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## Never too old to play video games

BY ROY MITCHELL

To Wii or not to Wii? 'Tis a modern dilemma, indeed. In Wal-Mart's crowded aisles this past winter Kim Hayes, too, pondered the purchase of a Wii, Nintendo's outlandishly popular video game system based on player interactivity. Hayes, a director at a local nursing home (the Cherokee County Health and Rehabilitation Center in Centre) discovered from a sales associate that a physical therapist had recently purchased a Wii system to help rehabilitate injured patients.

Kim had heard media reports of such "Wiihabilitation"-- using Wii games' interactive repetitiveness to help victims of injury and stroke. Based on this Wal-Mart conversation, Kim deliberated a Wii acquisition for the residents of the nursing home -- but it would not be used for rehabilitation.

Kim isn't a physical therapist. She is the Health and Rehabilitation Center's activity director, coordinating nursing home events such as bingo, quilting, cooking, gardening, and arts and crafts. Could a video system popular with active young adults and teens possibly entertain and enhance the lives of inactive octogenarians? Furthermore, who would help the CCHRC purchase the Wii and its games, a system worth a few hundred dollars?

Unlikely benefactors, willing to help finance the nursing home's needs, soon arrived in bandanas, leather jackets, and helmets. This mostly immobile group of seniors would find their Wii funding from a remarkably mobile set: bikers.

Last December the Weiss Lake Southern Cruisers, a biking group consisting of over 80 motorcycle-riding members sponsored an event called "Christmas for the Elderly" at the nursing home. The benevolent bikers had collected over \$1,000 from community businesses and individuals. With the help of elementary students from Cedar Bluff and Gaylesville schools, the Cruisers presented gifts for 140 residents and cash to the facility's coffers, some of which Hayes used to purchase a Wii and several games. The total acquisition included the Wii station itself, two controllers, and over a dozen Wii games. Hayes and the activity staff soon expanded the parameters of Centre senior sports.

By the end of January, the Wii system had brought its unique mix of entertainment and interaction to the seniors. Wii games were initiated as a weekly activity, alongside

more traditional events like gardening and bingo. At first, residents were unsure about the new system with strange-looking controllers with an even stranger name.

“It took a couple of weeks for them to figure it out,” Hayes said.

Before long, though, the Wii's popularity had risen faster than the price of petroleum.

“It's like it's opened a new world for them,” Hayes said. “It really took off better than even I thought.”

Spindly seniors who couldn't normally lift a bowling ball interactively tallied strikes and spares, and frail grandparents sprang into the boxing ring, jabbing at virtual jocks.

“It's the most exciting game we've implemented so far,” said activities assistant Chris Higgins.

“The Wii is wonderful and different and provides different levels of play, and it's easy to use,” said another assistant.

According to Hayes, the most desired Centre-senior Wii games include boxing, bowling, fishing, target practice, and a surreal contest where the aging players race on cow-back while jumping scarecrows. Kim says that it's not uncommon to hear hysterical laughing and carrying-on amongst the Wii-playing seniors.

Hayes beams of the Wii's nursing home benefits, and said the games increase mental stimulation, socialization, and range of motion.

“I had a good time,” said long-time resident Clay Conner after a game of virtual bowling. “I want to do it again.”

Hayes said she's unaware of any other nursing home facility using Wii's. Yet, she doesn't mind sharing her ideas. She plans on submitting the idea of implementing Wii's in nursing homes to the Alabama Nursing Home Association in the "Alabama's Best Practices" contest.

The Wii's positive effects and popularity have convinced Hayes to purchase, through facility-wide fundraisers and community donations, two more Wii's, one of which will be portable. Since one of the newly-bought Wii systems will be housed on a rolling cart, soon bed-ridden seniors may box, cast lures, and ride cow-back from their own bed.

Having possessed Wii access for three months, the staff and residents at the Cherokee County Health and Rehabilitation Center appear quite satisfied with their Wii system and games.

Activities assistant Connie Webb summed up the sentiments of the staff and residents: “There's one word to describe the Wii. Awesome!”