The Big 10
Stories everyone's talking about

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Healing touch
PlayStation Move game helps cancer-stricken kids build strength

The great thing about videogames is they offer an escape from reality. We can become virtually anyone—sports stars, superheros, secret agents, medieval knights—and, in many cases, even save the world. Sometimes, though, videogames can help save us. Such is the goal of PE Interactive (PE standing for patient empowerment), a non-profit videogame that utilizes the PlayStation Move to help build strength in pediatric cancer patients.

The project began when Gregorcz Bulaj (pictured upper right), an associate professor of medicinal chemistry at the University of Utah, met Tomas, a 10-year-old boy with a very deadly brain cancer. “Just meeting this boy and watching him, how strong his fighting was to overcome that disease was very extraordinary, and that captured my attention,” says Bulaj. During his hospital visits with Tomas, Bulaj became fascinated with a device called an incentive spirometer, a breathing apparatus through which patients exhale to raise a ball as high as they can. The act of raising the ball—the incentive—helps patients visualize their progress, encouraging them to produce better results. Bulaj had an epiphany: why not create a videogame to help people, like Tomas, visualize their battle against life-threatening illnesses? After receiving seed funding from University of Utah’s Department of Pediatrics, PE Interactive was born.

So how does it work? At its core, PE Interactive is a collection of minigames in which players control a superhero named Vance B. Strong, who has been weakened after a run-in with his arch nemesis. “In a sense, it’s sort of what (the patients) are going through,” says director of game design and production Roger

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Life With PlayStation
Want to contribute to scientific medical research? Head up the Life With PlayStation app on PS3 to activate the Folding@Home project, which simulates the folding and misfolding of proteins, a natural process in the body. By better understanding this process, scientists can better understand the cause of diseases like Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, HIV, and cystic fibrosis.

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Under the Boardwalk

In your weakened state you won't be fast enough to save the people from a dreadfully malfunctioning Ferris Wheel!!

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52 Trash Pick Up

Sandy Shores is so serene.
It's beauty is rejuvenating me.

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Defense Wall

My Robo-Crabs have been splashing furiously off-shore and have created a tidal wave of evil!

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Robotart Discount Merchian Series Ver. B9 was determined to ruin Vance's vacation.
Altizer, recruited by Bulaj from the university's Entertainment Arts and Engineering program. "They're not feeling as good as they would've, but we're trying to encourage them that 'You're going to be great again. It just takes a little bit of effort and you're going to be super once again, just like this superheroe's going to be super once again.'"

Altizer says levels are kept brief while incorporating physical activity, as many cancer patients don't have the endurance for long play periods. "We tried to include as much metaphor in the game as we could," he says. The main enemy in the game is a robotic crab—crab being the zodiac for Cancer—named B9, a pun on the word "benign." From a whack-a-mole-type game in which players smash crabs with a hammer (simulating the destruction of cancer cells), to a game where players build a giant wall to defend a seaside village from a tidal wave (symbolizing the strengthening of the immune system to fend off disease), every minigame in PE Interactive visually represents the battle against cancer.

The game's first play tester was Tomas, the young boy who inspired the project. Sadly, Tomas played the game for only a month; he passed away last October. Now the team behind PE Interactive is fundraising to send the game to clinical trials, where, if successful, it will be approved for patient use in hospitals and care facilities throughout the nation. Bulaj says this is only the beginning. The number of applications for games like PE Interactive can eventually be extended to help recovery from many types of ailments, including cystic fibrosis and stroke. "Sony's collaboration with us was one of the keys that really helped us get this off the ground," says Altizer. "This is one of the reasons why I love working at a University, because I'm able to show people that games can truly help people. It's not just about entertainment—games have a real positive effect on people, we can develop games that have a medical effect on people. Being able to be a part of that is almost like a dream come true."

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