

New U of M video game teaches consequences of distracted driving

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Being in a life-threatening vehicle crash due to distracted driving teaches a painful lesson, but makers of the new video game *Distraction Dodger* hope there is a much safer way to teach the same lesson.

Distraction Dodger is an Internet-based [video game](#) developed by the Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) Institute at the University of Minnesota. The game, designed to help teens and young adults understand the importance of concentrating on driving, will premiere at the Teen Safe Driving Summit on Thursday, Feb. 2, at the Rosemount Community Center, 13885 S. Robert Trail, Rosemount.

In the video game, players drive a virtual pizza [delivery vehicle](#) in the pizza-loving city of Little Moots. To help build a successful pizza business, players are tempted to use a smart phone, social media, and GPS while driving. If they choose to distract themselves, they must do so while avoiding obstacles, traffic tickets, damage to the vehicle, and personal danger.

"This is a video game, but the choices presented in the game are true to life," said Max Donath, director of the ITS Institute and a professor of mechanical engineering.

According to the National Safety Council, distractions are the leading cause of motor vehicle crashes. The use of a cell phone for texting or calling is a particularly well-documented danger, significantly slowing a driver's [reaction time](#) and increasing the likelihood of a crash. Other

demonstrably dangerous driving distractions include visiting with passengers, eating and drinking, using a navigation system, applying make-up, shaving and adjusting audio systems.

As the Distraction Dodger player progresses through the game's levels, feedback is offered about driving performance and the level of distraction. The feedback can be an eye opener.

"For [young drivers](#) who believe they can do it all and not negatively affect driving, the Distraction Dodger game offers a reality check," said Michael Manser, director of the HumanFIRST Program at the ITS Institute. The HumanFIRST program, which helped develop the game, studies how drivers interact with in-vehicle technologies on a psychological, perceptual and behavioral level and how those technologies may then support or detract from driving.

"Improving road safety isn't just about improving infrastructure, technology and laws," Manser said. "Improving road safety is also about teaching and changing behaviors. For young people, video games offer a particularly teachable moment."

The game, developed by the ITS Institute with the help of Web Courseworks and educational consultant David B. Glick & Associates, has already received attention with an award at the 2011 International Serious Play Conference. It has also gotten the attention of national transportation leaders.

"This is a valuable new tool for fighting distracted driving that delivers its message in a fun and interactive way," said U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. "I hope everyone who plays this game applies its lessons to the real world: Keep your eyes on the road, your hands on the wheel and your focus on [driving](#)."

More information: Distraction Dodger can be played online at www.its.umn.edu/DistractionDodger

Provided by University of Minnesota

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