Yale developing iPad video game to prevent HIV infection among youth

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Yale researchers are developing a video game for the iPad aimed at preventing HIV infection among ethnic minority adolescents. Their study appears in Games for Health, a new journal focused specifically on the development, use, and applications of game technology for improving health and well-being.

The Yale team interviewed three dozen adolescent boys and girls in New Haven, Connecticut (known as the Elm City), to determine the factors that drive their behaviors, specifically risk behaviors. The researchers are using these first-hand reports to design a video game intervention that will be tailored and relevant to this specific at-risk population.

The age group of 10 to 15 year olds is considered particularly vulnerable to engaging in risk behaviors. In 2009, researchers write, 33 percent of 9th graders reported having had sexual intercourse, with one-third of them reporting not using a condom during their last sexual encounter. In addition, ethnic minority youth are disproportionately affected by HIV infection. In 2009, 73 percent of diagnoses of HIV infection among 13 to 19 year olds were in African Americans.

According to lead author Kimberly Hieftje, associate research scientist and a member of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS at Yale, “It is vitally important that we reach this age group with interventions that reflect where they are — that is, playing games. We hope using video games as a delivery vehicle will increase their level of engagement, with greater opportunities for positive and enduring behavior change.”

The video game, which is called Playforward: Elm City Stories, is being developed, in collaboration with Digitalmill and Schell Games, as an interactive world in which the players, using an avatar (virtual character) they have created, "travel" through life, facing challenges and making decisions that bring different risks and benefits. The player will have the ability to see how their choices affect their lives and subsequently will be able to move back in time to see how different actions might lead to different outcomes. By negotiating challenges in a highly repetitive and meaningful way, the player learns skills that translate to real life, equipping the player to avoid situations that increase their risk for HIV, says Hieftje.

The sub-study is being supported by grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Clinical Scholars Program at Yale. Other authors are Lynn Fiellin, Marjorie Rosenthal, Deepa Camenga, and E. Jennifer Edelman of Yale.

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