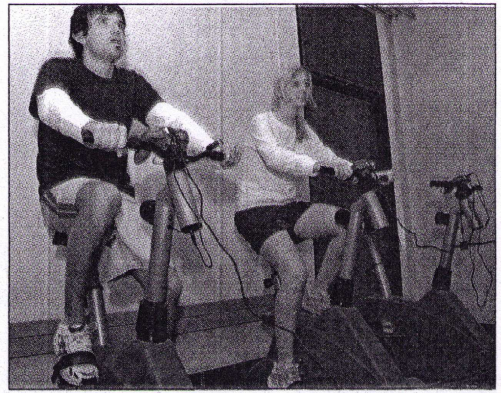


Video game addictions

New test to motivate the sedentary



SHARON TIFFIN/NEWS GROUP

UVic grad students James Coble and Aviva Kliman race four-wheelers with exercise bikes.

Sheila Potter
Saanich News

Wanted: men interested in video games who have not regularly exercised in the last six months.

This isn't a requirement classified personal ad. It is the for test subjects of a UVic experiment that exercise psychologist Dr. Ryan Rhodes posted on walls and billboards throughout the University of Victoria.

Eighteen men signed up to test Rhodes' theory: can video games motivate coach potatoes to exercise?

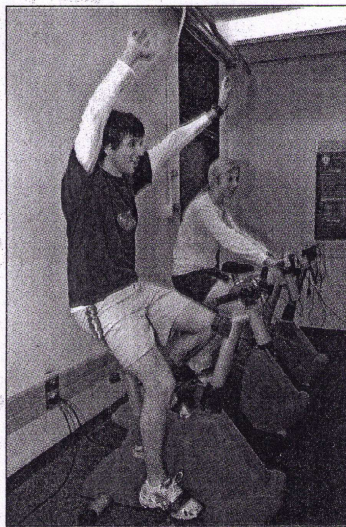
Rhodes is putting sedentary young men on exercise bicycles connected to video games so that they must pedal to operate the game.

When they pedal, the car/four-wheeler/motorcycle moves. They use the bike's handle bars to steer. Accomplished video players can pedal more quickly without crashing.

Rhodes hopes to find out if sedentary men are more likely to exercise with the video connection than a control group of similarly sedentary men on regular exercise bicycles.

The video bikes aren't new. There are several commercially available exercise bicycles that have attachments to hook into existing PlayStation games.

The theory is that the games' same addictive quality that turns youths into slavish zombies by the glow of the flickering TVs,



can be used to trick them into hours of exercise.

Does it work?

The study is only a few weeks old, and it is too soon to know yet. Rhodes is keeping an open mind.

"I'm not trying to promote this. My interest is assessing whether it works," he said. "There is enough gimmicks out there. It is

important to test them."

It could be that the video bikes are a novelty that wear off after the first five minutes of sweat, he said.

Rhodes interest is broader than just the obvious benefits of getting video-hooked young men to be more active.

Rhodes is a part of a branch of science called behavioural medicine, the study of how health is connected to behaviour — or in the video-bike study, how behaviour can be changed to promote health.

Rhodes has a background in psychology and kinesiology and is involved in several other projects.

For instance, next door to his lab in the basement of MacLaurin building, Dr. Pual Zehr is testing arm-cycling machines to see if they can help stroke victims walk.

Zehr is excited by the latest theories about how the spinal cord coordinates legs and arm movements together.

There is a chance that by exercising arms, stroke victims can regain movement in their legs and vice versa.

This type of research is great, said Rhodes, but all the exercise machines in the world won't help if people won't adhere to the exercise program.

He has noticed that several rehabilitation machines are not "consumer friendly."

As consumer friendly as video games are, they don't work for all people.

Rhodes and his grad students James Coble and Aviva Kliman do not understand

the appeal of video games and all three use the same word to describe their own play — terrible.

Coble and Kliman climbed on the bikes during a public demonstration last week. They chose to connect their bikes to an all-terrain vehicle race set in a virtual campground.

Kliman's competitive spirit was somewhat quashed by the number of times her four wheeler bounded off the dirt track and crashed into tents, trees and trucks: her video alter ego curled up in the fetal position.

The frequent crashes also kept her from working up a sweat.

But Coble and Kliman are not the target market.

Many of the test subjects are getting a workout, said coble, partly because inactive people don't have to pedal hard to raise their heartbeat.

Rhodes and his students measure their subjects' heart rates with heart rate monitors.

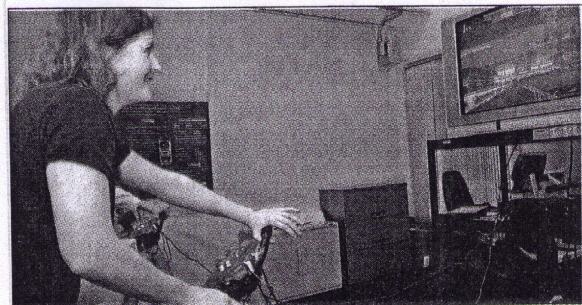
A colleague at the University of British Columbia is measuring the extent and quality of the workout.

With no concrete results so far, Rhodes can only rely on his first impressions of the study, which can be misleading, he said.

But there is one thing he has noticed. "(Subjects) are saying things like 'time is going fast,'" he said.

"I've always noticed — and there are lots of study on it — that when you play video games, the concept of time does drift."

Reporter now understands videogame appeal



SHARON TIFFIN/NEWS GROUP

Saanich reporter Sheila Potter hooked on videogame.

Like Dr. Ryan Rhodes and his grad students, I suck at video games and never really understood their appeal.

But things have come a long way from since I was a kid in the era of Pong and Asteroids.

I tried Rhodes' video bike setup and to my embarrassment, I was instantly hooked.

I was on deadline, but I was also beating Rhodes grad student and only had one more lap to go.

I liked the fact you could stop pedalling to slow down and the fact I could steer by leaning.

I liked the way my car was so real looking and crashed so spectacularly.

Games are so realistic these days, the U.S. military is using them for training soldiers.

Not only are today's video games infinitely more so-

phisticated (and to the chagrin of many, more violent) they are also more active.

Stop by Johnny Zs, a video arcade downtown, and you'll notice a dance video game.

The screen tells you where to step, and dancers step onto coloured squares to match the screen, all to obnoxiously loud tinny electronic music and flashing lights.

Tuesday at noon, Doug Junus was tearing up the dance floor, with foot work so fancy that at one point he held onto the back rail to let his feet fly. He's been playing for five years.

Suddenly it makes more sense that popular video game releases are grossing more than Hollywood blockbusters.