

Trinity set to beat teenage angst with techno-therapy

Siobhan Maguire

IRISH researchers are developing a computer game they claim will help teenagers cope with depression.

Personal Investigator is an interactive detective game that, rather than allowing them to shoot enemies, encourages players to hunt for clues to help them identify the way they are feeling. They answer questions about their goals, home life and feelings, which the developers hope will help them resolve personal problems.

The game is being created by researchers at Trinity College Dublin as part of a €1.27m government-funded project by Media Lab Europe.

In Ireland, an estimated 300,000 people are affected by depression at any time. One in 10 adolescents are reported to experience a serious depressive disorder.

John Sharry, consultant researcher at Media Lab Europe and psychotherapist at the Mater hospital, said the game will be available to hospitals in Dublin from next year and will then be made available online. A substantial pilot study is planned in 12-18 months' time.

Sharry said the team behind the project would encourage the



Bryan Meade

Game: Sharry tests the new technology in hospitals

Department of Education to consider the introduction of the game to the school curriculum to increase an awareness of depression and its symptoms.

He said: "There is a need to get teenagers to open up and talk about their problems rather than keep it to themselves. Personal Investigator is a novel

way to help encourage good mental health in adolescents.

"It is predicted that the combination of goal-orientated therapy within goal-orientated games will attract and sustain the interest of adolescents and make learning about mental health enjoyable."

Teenagers log onto the Per-

sonal Investigator Academy where they record their thoughts in an online notebook. Users are encouraged to write any ideas and feelings into the book as they navigate the site. The recorded words "should act as a mirror to your mind", they are told.

Users are encouraged to reveal their thoughts on depression and are offered a number of ways to cope with feelings, including sharing their thoughts with parents and peers and understanding depression as something that can be tackled and resolved.

Andy Nisbet, a Trinity lecturer and principal investigator of the project, said: "The idea of using a 3D environment instead of traditional 2D web-pages is that it is possible to produce content that does not require literacy, because communication is performed using audio and video.

"The idea of using a game concept is that it is possible to marry goal-orientated solution-focused therapy with the goal/reward structure of many computer games."

Other features of Personal Investigator that are under development include the use of biofeedback from sensors to estimate the emotional and mental health state of a user.