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MSU researchers study motivational impact of virtual workout partners

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EAST LANSING, Mich. — Based on evidence people work harder with a partner than when working alone, a team of Michigan State University researchers are pairing college-age students with a virtual workout partner to study the impact on exercise trends.

Deborah Feltz, chairperson of MSU's Department of Kinesiology, is leading a team that will use the Eye Toy camera and PlayStation 2 to measure what characteristics in a virtual partner motivate people to exercise harder, longer or more frequently.

The research is funded by a \$150,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a national organization focusing on health and health care issues.

"Physical inactivity in the United States is a big problem, and a key hurdle deals with problems of motivation," Feltz said. "If people's motivation can be improved to increase the intensity, duration and frequency of exercise by participating with a partner, they will realize better health outcomes."

Unfortunately, researchers have found live exercise partners are not always the most helpful.

"Individuals can become discouraged if they believe they can never keep up with their partner, or on the other hand, become bored if their partner is always slower," Feltz said. "With a virtual partner, this can be addressed."

To accomplish this, more than 900 participants will take part in a study that matches an experimental group with virtual partners using the Eye Toy camera and a modified PlayStation 2 game. Participants, who can view themselves on a large screen with the Eye Toy technology, will work out while their virtual partners perform the same exercises next to them.

Feltz and her team will analyze and adapt the characteristics of the virtual partner – including body composition, gender and age – to see which are most effective at improving endurance and exercise time.

"We want to find the optimal motivating principles to help people improve physical fitness, and then build into digital games the best workout buddy possible," Feltz said. "Our research could open up a powerful set of new tools in health game design."

Feltz and her colleagues, Norbert Kerr from the Department of Psychology and Joe Eisenmann from the Department of Kinesiology, join eight other research teams – including another from MSU – in the second round of foundation funding to develop digitally delivered games to achieve positive health outcomes.

Wei Peng and Brian Winn of the Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies and Media, and Karin Pfeiffer from the Department of Kinesiology, will use a \$284,000 grant to explore how digitally delivered games such as Wii Fit and Dance Dance Revolution can improve health. For more information about their project, go [here](#).

As part of its Health Games Research, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation shares and supports quality, evidence-based research that explores and documents how digitally-delivered games are improving health and health care. More than \$10 million has been awarded. For more information, visit www.healthgamesresearch.org.

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Deborah Feltz, chairperson of MSU's Department of Kinesiology. Courtesy photo



Brandon Irwin (sitting) of the Department of Kinesiology conducts exercises with test subject Nik Skogsberg in the Health Games Lab at IM Circle. Photo by Derrick Turner

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