

hands on

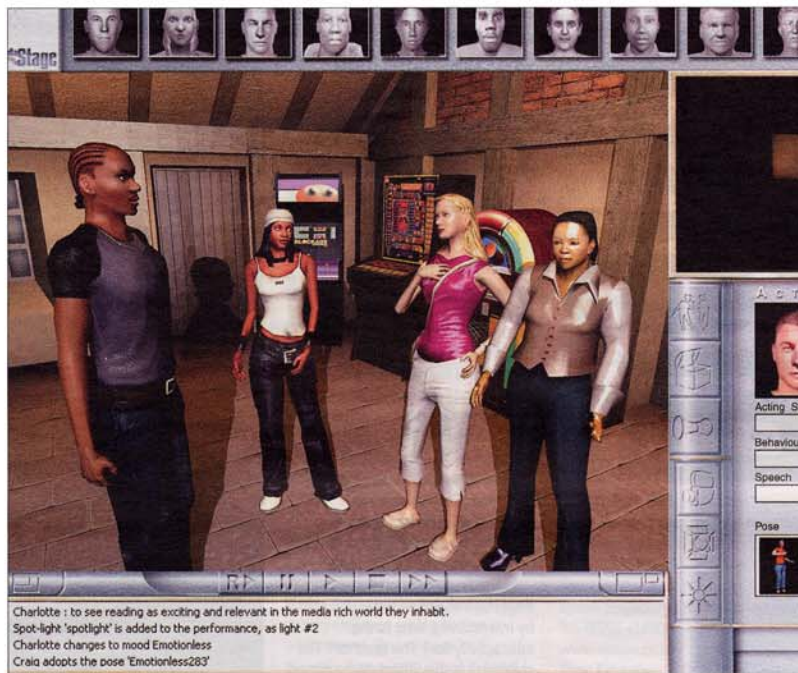
Virtual explorer

It's all in the game as **George Cole** enters the immersive world of 3D graphics presented by MediaStage

Every so often, something comes along that represents a giant leap forward for educational software. *MediaStage*, from Immersive Education, is one such example. *MediaStage* lets students enter a virtual world composed of 3D graphics and sound and then control their environment – both characters and props. Immersive is the company behind the KarZouche range of software, which includes *Krucible*, a science simulation program that has been nominated for a BETT award. Immersive aims to combine the interactive nature of computer games with educational activities to produce compelling software, and on the evidence of the preview software we've seen, it has certainly achieved that.

The technology behind *MediaStage* took more than two years to develop and has been tested in schools by Nesta Futurelab in Bristol. By using a 3D virtual world, students have a greater freedom to explore a wide range of scenarios, many of which are just not possible using role-play in a classroom. It also means that students who are reluctant to perform publicly can demonstrate their creativity on-screen.

MediaStage effectively provides students with a blank canvas to work on. The difference is that this blank canvas includes 3D characters and objects that are under their control. Students can add characters and props to a scene using a graphical menu system and then construct a series of situations or scenarios. The animated characters can be



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moved around at will, interact with other characters and speak when instructed. Two features, lip sync and script recording, make this program stand out from anything else. The lip sync facility means that the characters can even take on the voices of real people. Speech can be added to a character in three ways. First, text from an email or word-processed document can be converted to speech by an integrated text-to-speech synthesiser. Alternatively, pre-recorded Wav (sound) files can be imported into the program. Best of all, students can speak into a microphone and then see (and hear) their words being spoken by a character, with full lip sync automatically processed.

As an event unfolds (such as a character walking over to another character and speaking with them), it is automatically recorded as a script file. The script file is very small (we're talking kilobytes not megabytes) and allows users to play back their scenario at will.

This means each situation can be analysed, either by the student or students who created it or by the whole class. The script file could even be emailed to others who also have *MediaStage* on their computers, who can then also play back the scenario, opening the door to even wider collaboration.

The first title in the *MediaStage* series has been developed in collaboration with Harcourt and is aimed at performing arts students at key stage 4. The title allows a student or small group of students to put on a virtual performance by selecting a cast of characters and props. They can also make adjustments the lighting and also select the camera angle they wish to view a scene or event from. Another feature even makes it possible to add video clips to a scene, which appear inside a billboard on the screen.

But this is just the beginning and Immersive plans to add further titles to the series covering areas such as literature,

drama, music, science and PSHE. This type of interactive software would be ideal for, say, exploring the issue of bullying and one can imagine some highly productive sessions resulting from its use.

MediaStage doesn't aim to replace role-play in the classroom, but what it does is to greatly extend the possibilities for exploring a vast range of situations. It also allows difficult or stressful situations to be explored in a non-threatening way. Students feel comfortable because they are in complete control. Another strength of the software is that it uses a simple interface, and despite being a graphics-intensive program, Immersive has managed to put the program on to a CD-Rom rather than a DVD-Rom. If you get the opportunity to pop by Immersive's stand, be sure to check out this exciting and innovative program, which opens up many new teaching possibilities in the classroom.

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