Local company leading the way in virtual reality technology

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First responders and health care professionals manage difficult situations nearly every day. A new company based in Athens is trying to make training for those jobs easier and more realistic.

Emotus Tech operates out of the GRID (Game Research and Immersive Design) Lab on Ohio University’s campus, and also has offices inside the OU Innovation Center. The GRID Lab has resources that allow Emotus to create virtual reality training scenarios — even some that are interactive. The lab features technology to create 360-degree immersive storytelling using multi-lens camera rigs and specialized software. There are also rooms for audio and media editing.

Emotus was created by two Ohio University students, Josh Crook and Matt Love. Crook is completing a masters in fine arts degree in virtual reality and serves as the 360-video producer for Emotus; he is also the director of the film and video program at Hocking College.

“We’re very tied to Ohio University and the resources here, the faculty and expertise,” Crook said. “Then, we also work with Hocking College, because they have all their vocational programs that become good test beds.”

Crook met Love in a classroom at OU and both wanted to develop new ways to train professionals with high-risk situations.

“High-risk, low-frequency incidents are what are considered incidents where you don’t get to practice them very often, but when you do, you have to get it right,” Love said.

An example, Love said, is a medical professional having to give a tragic update to a patient.

“The idea is that this is (virtual reality) to train for emotional intelligence and empathy,” Crook added.

The team has also created characters to provide training for general care, not just in emergency situations. One scenario involves a character named Destiny, a woman in her 20s who is pregnant and addicted to opioids. With help from OU’s College of Health Sciences and Professions, the character was designed to help medical providers learn to overcome implicit biases.

“There is something about when you put on a headset and you are completely immersed in a new environment,” Love said of the virtual reality experience, “that when you create really well-shot (material), with really great actors, you know, that kind of environment, that people almost forget it’s not real.”

The Emotus website lists medical clients such as OhioHealth and Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital, along with other well-known brands such as Sony, Samuel Adams and PBS.

Eric Williams, a creative advisor for Emotus and the director of OU’s master’s degree program in communication media arts, was invited to speak at Harvard to describe the virtual reality technology being developed in the GRID Lab. Among those present were administrators with Atrium Health, a major
network of hospitals based in North Carolina. After the talk, Williams offered one of them a chance to experience a VR simulation.

“He takes the head set off and has tears streaming down his face,” Crook said. “It’s an awful, heartbreaking simulation, but it’s really powerful and effective. For a lot of professionals — nurses, doctors, policemen — their job is emotionally challenging.”

Crook said he is excited that the Southeast Ohio area can play a role in changing the way professional training is conducted all throughout the country — including at hospitals, government departments and private companies.

“This is something that the industry is asking for,” Crook said.