

UC SANTA BARBARA

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## **National Program in Health Games Research To Be Based at UC Santa Barbara**

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has announced the selection of UC Santa Barbara as the home for a new \$8.25-million national research program to examine how interactive games can be used to improve health.

The Health Games Research program will make grants to support outstanding research at institutions and organizations across the country as well as conduct studies, disseminate research findings, and work to bring new knowledge of the subject to a much broader audience.

"Health Games Research was created to advance the innovation, design, and effectiveness of health games and game technologies so that they will help people improve their health-related behaviors and achieve better health," says Debra Lieberman, director of the program. Lieberman is a communication researcher at UC Santa Barbara's Institute for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Research (ISBER), where the program will be housed, and also a lecturer in the university's Department of Communication.

She is an expert in the research and design of interactive media, especially video games, for learning and health behavior change.

ISBER's director, sociology professor Sarah Fenstermaker, says the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's decision to base the new program at UC Santa Barbara is an important development in this emerging field. "Health Games Research will be at the forefront of research support, innovation, and collaboration. Such focused activities will have an impact that reverberates to new practices and policies that can improve the population's health. ISBER is very excited to be involved with this cutting-edge research initiative."

Based in Princeton, N.J., the Robert Wood John Foundation is the country's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to improving the health and health care of all Americans. Focusing on pressing health and health-care issues, the foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and bring about meaningful, comprehensive, and timely change.

This award is made by the Foundation's Pioneer Portfolio, which supports innovative projects that may lead to significant breakthroughs in the future of health and health care.

Melvin Oliver, dean of social sciences at UC Santa Barbara, says of the new program: "This grant builds on the significant work of ISBER, our Communication Department, and Dr. Lieberman, and it confirms that UCSB is an important national resource for improving effective communication about health. The activities of this grant will stimulate original research, convene important scholars, and create effective tools to help create a media-savvy society where positive health outcomes are increasingly important for both personal and national well-being."

According to Lieberman, the goal of the Health Games Research program is to discover theory-driven, evidence-based strategies for designing games and game technologies that will promote and improve players' health behaviors and health outcomes.

The types of games to be studied are games that improve health either by requiring physical activity in order to play the game or by enhancing the player's health-related knowledge, skills, attitudes, self-concepts, and social support that could lead to better prevention and self-care behaviors.

Physical activity games use a wide variety of interfaces and technologies, such as dance pad video games, sports and exercise games that use a motion-sensitive remote controller, and physically demanding games that take place face-to-face and

are supported or enhanced by mobile networked technologies.

Self-care games are also wide in scope, ranging from games that challenge the player to nurture a character that has an illness or chronic condition, to games that engage the player in healthy habits and decision-making.

Self-care games can be delivered on traditional game media such as consoles, handheld game players, arcade machines, computers, and web sites, or on newer platforms such as multiplayer online worlds, mobile technologies, home medical devices, exertion interfaces, robots, interactive television, virtual environments, electronic toys, context-sensitive programs (using sensors, physiological and health monitors, global positioning systems), or other emerging technologies that are becoming more affordable and accessible.

Lieberman says the results of the program's research will be shared widely with health-care and health-promotion professionals as well as game developers and publishers, technology companies, government agencies, and policymakers.

The complete text of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's announcement follows:

**\$8.25 Million Research Program to Investigate Design Strategies and Benefits of Interactive Games to Improve Health and Health Care**

**Efforts Intensify to Strengthen Growing Field; Call for Proposals Announced**

(Princeton, NJ, November 12, 2007) -- The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) today launched Health Games Research, a new national program to support research to enhance the quality and effectiveness of interactive games that are used to improve health. The \$8.25 million grant builds on RWJF's ongoing work to understand the potential for games to improve health and health care, and to forge connections between the games and health fields. Health Games Research will be located at the University of California, Santa Barbara and directed by Debra Lieberman, Ph.D., communication researcher in the university's Institute for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Research.

This grant represents a significant new investment to advance the health-related impact of games by RWJF's Pioneer Portfolio, which supports innovative projects that may lead to breakthrough improvements in the future of health and health care. In 2005, the Pioneer Portfolio made an initial grant to the Games for Health Project,

whose work to connect game industry leaders with scholars and health experts heightened interest in the potential for this field to positively influence health. Research has shown that games can help increase players' physical activity levels, reinforce anti-smoking attitudes or improve young cancer patients' adherence to their treatment plans.

They also provide simulation environments that health care professionals use to hone their skills, and help policy-makers and public health leaders plan for natural disasters and infectious disease outbreaks. Growth in this field has underscored the need for more research to understand how games and game technologies can be designed to benefit people's health and health care.

"Computer and video games are one of today's fastest-growing media forms. While we have seen dramatic expansion within the health games field, we lack solid evidence to help identify when a game – used alone or in combination with other interventions – can improve people's health, and what specific difference it makes," said Chinwe Onyekere, M.P.H. RWJF program officer. "Studies funded through Health Games Research will produce important, action-oriented results that will help this growing field make a meaningful difference in the health and health care of all Americans."

Computer and video games are an increasingly powerful medium, providing engaging ways for people to learn, be entertained, and connect and communicate with each other. The industry brings in more than \$7.4 billion in annual revenue; nearly 70 percent of American heads of households play computer and video games, the average age of players is 33 and more than 40 percent are women. There is enormous opportunity to apply the power of this interactive medium to pressing health and health care challenges.

"Research on learning and behavior change with interactive media—including games—has found that they can be very motivating and effective. So it is no surprise to find in the research that playing a well-designed health game can help improve players' health behaviors and outcomes," said Lieberman. "We need more research to develop evidence-based design principles that can be used in future health games and technologies. Studies funded by Health Games Research will make an important contribution toward this goal."

The first Health Games Research call for proposals, announced today, will award up to \$2 million to support studies that investigate principles of effective health game design. In this initial round of funding, grant recipients will focus on games that engage players in physical activity and/or games that promote and improve players' self-care. The latter category includes games that influence people's health behaviors and outcomes related to lifestyle, prevention, adherence to medical treatment plans and/or chronic disease self-management. Health Games Research will support a second round of funding in 2009, awarding up to an additional \$2 million in grants.

Beyond supporting and disseminating new research, the \$8.25 million RWJF grant also will sustain and expand the efforts of the Games for Health Project to bring together game developers and health experts to collaborate and share best practices, virtually and in person. Led by Director Ben Sawyer, the Games for Health Project will spearhead convening and field-building activities including: its popular annual national conference; regional events; competitions to spur the development of new, high-quality games and special partnerships, and; other online and offline forums to strengthen ties between the worlds of game development and health care.

"This major new commitment by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Pioneer Portfolio will take the field of games for health to new levels. Research showing how games actually contribute to better health can help the medium reach far beyond the entertainment realm to help shape key health and policy decisions," said Sawyer. "Debra Lieberman is a world-class scholar in this area, and we look forward to working with the Health Games Research program to apply the strongest evidence to our collective efforts to strengthen this field."

The Health Games Research Call for Proposals is available at [www.rwjf.org/applications/solicited/cfp.jsp?ID=20001](http://www.rwjf.org/applications/solicited/cfp.jsp?ID=20001)

. Proposals are due January 29, 2008. Potential applicants may contact the program at (888) 635-7433 or visit [www.healthgamesresearch.org](http://www.healthgamesresearch.org) for more information.

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About the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to

improving the health and health care of all Americans, the Foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, meaningful and timely change. The Foundation's Pioneer Portfolio supports innovative ideas and projects that may trigger important breakthroughs in health and health care. Projects in the Pioneer Portfolio are future-oriented and look beyond conventional thinking to explore solutions at the cutting edge of health and health care.

For more than 35 years the Foundation has brought experience, commitment, and a rigorous, balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those it serves. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, the Foundation expects to make a difference in your lifetime. For more information, visit [www.rwjf.org](http://www.rwjf.org).

#### About the University of California, Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is one of only 62 research-intensive institutions elected to membership in the prestigious Association of American Universities. The distinguished 980-member faculty includes five Nobel Prize winners and scores of elected members or fellows of elite national academies and associations. The campus is also home to 12 national centers and institutes, eight of them sponsored by the National Science Foundation. U.S. News and World Report's guide, "America's Best Colleges," ranks UCSB number 13 among all public universities in the nation.

UCSB's Institute for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Research brings together researchers from many academic disciplines in order to span the boundaries between the social and behavioral sciences, the humanities, and the physical and biological sciences.

It is an ideal home for Health Games Research, which welcomes participation from a wide range of fields and professions. Debra Lieberman, Ph.D., director of Health Games Research, is a researcher who specializes in processes of learning with interactive media, especially in the areas of health media, interactive games and children's media.

For more information, visit [www.healthgamesresearch.org](http://www.healthgamesresearch.org).

#### About the Games for Health Project

Games for Health is a project produced by The Serious Games Initiative, a Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars effort that applies cutting-edge games and game technologies to a range of public and private policy, leadership, and management issues.

The Initiative founded Games for Health to develop a community and best practices platform for the numerous games being built for health care applications. To date the project has brought together researchers, medical professionals, and game developers to share information about the impact games and game technologies can have on health care and policy. For more information, visit [www.gamesforhealth.org](http://www.gamesforhealth.org).

Related Links

[Health Games Research Program](#)

[Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#)

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## **About UC Santa Barbara**

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.