

Lose weight while playing video games

BY NICHOLAS READ
VANCOUVER SUN

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

That's the philosophy behind a new University of B.C./University of Victoria initiative to link exercise with video games, that latter-day scourge of physed instructors everywhere.

Professors at both universities have developed an arrangement whereby Sony Playstation 2 systems are interfaced with stationary exercise bicycles. A road-race game is then inserted into the computer, and the game begins.

But unlike traditional video games that call for the on-screen character to run himself ragged and the button-

pushing human player to deteriorate into a fleshy, out-of-shape blob, this system rewards the player for moving, too. The faster the rider pedals, the faster his video game character goes, and the better chance he has of winning the game.

The on-screen vehicle's direction is guided by turning the bike's handlebars. About 10 different race games will work in the system, none of them better than any other. Also, none of the games involves guns, killing or any kind of violence.

The rider begins with a five- to 10-minute warm-up before the game begins.

See **VIDEO GAME** A2

Why are pregnant women forgetful? UBC researcher finds out

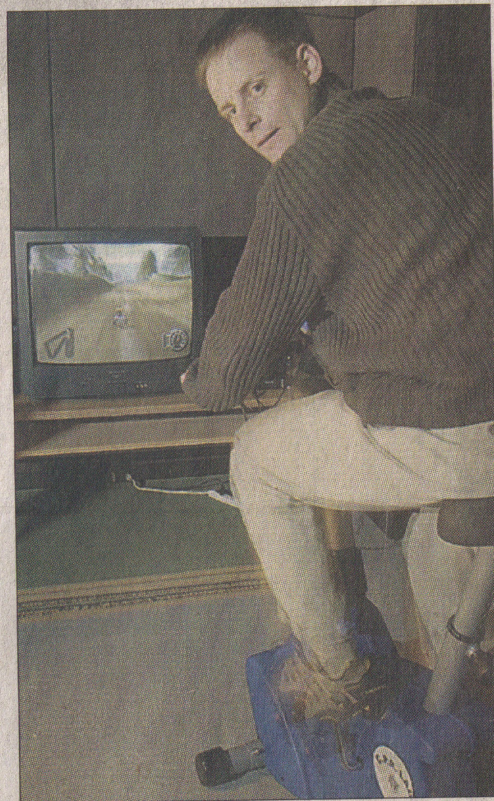
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Pregnant women know it as "maternal amnesia" or "baby brain," a time in their pregnancy when they can't seem to remember a thing. But now a University of B.C. psychology professor says what used to be just folklore may have a real basis in science.

Preliminary research by Liisa Galea suggests that a dramatic thousand-fold increase in a woman's estrogen level during her last three months of pregnancy may lead to a seemingly concomitant increase in forgetfulness.

To prove that, she has been studying women in their third trimester of

See **RESEARCH SUBJECTS** A2



GLENN BAGLO/VANCOUVER SUN

Darren Warburton has developed a system linking a stationary bicycle to a video game.

Video game 'workout' lasts 45-50 minutes

From A1

Once it does, the cycle is programmed not to allow him to exceed 60 to 70 per cent of his maximum heart rate for 30 minutes. That way, he gets his heart pumping effectively but doesn't endanger himself by pedalling too fast.

A 10-minute cool-down period follows, meaning the whole "workout" lasts 45 to 50 minutes.

The idea is the brainchild of Ryan Rhodes, a professor of health and exercise psychology at UVic, and Darren Warburton, an assistant professor of cardiovascular physiology at UBC's school of human kinetics.

They and fellow researcher Shannon Bredin, a post-doctoral student working with Warburton, were becoming increasingly concerned about the effect video games were having on the activity levels of children and college-age adults.

Statistically, playing video games is the most popular leisure activity there is among boys and college-age men, and that's a worrying trend, researchers say, when it comes to heart health, obesity levels and muscle devel-

opment.

At the same time, Rhodes, whose specialty is finding out what motivates some people to exercise and other to bum out, said that rather than fighting the popularity of video games, this may be a way to exploit it.

"A lot of kids who play sports also play video games," he said in a phone interview from Victoria Monday. "But kids who play videogames may not be active.

"But if they're playing video games and burning a lot of calories doing it, we're making an enemy an ally."

His research so far suggests the prime motivating factor in getting a person to start and continue exercising is enjoyment. Is it fun?

The trouble is that for a lot of people, it isn't. But Rhodes posits that if a stimulating and enjoyable video game is attached to a normally mind-numbing exercise bicycle, maybe it will be.

"Will they want to come back and exercise when they play this game?"

That's what he and Warburton intend to find out next spring when they launch a formal study of the system. They plan to recruit 40 lumpish and sedentary

UBC students to try it out for a period of months. Twenty of the students — the control group — will be given stationary bicycles to ride and no video games. The rest will ride bikes linked to the Playstation systems.

If their hypothesis is correct, the 20 students without video games will give up and return to their burgers and beer, while the 20 who ride and play at the same time will be motivated to keep going.

Certainly, that's what Warburton's anecdotal evidence suggests so far.

"Anecdotally, I can't stop my graduate students from being on it," he said. "We've actually told our students not to tell their friends about it because it's becoming so popular."

Even Warburton himself, a runner by nature, has turned to calorie-burning video games for his winter workout. "I now play video games during the wet season instead of going out and running," he admits.

All the equipment was bought outright by the researchers. Sony has no financial stake in their work, they say, and neither Rhodes nor Warburton has any interest in making a million dol-

lars from what they learn.

However, they both agree that if their research does bear out their theory — that exercise and videogames can go together — that video game companies may try to profit from it.

"I would certainly think so," Rhodes said. "I have a hunch that if this is successful, some companies will jump all over it and market it very quickly."

But that doesn't interest him.

"Maybe we're foolish, but we're scientists and we tend to be. We don't think that way [for financial gain]. Our fortune will be made by making a contribution to physical activity."

It's not the first time a link has been made between video games and creating a healthier lifestyle.

Japanese game maker Konami has developed a game for Nintendo's Game Boy system that requires real sunlight for the game's hero to slay vampires. Called *Bokura no Taiyo* (Japanese for Our Sun, and shortened to *Boktai* for the export market), the game doesn't run on its solar sensor, but uses sunlight to boost the hero's powers.

It's intended as a way to get kids outside again rather than spending too much time indoors.