information to people in emergencies and the cell phone kept coming up over and over," Monahan says.

CADE sees this as a first step toward turning mobile phones into the first-aid kit of the future, says Kevin Harvey, assistant director of development.

Currently, the cell phone application is a static, one-way communication medium - a kind of generic preparedness handbook that happens to live on your phone instead of a paper document. However, CADE staff members are working with cell phone service providers to make it a two-way, dynamic public health information system. By tapping into the providers' information networks, officials could track the location of Mobile PanFlu Prep users and beam information directly to their phones, directing them to clear a hazardous area.

Although most of the center's projects are commissioned by specific clients, CADE developed Mobile PanFlu Prep as an experiment - a way to attract attention to the technology's possibilities.

"We decided to develop this application and see who showed up," Monahan says. "It was a way of getting a lot of visionary people out of the closet."

As it turned out, Chicago embraced the application and the Chicago Department of Public Health will be rolling out their version in fall 2007. CADE staff members are currently developing neighborhoods and public health scenarios in Second Life, a virtual world. This online virtual environment - complete with buildings, furniture, and communications technology - is a place to develop and test public health interventions.

In 2007-08, CADE will be developing plans for the mass dispensing centers across Chicago using Second Life. CADE is also developing a virtual island, called CeaseFire Island, to use for training volunteers with the violence prevention organization CeaseFire. To read more about this go to: http://www.virtualpublichealth.com.

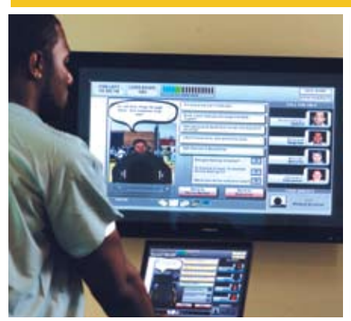
"We're ambitious," says Lars Ullberg, assistant director of development. "We have a lot of ideas. What you're seeing implemented today is what we thought would be revolutionary a year ago." ■

DOWNLOAD MOBILE PANFLU PREP

To get Mobile PanFlu Prep, you need an Internet-enabled cell phone. Go to http://www.mobilepanfluprep.com/ and fill in a registration form with your email address and phone number.

The system will send an SMS text message to your phone with a web address from which to download the application. Set your phone's browser to that URL, and the program will install itself on your phone, where it can be accessed through the "games and applications" menu.

Verizon customers can use the web site above to register, and CADE will get in touch when the service becomes available through the Verizon network.



People trying the POD game