

UF asks if seniors are game for study

By [Diane Chun](#)
Staff Writer

Published: Tuesday, March 24, 2009 at 6:01 a.m.

Help wanted: Some 70 senior citizens who are game to try something new.

University of Florida researchers have received a \$100,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to explore whether playing video games at home can enhance the mental abilities of older adults.

Michael Marsiske, an associate professor in the College of Public Health and Health Professions, is one of the investigators in the new study.

Marsiske said participants will get to log about 64 hours playing a popular driving simulation game, such as "Crazy Taxi."

Patricia Belchior, the study's lead investigator, said the team is seeking 72 participants who will have video game systems set up in their homes for a three-month period. No previous experience with video games is needed.

Belchior said an earlier pilot study, in which seniors played the game "Medal of Honor" for about 10 hours, already has demonstrated that gaming can improve visual attention and provide mental benefits for those over 65.

In his years of study of cognitive training for older adults, Marsiske said, "We have often been at a loss as to how to answer seniors' questions about what they can do at home, on their own."

Logging some hours driving a "Crazy Taxi" at home could provide some answers, the UF team believes.

They expect study participants to significantly improve their visual attention. That's the amount of information someone can take in at a moment's glance. It's related to seniors' driving ability, mobility and fall rates, according to Marsiske.

When people play solitaire or do a crossword puzzle online, it helps with mental alertness and provides enjoyment and a chance to



Erica Brough/The Gainesville Sun
Post doctoral associate Patricia Belchior, left, monitors Judy Tipton as she plays "Crazy Taxi" during a University of Florida study at the Health Professions, Nursing & Pharmacy building in Gainesville earlier this month.

practice skills that are already strong, he said. "However, when we talk about sharpening visual attention, which most of us begin losing in young adulthood, it isn't a real-world context in which we can improve it, except perhaps by driving," he said.

Visual attention is a skill people use when finding numbers in a phone book, itemizing things to restock the pantry or reading prescription labels. When that skill begins to decline, it can have a dramatic impact, Marsiske said.

The UF team, which also includes William Mann, a professor and chairman of occupational therapy, is one of 11 teams supported by funding from Health Games Research, an RWJF national program.

Marsiske describes developing visual attention as one of many steps that an older adult can take to maintain and improve mental function.

Belchoir added that the study has another potential side benefit: "It's fun."
