

Can video games be good for you?

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A team of researchers led by McGill University psychologist Mark Baldwin has created a video game that it says is not only good for you – it makes you feel good about yourself.

Research conducted by Baldwin and his team – McGill graduate students Jodene Baccus, Stéphane Dandeneau and Maya Sakellaropoulo – indicates that specially designed games can modify people's social intelligence – how they perceive themselves and their interactions with others – and actually help them learn to better cope with stress. Based on those findings, Baldwin founded MindHabits Inc. to develop games aimed at reducing social stress and increasing self-esteem.

One of the company's games, MindHabits Trainer, has earned a top 10 finalist spot out of 69 entries in Telefilm Canada's Great Canadian Video Game Competition, which will provide up to \$50,000 toward bringing what is now an online game to the handheld computer market.

In MindHabits Trainer, the player must click on the one smiling face among many frowning faces on the screen as quickly as possible. Through repetitive playing, the game trains the mind to focus more on the positive, said Baldwin. A demonstration version of the game can be played at www.mindhabs.com.

In a 2004 study of 56 students, a standard reaction-time test showed the game helped people with low self-esteem to become less distracted by social rejection by shifting the way they processed information. Five new studies to be announced later this year indicate that this shift toward

the positive leads to lower stress levels.

"Stress is largely about social perception," Baldwin said. "When you walk into a crowded room, if your attention is drawn toward the one frowning person in the room instead of all the accepting people, this will tend to increase your feeling of insecurity and actually trigger the release of the stress hormone cortisol into the bloodstream."

MindHabits will go on to the second round of competition at the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, CA, in March, when four finalists will be chosen to receive up to \$250,000 in matching funds from Telefilm to create a playable prototype. In September, the finalists will compete for the grand prize of up to \$500,000 to support the commercialization of the winning game.

Source: McGill University

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