Looking for affordable crime-scene investigation training, and stymied by a lack of travel funds for your agency? Stop looking for classes taking place within commuting distance of your agency, and turn your search to the World Wide Web.

Available to law enforcement agencies only, Investigator Virtual Reality (IVR) training follows the model of the National Forensic Academy (NFA) developed by its host, the Law Enforcement Innovation Center (LEIC) at the University of Tennessee in Oak Ridge. Using a $750,000 grant from the Office of Justice Programs’ National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and assistance from its development partners, the National Forensic Science Technology Center and Advanced Interactive Systems, LEIC modified its 10-week in-residence training into an online environment targeting entry-level investigators or those in need of a refresher.

“Law enforcement officers, especially the younger ones, are experienced in playing video games, so we wanted to create some training that would appeal to them and educate them at the same time,” said LEIC Executive Director Don Green.

“The online training has become so important because of restrictive budgets. Agencies just can’t send people out to training as much as they did in the past. IVR reaches a much wider audience, potentially hundreds or thousands of people instead of dozens,” says Brian Cochran of the Boone County (Ky.) Sheriff’s Department, who serves as a part-time instructor for LEIC and NFA, and helped inform the development of IVR.

Cochran and others came together both virtually and in person over a two-year period to provide subject-matter expertise to the training’s developers. Another member of that group, Cory Latham of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, says IVR’s capability to provide a field perspective without pulling investigators off the job or running up travel expenses makes it perfect from an administrator’s perspective.

“If you’re looking to boost your skills, you get to test them in action and get immediate feedback,” Latham adds. “It lets you know if you’re catching onto the concepts. If you read a book, maybe you get it and maybe you don’t, but you might not get it and think that you do, which could prove dangerous. With this, you get feedback immediately and know where you stand.”

The training begins with a tutorial on how the system works and ends with feedback. Virtual lessons cover areas such as oblique lighting, evidence marking, evidence recording with a digital camera, evidence sketching and diagramming, and scene evaluation. Students first complete the lessons, then select one of a number of virtual crime scenes to investigate using online versions of tools such as a collection swab, a presumptive test, nonmagnetic and magnetic powders, impression casting, lifting tape, electrostatic dust lifter and gel lifter. Virtual evidence is marked, packaged and sent to the lab. On completion of the investigation, the student releases the scene and receives the evaluation.

“We collected existing NFA curricula, analyzed it and converted it into storyboards to create virtual lessons and crime scenes,” says Emily Miller, LEIC curriculum specialist.

“As the software stands, it’s good,” Cochran says. “What we would like to do is continue to develop it so it can be more widely available. We’d like to add additional content, expand it and move it to the Cloud so it’s accessible to even more law enforcement agencies.”

Even if that expansion does occur, however, IVR will remain accessible to law enforcement personnel only. Susan Robertson, information specialist at the university, says potential students must first register and go through a verification process before they gain IVR access.

“It’s pretty impressive and very professional looking, and it could easily attract crime-scene buffs who just want to play with it for fun,” Robertson says. “We want to keep access limited to professionals who truly want and need the training.”
During its first 12 months of operation, 400 students have completed the self-taught, individually paced, free training. LEIC is currently working to make the online training eligible for 20 hours of POST (Peace Officer Standards and Training) certification. Using funding received in late 2012, LEIC will continue to offer the training free for the first six months of 2013.

For more information or to register for the class, visit the LEIC Investigator Virtual Reality web page at http://leic.tennessee.edu/online/ivr.html. For more information on NIJ’s forensics technology programs, contact Program Manager Charles Heurich at (202) 616-9264 or charles.heurich@usdoj.gov.