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IT'S IN THE GAME
Can video games help kids get in shape?

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Wii WILL rock you

THE WII IS ONE OF THE HOTTEST VIDEO GAME CONSOLES AROUND, BUT FOR MANY, IT'S ALSO A SOURCE OF A GOOD WORKOUT.

BY ANDREW KAMEKA

HERE'S JUMPING, MOVING FROM SIDE TO SIDE and plenty of sweat. This isn't a day at the park—it's Wii mania. The Nintendo Wii console has given millions of video game players a reason to get off the couch. Fans have traded in their controllers for a movement-response system that allows them to become an active part of the game. Considering the rising number of overweight teens in the United States, a fun way to increase activity couldn't have arrived soon enough.

Public schools and game developers across the country hope that videogames can continue to encourage young people to become more active. Evergaming, a combination of exercise and video gaming (reverse the name), may help get kids moving in ways traditional sports don't.

"Your body becomes the controller," says Stephen Sanders, director of the University of South Florida School of Physical Education. "Although more research is needed to know exactly what the benefits may be, evergaming seems to be a fun alternative to exercise for teens."

The benefits may not be clear, but anything that gets kids involved in some kind of physical activity is a welcome change. Studies show that 37 percent of teens are overweight, three times as much as their parents' generation.

USF runs the XRSafe Research Lab to study how evergaming could help fight childhood obesity. And the lab also provides a heart-pounding soundtrack. Kids move and enjoy themselves without realizing that they are working out.

XRSafe Co-Director Lisa Hansen says that visitors seem to enjoy evergaming more than traditional exercise. Two fifth-grade classes visited the lab once a week, and though students
work it out

Dance, Dance Revolution is the unlooked-for king of the dance games. Developed in 1999 by Konami, it has become one of the most popular games in the world thanks to flashy beats and flashing arrows. DDR is played by standing on a dance pad with arrows pointing in four different directions. As upbeat tunes pump out of the game’s speakers, an arrow flashes across the screen and players must step on the dance pad arrow that matches it. But this isn’t a dance to the music; you have to time your steps to the music. Missing arrows results in a loss of concentration and players are often left dripping with sweat after trying to keep up with the rhythm. Still, it’s fun to dance the night away.

I had the option to sit down if they became bored or tired, they all remained active.

“Kids were busy,” in the nongaming activities,” Hassen says of a survey taken by the fifth graders. “The children said traditional jump rope was boring.”

The Wii managed to tap into millions of people’s love of videogames, but it was never intended to become an exercise machine. However, that’s exactly what happened thanks to Wii Sports, a popular game that lets users play virtual baseball, bowling, golf or tennis. Nintendo will take the trend to new heights when it releases Wii Fit and Balance Board, a videogame and hardware combo that could do everything from monitor weight to simulate snowboarding.

The excitement created by exercising has even led to gym classes using popular arcade game “Dance, Dance Revolution” to promote movement. DDR is known to get hearts pumping as the music-driven pace rises and players’ feet scurry to keep up with on-screen directions. It’s common to see twenty players finish the game as excited as they are exhausted.

“I play it all the time because it’s so much fun,” says Yasek, a 15-year-old who frequents intense DDR sessions with his friends at a Miami movie theatre. “That’s the only reason that I use it. I guess you can consider it exercise because I do sweat a lot, but it’s just a cool thing to do.”

Yasek’s friend Jason, 15, agrees.

“I’m skinny, but I don’t really play sports,” Jason says. “[Playing DDR] and Wii Fit are the only times I ever really move enough to sweat.”

Exercising seems like a good option to get children active, but can you really fight fire with fire? How can video games, which are blamed for helping create a generation of kids to obese children, help promote healthier lifestyles?

“Your body does not care how the heart is raised,” argues Sanders. “We are discovering that participating in Dance, Dance Revolution or pedaling a stationary bike while starting at an on-screen obstacle course certainly raises the heart rate to the same level as … jumping rope or running laps.”

Youth football, baseball and soccer are still popular activities, but fiddling with game controllers takes up a huge chunk of the average child’s day. It remains to be seen if future generations will prefer bouncing basketballs or moving a controller to get their daily exercise.

“Do them both,” says Sanders. “Exergaming is not intended to be a replacement for any physical activity. Our advice is to do as many different physical activities as you can as often as you can — at least 60 minutes each day. This will help you lead a healthy lifestyle.”

The Wii Fit takes players off the couch.

It comes with the pressure-sensitive Wii Balance Board which takes users through a wide variety of fun and physical activities, including aerobics, yoga, muscle toning and games.