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Video games teach hockey safety

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Can video hockey games influence how hockey players behave on ice? Chad Ciavarro and Brad Paras, recent graduates of Simon Fraser University's school of interactive arts and technology, hope to change on-ice behaviour and perhaps reduce the incidence of concussions with two new video games, Alert Hockey and Symptom Shock.

The pair developed their games while working with kinesiology professor David Goodman on a Canadian Institutes of Health Research-sponsored project to prevent head injuries among young hockey players. Goodman's team reasoned that young hockey players might learn to avoid risky behaviour through a video game better than more traditional means. In the PC-based Alert Hockey, the more aggressive players are, the worse they perform. Ciavarro and his colleagues tested it in schools in the Vancouver area and found a significant drop in aggressive and negligent behaviour, he says. Symptom Shock is based on the popular block-manipulating game, Tetris. According to Paras, now an Electronic Arts designer, "players compete against a computer opponent by strategically aligning groups of icons." The game's quick decision-making and timely execution are "compelling and exciting." Ciavarro would like to make Alert Hockey available to young hockey players, but says the game needs to be refined with more research before it's ready for a wider distribution. "Concussions in hockey are a hot button topic. I think every hockey fan remembers Eric Lindros lying unconscious on the ice."