

Spinning with the Enemy

Ah, the sedentary lifestyle: television, videogames, Web surfing, DVDs.

Great fun, but not so great for keeping in shape.

Prof. Ryan Rhodes, an exercise motivation specialist in the School of Physical Education, thinks new technology combining video games and exercise bikes could be a way to keep young people physically fit. Rhodes and UBC colleague Darren Warburton are in the middle of a study to see if a regular spin on an interactive exercise bike can put more fun and commitment into working out. Rhodes spoke to the *Torch* in his office in the McKinnon Building.

Torch: Your study seems to be really about young people and their lifestyle choices.

Ryan Rhodes: Physical activity is just one of many things we can choose to do. Television and video gaming are very popular choices among the college-age group and adolescents. It's a transitional phase where behavioural patterns can be established and people get into the way they're going to be. The other major factor, and this isn't going to be a surprise, is enjoyment—those who are involved in physical activity enjoy it, those that aren't, don't. So we're trying to combine these things.

What makes a good motivational environment for someone trying to maintain a workout routine?

You really have to choose an activity that you find pleasant. Yet a lot of people in our studies are trying to make themselves go to a place (like a gym) that they inherently don't really like that much. Another factor is to find a time in the day that it isn't a burden. Physical activity is often scheduled, if scheduled at all, at the end of the day. But by then sometimes you haven't done what you're supposed to do, other times you're tired.

So tell me more about the test bikes.

They're interactive in the sense that pedaling represents your speed on the screen. They play all the driving games for Sony Playstation 2 (such as *ATV Offroad Fury*, *Smuggler's Run*, *The Simpson's Road Rage*). The point is to go up to a moderate intensity and stay there. It's not like you would go faster and faster and faster because that's not really the purpose of having a workout. People would burn out in a minute (laughs). It's set up to have a five minute warm up, then the game starts and it can be somewhere between a 20 and 30

minute workout, and then a warm down. The bikes are new and relatively inexpensive which is another important factor. I wouldn't want to promote them yet because we want to test them first. But they are at least within someone's price range and a lot of families already have Playstation games.

Okay, so half of the test group is on the fun bike, half is on the old-fashioned one. What sort of things are you looking for?

My colleague is the exercise physiologist so he's interested in the various physical parameters—are there fitness changes associated with these bikes? My interest is in the adherence and enjoyment of these activities. And I'm looking at motivational factors. I'm totally open to the possibility that this is pretty fun for a week then people stop showing up. I'm really interested in that drop-off effect.

In terms of whether they go to another exercise or none at all?

Yeah, it happens all the time (in exercise programs). Our hypothesis is that this is more fun than the ordinary exercise bike and we want to prove that adherence will be better in this group than on ordinary bikes. If we find something, we would like to go into homes and try it with adolescents.

What are your preliminary results?

It's so far very successful. We're finding exactly what we expected to find. Adherence is better. People are having a really good time. The anecdotal comments are that a half hour passes and they don't even know it's gone. The other thing is that the game can be played in tandem, so up to four people can get a workout and play together. It is still very early, but it's something the school systems might include too.



Making fitness fun: Ryan Rhodes aboard one of the Cateye interactive bikes that combine exercise with video games.

Why not just get on a real bike and get some fresh air?

Ultimately we would love that. But we're losing a battle and we're looking for alternatives. We call it making an enemy an ally. Maybe we can take some of these things we're losing to and use them for physical activity. We have to look at other strategies.

The interactive bike study is supported by the BC Knowledge Development Fund and the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research.