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Video game gets patients moving again

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Nintendo's very physical Wii encourages exercise

For many patients recovering from disabling accidents and illnesses, rehabilitation exercises are a dreary business.

But with a wave of the video game Wii's magic wand, exercising can be fun.

Unlike other video games, Nintendo's Wii Sports requires players to get off the couch and mimic the movements of the game they are playing with a wand, which is a motion-sensing remote control.

Now the Wii is being used in the rehabilitation of stroke patients, amputees and accident victims in the US and Canada.

The game is also gaining popularity in retirement villages in North America to keep the residents physically active.

Professor Grigore Burdea, a rehabilitation devices expert and the director of the Human-Machine Interface Laboratory at Rutgers University in the US, told the Sunday Times: "The reason the Wii is so successful from a therapeutic point of view is the movement and also increased motivation among patients [to be active]."

South Africa seems set to follow the Wii trend with the organisation Stroke Aid and a retirement village in Johannesburg about to strike a deal with Nintendo.

Sylvia Shapshak, a Wii fan who lives in the retirement village, Randjes Estate, is the driving force behind the local initiative.

The company is donating a Wii console, controls and a big TV screen to Randjes Estate, possibly before Christmas.

Early next month Nintendo is meeting Stroke Aid about the Wii's potential to contribute to its programmes. Plenty of research is going on internationally into how the Wii affects gross-motor and fine-motor movement.

The Wii's ability to get people moving lies in the fact that it is entertaining.

Shapshak says: "You can't sit and play, and it is an enormous amount of fun. You actually have to get up and participate and stand clear, so you don't hit each other or the tables.

"If you are serving in tennis you have to take all the actions. The last time I played tennis was years ago and I haven't played golf since I was a teenager," says Shapshak, who is 79 and still works as an architect.

"I'm not as good as my husband. I'm not playing tennis like I used to but it is not passive.

"My husband and I thoroughly enjoy it," says Shapshak, whose husband is also 79 and works as a jeweller.

The couple were introduced to the Wii by their son, techno boffin Toby, who brought the game to their home to show them. The Wii Sports games include tennis, golf, bowls, baseball and boxing.

"He thought it was be good for us and we play every night," says Shapshak, who refused to return the Wii to him.

"We let him borrow it one weekend but we wanted it back."

The game has pulling power across the generations.

"It is a wonderful way to entertain our grandchildren, though they have a tendency to beat us," Shapshak says. Johannesburg physiotherapist Farrell Cohen, from the Norwood Sports Medicine and



MAGIC WANDS: Leon and Sylvia Shapshak, both 79, and married for more than 40 years, play with their Wii Picture: RAYMOND PRESTON

“People need change or they get bored during exercise”

Exercise Institute, says a video game that gets the circulation going and heart rate up is a bonus.

"People need change or they get bored during exercise," he says.

The Wii also helps mentally as it distracts patients from their conditions.

Burdea says: "The US Walter Reed Hospital is using Wii on hundreds of amputees because it improves their wellbeing psychologically by taking people's minds away from concentrating on their illness or injury."

But the game's strength — that people have such a good time they forget they are moving — can also be the downfall of those with limitations.

As Burdea points out: "The Wii is not designed for people with medical problems but for healthy young adults. The danger for patients' safety is the danger of over-exertion.

"In their enthusiasm people forget about their health issues. One has to caution that, for all the good it does, it can be too much of good thing.

"It misses some of the elements needed for rehabilitation because it is not designed as a rehabilitation tool.

"However, that doesn't mean many people do not use it at home anyway.

"When it is used in clinics, as is happening around the world, they have therapists nearby who monitor and watch for developing problems.

"Obviously it is safer for patients when it is played at a clinic under supervision."

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