



EDUCATION

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'One drink can't hurt'

UCF-developed game to provide a crash course in sobriety to alcoholic veterans

■ MEGAN STOKES
Staff Writer

Many alcoholics think they could have just one drink.

But testing that theory is often a death sentence for sobriety and can lead to losing everything — job, family and home.

Dr. Marcy Verduin has seen this happen all too often. In therapy sessions at the Orlando VA Medical Center, she coaches alcoholics on what to do if they

have a craving for a drink.

They run down the scenario: her client leaves work, passes the bar he used to frequent, stops in — just to say hello to a buddy — and ends up sitting at the bar.

He orders a ginger ale. His buddies tease him. He caves. He reasons, 'One drink can't hurt.'

"It's never just one more," she said.

Verduin knows too many of her clients will have to test their limits and learn the hard way that she was right. But what if

they could do this without even raising a glass to their lips?

The University of Central Florida is developing a relapse-prevention game called Guardian Angel that will hopefully provide a virtual supplement to Alcoholics Anonymous programs by allowing recovering alcoholics the chance to navigate their new, alcohol-free lives.

The program, in 4-D, helps them practice relapse-prevention techniques and

skills to confront the challenges they will face.

"This puts them in a situation that is more realistic, but if they relapse, it is not the end of the world," Verduin said.

Players practice everything — from ridding their home of items that might trigger a relapse, like a bottle of booze or shot glasses, to managing their money in order to reduce stress, often a relapse trigger.

Next year the game will roll into the VA alcoholism recovery program in Charleston, N.C. Doctors and clients are already giving feedback to the handful of UCF Institute for Simulation and Training students who are developing the game.

The last round of feedback said the characters in the game were too young.

Clint Bowers, psychology professor

■ PLEASE SEE NEXT PAGE

■ CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

and IST chief scientist. They even reported the game was too easy at one point.

"What is interesting to us is building a game that is fun for middle-aged folks who might not have a lot of computer experience and are under a lot of stress," Bowers said.

"It is challenging for us to make games for folks who are not gamers. We have to drop a lot of our assumptions about our users."

Although he is an avid gamer himself, his primary passion is developing games for learning.

Bowers spent the bulk of his 20-year career working with pilot programs, which he said do not pose nearly as many unexpected challenges as this program does for its users.

"When you are flying an airplane, there is a limited number of things that can happen. With this, there is a host of challenges they will confront, some of which are completely unexpected like an old college buddy approaching you and asking you to get a beer with him," he said.

"We want to make sure people are not doing these things for the first time in real life, to make them better prepared and better practiced. I am excited by the notion that we can help an already good treatment program be better."

The game is intended for folks who have lost everything — they are jobless and homeless. They will use the game to choose an appropriate job and a home that does not challenge their recovery.

For instance, if a client is considering a truck-driver position, the game will bring to their attention that this job could pull them away from their support network, whereas a job cooking at a McDonald's restaurant might not be as attractive but more conducive to their recovery.

"We hope this will translate into their lives and help them make the right decisions," Verduin said.

A worthy cause

Many people, and even some doctors, cannot wrap their minds around alcoholism.

Verduin cringed in medical school when she would hear a fellow psychologist say, "If you would just stop drinking we could help you."

"It is a real illness and unfortunately sometimes people see it as a moral defect rather than an illness," she said.

"People understand a diseased heart or liver, but because the brain controls our behavior, they do not see that it can get a sickness too."

Verduin said studies show that relapse rates for alcoholism and other drug addictions are similar to those for people with diabetes or high blood pressure.



UCF designed a relapse-prevention video game to teach alcoholics that it's never 'just one more.'

"There is a perception that people do not get well as often with addictions, but that is also a stigma," she said. "Relapse rates with other illnesses show that people follow their treatment plans about as often as addicts do."

Guardian Angel was one of 12 Gaming for Health programs chosen by the The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to receive more than \$200,000 for development and testing over two years. Other recipients included Cornell University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Public Health.

"We were one of 12 chosen out of more than 100 proposals, plus the VA is changing their whole program to work our game into it," Bowers said.

"This is a big deal and we are taking it incredibly seriously."

The game will be tested in 2009 at the Charleston VA, where over 700 veterans were treated within the Substance Abuse Treatment Center last year alone. If it is successful, Verduin said the program could be rolled into the Orlando VAMC treatment plan.

"There is a great need for addiction treatment in the VA," she said. "I really like working with vets. They have done such a service for our country so it is important to help them in any way we can."