Learning Curve is a special feature that focuses on education and student life.

Game study aims to curb obesity

MICHELLE LINDSTROM
for Metro Calgary

No couches will be found near a local video game study, exergaming, aimed to curb childhood obesity through innovative intervention.

Exergaming uses video games, such as Wii Fit and Dance Dance Revolution, that only function via the interactive movement of the gamer, forcing users to get off their hineys.

Dwayne Sheehan, lead researcher for the five-year exergaming study at Foundations for the Future Charter Academy (FFCA) southwest Calgary location, approached the school mainly because of its grade span — kindergarten to grade 12 — giving him access to many age groups at one location.

He explained the complete study will monitor "various impacts of exergaming technology at a number of different age groups — we just happen to be starting with nine- and 10-year-olds."

Sheenan, also assistant professor and co-ordinator of Mount Royal's department of physical education and recreation studies, was inspired to pursue the idea of exergaming by Dr. Larry Katz, his supervisor of kinesiology PhD studies at the U of C.

CARLOS OSORIO/TORSTAR NEWS SERVICE

Exergaming is an alternative to thumb-only video games, and it encourages users to stand up and get actively moving.

Katz and Sheehan co-founded the exergaming study and completed a pilot run last year at FFCA. The first six-week cycle of real data collection started yesterday with 140 students in grades three and four.

FFCA principal educator Justin Kool said the grades chosen for the study are appropriate because he feels that's when habits related to physical activity begin to form.

"They've got a good understanding that it's not just about playing video games," Kool said.

That is exactly the point Sheehan hopes young people will realize.

"It's my dream that the next generation of gamers are all physically active gamers," he said. "Inherently, kids love to move."

The study blends the world of physical activity with technology instead of forcing one and taking away the other from today's gadget-savvy young people.

"Sedentary video gaming is a contributor to this childhood obesity problem," Sheehan said, clarifying exergames are an alternative to thumb-only games, not a replacement for regular physical activity.

"I can understand how there could be skeptics," said Kool. "But, once people understand the project isn't about video games, but about getting people up and actively moving, they get it."

The five-year commitment with FFCA is only the beginning, said Sheehan. He expects years of further studies as technology and exergames continually evolve.

Go to ucalgary.ca/exergaming and mtroyal.ca for more information about Sheehan, Katz and the exergaming study.

U of C grad develops new sit ski

MICHELLE LINDSTROM
for Metro Calgary

James Chew's 2006 University of Calgary environmental design sit ski project finally has a prototype: Canada, meet the EVO 1.

"It's not a great name," laughed Chew, but it became the mono ski's working title, meaning evolution one.

A U of C graduate, Chew is now also the director of product design and marketing for local business InclineDesign (inclinedesign.ca).

The company hopes to increase interest and accessibility to the sport of sit skiing and EVO 1 is Step One towards doing that.

The idea to improve upon the existing heavy and overpriced sit ski models, ranging from $3,500 to $7,000 each, evolved from Chew's personal interest in skiing, innovation and product development, but also the obvious market gap for adaptive ski products.

With help from others — fellow U of C students, Westlink Innovation Network Ltd., University Technologies International (UTI), Canadian Association for Disabled Skiing (CADS) and local manufacturers — via funding, collaborative thinking and industry expertise, Chew said InclineDesign should have an affordable, entry-level sit ski ready for adaptive ski programs by this fall/winter season.

GETTY IMAGES FILE PHOTO

Existing sit ski models range from $3,500 to $7,000 each.

CADS Calgary offers adaptive training for disabled skiers at Canada Olympic Park (COP) with older mono ski models available for students to borrow during lessons.

Volunteer CADS supervisor Brian Martin estimated eight sit skiers enrolled in COP's specialized program that started last week. He said it's likely only one student will pursue the sport when those lessons end.

"To say to students you need at least $5,000 to continue — that's a pretty tough pill (for them) to swallow," explained Martin.

He hopes EVO 1's cost — Chew approximated $2,000 per model — will allow more people to continue beyond beginner lessons and into higher performance sit skiing.

Martin became InclineDesign's prototype test pilot due to their mutual CADS connection. As a paraplegic with experience riding two older sit ski models, he could also provide more effective input.

He said he was unsure what to expect as he's quite used to his $6,000 custom-fitted model. But, after a few modifications based on Martin's feedback, he said EVO 1 skis well and he'd feel confident taking it from the top of COP and down intermediate runs in the mountains.

Chew said tests are still taking place on InclineDesign's second generation sit ski, but its simple, modular pieces will help provide a much needed affordable option for disabled skiers in the near future.