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Operation animation

IU spinoff's multimedia deal for its surgery primer a sign of things to come

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Hear the words "digital animation," and you may think of that lovable green ogre Shrek. Or, if you're a gamer, it may be Master Chief from the oh-so-popular "Halo" video-game series who pops into your head.

You probably don't think of getting prepped for surgery. But maybe you should.

In the booming field of digital computer animation, medical animation is a fast-growing, if somewhat unsung, niche. More and more hospitals are turning to the same type of special effects seen in movies and video games to explain complex surgical procedures to patients.

"We do think that this kind of technology will become commonplace," said Harlon Wilson, president and chief executive of Indianapolis-based Medical Animatics.

Last month, the Indiana University spinoff announced a contract with Indianapolis-based Community Health Network. It's the first contract of what the company hopes are many with hospitals nationwide.

Authorized patients can watch an animated, multimedia primer on bariatric surgery from any Web-connected computer. Imagine the information of WebMD.com with the visual step-by-steps of HowStuffWorks.com.

"The product shows people what they're going to be going through in the surgery," Wilson said. "If we really want to impact health care, which is what we really want to do, then patients have to be empowered."

He compared it to people turning to the Web to diagnose random aches and rashes. The bar is just higher now for hospitals to engage patients because of the realistic digital animation coming out of Hollywood. Medical Animatics was founded to meet that need, but for now, it rivals just a few other companies, including Chicago's Emmi Solutions.

"I feel a lot of things in the market are going to change because they're (patients) going to be bored," Wilson said.

That translates into what, experts say, is a growing niche in an already booming field.

Indeed, digital animation is so big and is evolving so fast that even those who prepare students to enter it as employees can't quite wrap their arms around it. Or quantify it.

"What's happened is, the computers have gotten faster and they are more and more capable of doing animation," said John Fillwalk, director of the Institute for Digital Intermedia Arts and Animation at Ball State University. "It's changing. Something like that several years ago, it wasn't even available."

The entertainment industry has been the most visible recipient of all these technological advancements. Video game sales, for example, hit \$9.5 billion in 2007, up 28 percent from 2006, according to the Entertainment Software Association. Microsoft's "Halo 3" brought in \$170 million on its first day.

"What young people take for granted in their \$200 game platforms was once the realm of multimillion-dollar flight simulators and computer-aided design workstations for engineers,"

said John Fujii, an advanced graphics engineer for Hewlett-Packard and a member of the trade group SIGGRAPH.

The entertainment industry still employs the most digital animators. But companies that specialize in scientific visualization are hiring at a fast clip, too, Fillwalk said.

Medical animation falls under that umbrella. But scientific visualization also can mean building a flight simulator or a 3-D Parthenon to test archeological evidence. The skill set for animators and the goals are the same.

"When you see something, you can a lot of times understand it in a fraction of the time," Fillwalk said.

Medical Animatics is using that as its mantra as it hawks its bariatric surgery product to hospitals across the country. So far, it is in talks with seven Indiana hospitals and four in other states Wilson wouldn't name. He's confident the product will sell, though.

Medical Animatics is moving to bigger offices next month and plans to increase its staff from seven to 20 by the end of 2008.

"We're getting great results," Wilson said.