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701 E. Chocolate Avenue, Suite 200, Hershey PA 17033-1240, USA
Tel: 717/533-8845; Fax 717/533-8661; URL-http://www.idea-group.com
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Chapter XIII

Interactive Multimedia and AIDS Prevention: A Case Study

José L. Rodríguez Illera, University of Barcelona, Spain

Abstract

Using multimedia applications to inform or to train is very different than using them for changing attitudes. The documented and discussed project started with the perspective that a large proportion of young people, despite knowing how AIDS might be contracted, still adopt risk behaviors. A multimedia role play application was designed to include both information and game layers. The game introduces complex situations using video stories, and then lets the users construct different narratives by choosing between behavior alternatives. The result of each narrative is related to contracting the disease or not. A discussion about role playing games follows, on the limits of this approach, as well as the kind of interactivity and the forms of delayed feedback given.

Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed description of a multimedia AIDS prevention project undertaken jointly by research teams in Italy and Spain. The project, "AIDS: Interactive Situations," was funded by the European Union and resulted in the setting up of a Web site and the production of a hybrid CD-ROM, of which more than 40,000 copies were distributed, through both public and private channels, in the two participating countries between 1999 and 2000. The chapter is divided in five parts: a description of the project rationale and an outlining of its objectives; a description of the project's contents; a description of the multimedia technology used and the interactive approach incorporated; a discussion of the project; and conclusions reached.

Project Rationale and Objectives

AIDS prevention is a constant concern of the education and health authorities. Prevention campaigns are frequently mounted, and wide use of the mass media is made in conveying the message. However, interactive media have only rarely been used for this purpose.

At the start of the 1990s, the only software available were HyperCard stacks and similar programs containing AIDS fact files and information about the ways in which the disease might be contracted, and a number of simulation programs based on system dynamics models that demonstrated the evolution of the disease at a time when it was thought to be fatal in a period between 10 and 15 years (González, 1995). Multimedia programs were later developed, but their primary purpose was as a source of medical information (AIDS 2000 Foundation). Other programs included a computer game that allowed the study of epidemics throughout history (Fundació LaCaixa, 1995).

In developing this project, "AIDS: Interactive Situations," the aim was to provide a different focus. In fact, by the mid-1990s, most adolescents (here, and throughout the chapter we refer solely to adolescents in the Western world) had a good grounding in the basics of AIDS prevention, thanks in large measure to the prevention campaigns. Yet, despite knowing how the disease might be contracted, a large proportion of adolescents still adopted risk behaviors. This discrepancy between the information received and the attitudes that guide their behavior is a constant feature among adolescents.

The main aim of this project was, therefore, to focus on the subjects' perceptions of risk situations and the consequences of their behaviors. The other objective