Web

A serious virus, a serious game

The influenza virus has mutated once again, but this time, instead of jumping the species barrier, it has infected the digital domain. Rather than causing the usual discomfort associated with influenza, symptoms of this virus are more likely to include entertainment and education.

Enter *Killer Flu*, a computer game that lets you play the part of H5N1. You have 180 days to infect as many people as possible on a quest to reach your pandemic potential. This game subtly teaches its player that becoming a widespread, phase six virus is no small task; use the wrong infectious strategy and your virulence quickly falls. Games like *Killer Flu* are part of a growing form of online media that tackle real-world issues. These games are called "serious games"—a term originally coined by the US Department of Defence as a more acceptable way to talk about war games with Congress and the public.

Beyond raising awareness, serious games present important issues in a virtual environment and draw upon the player's problem-solving skills. By placing issues within the setting of a computer game, challenging and sometimes hopeless real-world problems can be structured in a way that makes them manageable and more approachable. Another serious game, *Evoke*, is an online social networking game from the World Bank Institute. The game seeks to attract a community of members who embark on a series of missions to address issues such as famine, water scarcity, and the social and psychological effects of pandemics. Top players—those who contribute the most innovative solutions—can win online mentorships, funding for new ventures, and travel scholarships. Computer games that simulate medical environments are also used to overcome logistical barriers, providing new and engaging ways to train medical students.

Killer Flu
by Bill Carmen. UK Clinical Virology Network, 2010. http://www.clinical-virology.org/killerflu/killerflu.html

Evoke
World Bank Institute, 2010. http://www.urgentevoke.com/

Killer Flu highlights the unique capacity of online games to directly communicate public health messages, particularly to the digital generation, in a way that appeals to the user's competitive nature while compelling them to think about the complexities of disease transmission. There is potential for future versions of these games to include information on symptoms, vectors, and prevention. By educating, serious games might prove to be an effective device for allaying some of the fears and uncertainties that accompany disease outbreaks. However, it is important to be conscious of the fine line that exists between making health education fun and trivialising a potentially serious health risk. That aside, *Killer Flu* is an innovative, informative, and entertaining portrayal of the influenza virus.

Mario Christodoulou
The Lancet

Book

Superbug: the fatal menace of MRSA

Superbug: The fatal menace of MRSA presents a popular history of meticillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), focussing on the emergence of community-associated MRSA. The book is aimed at readers with little or no medical knowledge and the author succeeds in communicating complex scientific and medical concepts to this audience with, for example, a useful appendix about antibiotic resistance for readers seeking more information.

The dust-jacket blurb is the worst part of the book. Phrases such as 'Lurking in our homes, hospitals, schools and farms is a terrifying pathogen that is evolving faster than the medical community can track it…', '…the biggest thing since AIDS', and 'Empowering readers with the knowledge they need for self-defence…' left me preparing for the worst before I started reading. However, the author's note is much more balanced and introduces a readable, well referenced, detailed, and enjoyable book.

The book begins by describing the first cases of community-associated MRSA affecting children in the USA and the growing realisation among the medical community that something had changed in the epidemiology of MRSA. This is followed by a detailed description of the problems

Superbug: The Fatal Menace of MRSA
by Maryn McKenna. Free Press, 2010. Pp 271. £17·63. ISBN 978-1416557272