

# 'Exergaming' may combat kids' sedentary lifestyles

BY NICK LEWIS, CALGARY HERALD    JUNE 19, 2009



A fitness trainer demonstrates how to exercise using Wii Fit. The Nintendo game gauges weight and fitness level before leading players through a workout. It was the No. 2 selling game in 2008 with 8.31 million sold.

**Photograph by:** Emmanuel Dunand, AFP/Getty Images

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CALGARY - We fit? Well, somewhat, but most of us live a fairly sedentary lifestyle. And so with the new trend of exergaming --the genre of fitness video games--kinesiologists in Calgary see an opportunity to get kids twitching more than just their thumbs.

Canada's first Exergaming Research Centre was unveiled Thursday in hopes of having an impact on youth fitness and even dealing with the growing incidence of child obesity in Canada. It is located at Calgary's Foundations for the Future Academy southwest campus, in a collaboration between the University of Calgary and Mount Royal College.

"Our hope is to try to connect exergaming to the acquisition of fundamental movement skills," said lead researcher Dwayne Sheehan, a professor at MRC and a PhD student at the U of C. "Can we develop skills like balance? Laterality? Reaction time? Agility? If we can, then we're one step ahead of being able to help these kids who are at that critical learning age."

Used to be, the only thing video games slimmed down was the cushioning in your couch. Not here.

As a red curtain in the school's gym pulled apart, the clattering of plastic footboards on a wooden gym floor rang in the air as a group of 20 Grade 4 students danced in unison to the game Dance Dance Revolution, jogged and performed yoga poses on Wii Fit, and found their balance on plastic snowboards as they slalomed down virtual slopes.

When they step off away from these gaming machines, these kids are meant to hit heart rates at 75 per cent of their maximum, and the slow beads of sweat forming on their foreheads was a good sign they were getting a workout.

"I really like it, it's a lot of fun," said student Kateri Oakley, who had come off doing yoga poses on Wii

Fit. "It's playing video games during school, it doesn't feel like gym class. But you can still get really sweaty."

Ishaam Agarwala was more into the snowboarding activity on Wii Fit.

"It's funner than all the regular activities," he said. "And it's active, and that's good."

The exergaming module at Foundations for the Future Academy will become an afterschool and lunch club.

"It's not meant to be a replacement for physical activity, it's meant to be a replacement for sedentary video gaming," Sheehan said. "It's important that these young people understand that video gaming is activity and they are the human joysticks."

The video game consoles, accessories and TV screens were all funded by the Community Initiatives Program through the Alberta Lottery Fund, and there are enough of them for an entire class of 20 students to play at once.

Beyond keeping them fit, these virtual activities may give these kids self-confidence and may even prove to help them learn, said Dr. Larry Katz, a professor of sport technology at the U of C.

"We want to know a number of things," he said. "Are kids able to monitor their own performance reliably? Can they then take that information, such as heart rate or calories burned, and use it in math and science to get a better understanding of what they're doing?"

"In traditional teaching, we give kids math problems, and they write it out and we say they're right or wrong. Now we're giving them meaningful personal data, so they can learn math in a meaningful context, with numbers that have value to them."

School principal Cathy McCauley said she didn't have to try very hard to get her students on board.

"They love it, everybody wants to do it," she said. "Kids today are technological wizards, so this is what their lives are about."

"We're just lucky that the schools chose us as their partner for collaborative research."

Parents don't mind.

"They work toward getting a high score without even thinking about the physical effort," said Cindy Higa.

"And that's great."

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