

Developing an intelligent avatar to help UK's aging population

February 28 2014, by M.j. Herrema

The University is taking a leading role in a ground-breaking project to support the UK's aging population through the use of responsive and interactive avatars.

Kent's Centre for Child Protection is heading a consortium of partners developing a project, known as Responsive InTeractive Advocate (RITA), which has won a share of £2.4m in funding from the UK's innovation agency, the Technology Strategy Board (TSB).

The RITA project is one of six born of a national Technology Strategy Board initiative aimed at developing new cost-effective ways of helping elderly people to continue to live comfortably and independently in their own homes if they want to.

Kent is working with the University of Portsmouth's School of Creative Technologies and two companies - Affective State and We Are Snook - in the consortium, with each partner responsible for a different element of the project.

Dr Jane Reeves, Co-Director of the Centre for Child Protection, said: 'There is a major debate about how we provide care for vulnerable people across all age-groups and this project is seeking to meet one of our biggest challenges, which is ensuring older adults can remain independent for as long as possible.

'Although this project is at an early stage, with a number of technical,

moral and ethical issues to be addressed, the development of RITA in the form of a humanised avatar could revolutionise how an individual's personal, social emotional and intellectual needs are met in the future.

'RITA would exist as a digital champion, an advocate in the form of an avatar, providing a friendly interface between the individual, family, friends, professions and services.'

The avatar might appear as a figure on a television screen or a tablet computer or could even be a holographic display. It could monitor heart rate and blood pressure, remind people to take medication and would know if they had fallen over or were in pain and alert the doctor or the emergency services. It would be able to analyse their speech, movement and facial expression to detect their mood and respond accordingly. The system would not require computer literacy and would be no more challenging to operate than switching on a television.

Kent's Centre for Child Protection has an international reputation as a centre of excellence and innovation in training, research and practice for the full range of professionals involved in [child protection](#). It sees this project as an opportunity to become involved in developing an innovation for the future that could provide significant benefit across the life course.

Dr Reeves added: 'Of course, these developments have enormous ethical and legal implications but we will explore these fully as the project develops.'

The University of Portsmouth will focus on developing the interactive avatar, while Winchester-based company Affective State will work on sensing and forecasting emotional well-being and Glasgow-based We Are Snook focus on the user experience design.

The funding competition, called the Long Term Care Revolution, is funded through the Small Business Research Initiative scheme, which connects public sector challenges with innovative ideas from industry. The RITA project has been awarded £500K.

Iain Gray, Chief Executive of the Technology Strategy Board said: 'This is an expanding market and we need to radically rethink our approach to long-term care provision, providing options that will enable people to live with more dignity and autonomy.'

'We focus innovation activity on areas where we think it can make the biggest difference. Late life care is often regarded as an economic liability but it can actually be an engine for economic growth.'

Provided by University of Kent

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