

Prevent the new flu epidemic ! !

A smash hit on-line game 200,000 people playing each week

No laughing matter **'Serious Game'**

Going down a storm in Holland

From language study to counter terrorism

Baas, the Netherlands General Manager, explains how it works. • From Rotterdam

With the new influenza having already claimed around 3000 lives globally, the Dutch online game where the aim is to keep the epidemic in check is proving a bestseller. Free of charge to anyone with a PC and an Internet connection, the total of weekly users has risen to 200,000 or more. Medical professionals believe that it has the potential to familiarise young people with the mechanism and measures to tackle expanding infection.

[Yoshinori Fukushima from Rotterdam (West Holland) inc. photos]

The game is titled 'The Great Flu'. In Holland's second city, Rotterdam, upon receiving a request from the Erasmus Health Centre, gaming firm 'The Lunge' developed the title this spring. High school students are assumed to make up the bulk of the users. The aim is simply 'to work out the best way of tackling the epidemic' (Michael Baas, General Manager.)

The game took shape in 2009. The user becomes the boss of a fictitious 'global epidemic prevention organization' and while preventing new influenza, has access to a budget of two billion Euro (about 265 billion yen). Measures to tackle the spread of infection are considered, while everything possible is done to limit the numbers of infected and the death toll. There is a choice of five different strains of virus, with varying veracity.

The user, based on the situation, and for each country and region in the world, can implement a range of measures including the 'introduction of an early warning system', or 'mask distribution', in airports and schools, closing down markets, stockpiling anti-viral drugs to prevent the infection spreading, as well as the 'despatch of a team of scientists targeting the development of a vaccine.' However, if suitable measures are not promptly adopted in response to local circumstances, instructions such as orders to close markets are ignored due to the significant adverse effect on the economy, and increasing numbers of people unhappy with the lack of measures will start rioting.

I took a journalist's look behind the scenes at Lunge. 'At first, even if put on notice of the possibility of an epidemic, there is a 'calm before the storm' period, but when the infection starts to proliferate, it soon becomes uncontrollable. Despite measures taken to try and keep a hand on the panic, the budget runs out in just 10 minutes.'

Albert Osterhaus of the Erasmus health centre, Virology Department chairman: 'It is possible to obtain positive results if the budget is saved through the correct use of antiviral drugs. We also hope policy-makers will also show interest in this.' The game is only available in English. Website can be accessed here: <http://www.thegreatflu.com/>.

Games involving elements of study and training stand out from those for amusement alone, hence the title 'Serious Game'. Around 65% of the 100 or so gaming firms in Holland are working on this, and the development is also state-supported. The themes of language learning, employee education, family medicine, from health to fatalities and even encompassing counter-terrorism. The 'VSTEP' game company in Rotterdam produces games to train firemen and marines, in response to orders from naval forces in the Middle East and Europe, for professionals learning vessel control technology. The Netherlands is also focusing closely on Japan, as a gaming centre. Says Professor **Yuran Van Maastricht** of Utrecht Art University, which is cooperating with Kyushu University, 'I would like to familiarise Japan, home to so many children's games, with the concept of the serious game.'