FearNot! Providing Children with Strategies to Cope with Bullying

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents FearNot!, an innovative anti-bullying intervention for 8-12 year old children, illustrating the potential of Virtual Learning Environments in providing supportive secure experiential learning for challenging social situations. The innovative technological approach taken to FearNot! is briefly described, along with an overview of the evaluation approach used to assess FearNot! with over 800 children in the UK and Germany. The demo of FearNot! provides participants with the opportunity to experience leading edge technology adopted for a classroom intervention.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
I.2. [Artificial Intelligence]: Learning

General Terms
Design, Experimentation, Human Factors.

Keywords
Virtual Learning Environments, Synthetic Characters, Bullying, Coping Strategies, Role Play

1. INTRODUCTION
Bullying is a serious issue, impacting upon many children and schools. This is a widespread problem worldwide with potentially negative consequences, including depression, truancy and in some cases, suicide. Although there have been a range of interventions to reduce bullying behaviour, the impacts of these interventions remain unclear and providing children with strategies to cope with bullying remains a challenging issue for educators and parents.

Like other complex social situations, children need to be provided with experiences that allow them to develop an awareness, understanding and realization of potential responses to cope with bullying. However, offering children relevant experiential learning to enable them to develop appropriate strategies is difficult to achieve in the classroom environment.

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) populated with synthetic characters can provide children with a safe and private environment where they can engage in experiential learning. Synthetic characters, with their expressive and emotional behaviours, provide an intuitive solution to the requirements of complex, difficult social learning such as that related to coping with bullying.

This paper presents FearNot! (Fun with Empathic Agents to Reach Novel Outcomes in Teaching) [1]. This experiential learning system has been developed to engage children with developing strategies to cope with school bullying. FearNot! has been developed over the past 7 years, initially within the VICTEC (Virtual ICT with Empathic Characters) project and then in eCIRCUS (Education through Characters with emotional-Intelligence and Role-playing Capabilities that Understand Social Interaction) project.

FearNot! provides a contemporary approach based on the use of increasingly available school-based technology. It provides children with experiential learning that promotes the development of strategies to cope with bullying. This demo presents FearNot! Version 2.0 developed for use in the classroom situation and evaluated with over 800 children in the classroom, in both the UK and Germany.

2. THE FEARNOT! DEMONSTRATOR
FearNot! aims to enable children to explore a bullying situation in a non-threatening environment, provided through the virtual school presented by the software. During the interaction, the child is encouraged to take responsibility for the victim, providing advice and support, yet without being placed in to a victimized situation themselves. The sense of responsibility is achieved through empathically engaging the child with the character, aiming to ensuring that the child really would care about what happened to the victim and would aim to support the victim through this bullying situation.

FearNot! depicts bullying incidents in the form of an episodic virtual drama, where the child watches that drama from a 3rd person perspective. The child views the bullying incidents that take place between the cast of synthetic characters in a virtual school and acts as the ‘invisible friend’ of the victimised character, providing help and advice. The advice influences the victim’s behaviour, with emergent narrative creating believable dramas that provide bullying situations that morph and respond to the advice provided by the children.

Two distinct forms of bullying are available to children interacting with FearNot! each of which have been developed as gender specific bullying. For the boys the focus is on direct
(physical / verbal abuse) bullying and in the direct scenario (see figure 1), children are helping the victim, John, to respond to the physically abusive behaviour of Luke (the bully). During the improvisational drama, children experience the impact of Luke’s physical bullying (e.g. hitting John, damaging John’s possessions).

3. FEARNOT! EVALUATION

FearNot! has been extensively evaluated, both in terms of the applicability of this innovative use of technology and as an anti-bullying intervention. In addition to empirical work focused on technological innovation, FearNot! has been extensively evaluated in a classroom based longitudinal experimental study in both the UK and Germany [2].

The pre/post-test control group design used a battery of established and bespoke instruments to gather data. In the experimental group, children participated in a longitudinal study involving multiple exposure to questionnaires. Initial exposure to the assessment instruments was followed by a second session occurring three weeks after the first. During this three week period, children interacted with FearNot! Finally, five weeks later a further evaluation occurred. Through this longitudinal evaluation children’s views and experiences of bullying and their knowledge of coping with bullying strategies was evaluated. The control group completed the same instruments, however, during the three week period they did not interact with FearNot! Instead, bullying was not specifically considered within their school lessons. Once the control period had been completed, children were provided with the opportunity to interact with FearNot!

Results indicate that FearNot! has a positive impact on bullying within the school situation, with children increasing knowledge and awareness of bullying situations.

4. CONCLUSIONS

FearNot! provides children with experiential learning that enables them to experience a bullying situation in a secure and private manner. In classroom evaluation has identified that FearNot! offers a useful intervention approach, with further studies focusing on how to incorporate FearNot! into classroom-based social and emotional learning.

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6. REFERENCES


Further information relating to the technology and evaluation approach used for FearNot! is available from www.ecircus.net