



## Treat Your Phobias With Xbox

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According to a paper published in the October 2003 (Vol 6, N 5) issue of CyberPsychology and Behavior, inexpensive and readily available computer games that run on standard personal computers provide virtual environments that may be helpful in treating individuals with phobias. Phobias affect approximately 11.3% of Americans sometime during their lifetime.

Genevieve Robillard, M.Sc. and colleagues from the Universite du Quebec en Outaouais studied the effectiveness of using modified commercial computer games to elicit the levels of anxiety needed for phobia exposure therapy. The study group included 13 men and women suffering from a specific phobia of spiders, heights, or enclosed spaces, and 13 nonphobic participants.

*"Using video games in healthcare is a growing trend. We have seen video games used for teaching children about asthma, training for driver's education and teaching preventative healthcare skills to children," says journal Editor Mark D. Wiederhold, M.D., Ph.D., Medical Director of The Virtual Reality Medical Center, San Diego, CA. "The quality of graphics today makes this platform very attractive for a potentially large number of additional applications. Several groups are investigating the use of video games as educational tools, and several companies showcased these products at the recent Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles this year. Because video games are inexpensive, can be adapted for multi-player use over the Internet, and also run on both PlayStation 2 and Xbox hardware, markets for this kind of product are significant."*

Virtual environments and simulated experiences are tools used by mental health professionals in exposure therapy to reduce phobic anxiety. The goal of systematically and repeatedly exposing a phobic person to the feared stimulus in a controlled environment is to modify gradually the fearful and anxious response evoked by the stimulus.

Although an effective therapeutic option, commercial virtual reality environments can be quite costly and are not readily adaptable to the needs of individual patients. In contrast, virtual environments created using standard map editing programs for three-dimensional computer games are inexpensive and easy to modify.

