

Eat a carrot and get out of that chair, or your iBird dies

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Users of a Stanford app can “adopt” a bird whose health depends on its owner’s habits.

Why would 300 million people waste time playing a smartphone game like “Angry Birds,” where players hurtle kamikaze birds at evil pigs trying to steal eggs?

That’s precisely the question that Abby King, PhD, professor of health research and policy and of medicine, and Eric Hekler, PhD, a former

postdoctoral scholar at the Stanford Prevention Research Center, asked when their healthy-aging team set out to design fun smartphone applications that motivate midlife and older adults to improve their health habits.

By analyzing games like “Angry Birds,” King and her team of behavioral and computer scientists want to identify the psychological motivators that could be used in a smartphone-based app that challenged people to walk more, sit less or eat fewer calories.

“My lab is focused on healthy aging, in all of its forms,” said King. “Our goal is to creatively find ways to make sure that people, in essence, run out of life before they run out of health.”

In this current study, participants are loaned an Android smartphone for two months. Each is preloaded with one of four apps that test different ways to motivate people to exercise more, sit less or eat in healthier ways, using different motivational “frames” drawn from psychology.

One app motivates with visual feedback, using gas-gauge graphics to inform people if they’re meeting their daily healthy habits goals. Another app appeals to users’ cooperative and competitive natures, setting participants up with social groups with similar goals, then tracking their progress in comparison with others. A third app allows participants to “adopt” a virtual pet bird that exhibits the symptoms of either good health or bad, based on the daily habits of its “owner.”

So which behavioral modality works best for promoting healthier habits in this age group? That is the question that the study hopes to answer. Researchers are recruiting participants age 45 or older for the study.

“Our job as applied researchers is to develop the evidence base for these types of applications, so when developers design software tools and

consumers make choices, they will understand which approaches are most effective,” King said.

The Mobile Interventions for Lifestyle Exercise/Eating at Stanford study is funded by the National Heart, Lung & Blood Institute. The project researchers are from the Stanford Prevention Research Center and the School of Engineering.

Provided by Stanford University Medical Center

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