

Exergaming blends video games with workouts

The interactive exercise equipment appeals to kids. Will arcades be the gyms of the future?

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Electronic beep-boops echo inside XRtainment Zone, a gym noticeably absent of the usual treadmills, stair climbers and weight stacks.

In their place are "exergames" and "exertainment" machines — interactive exercise equipment, often with a video component — that beckon to the admittedly young (as in elementary school) clientele trickling in on a recent afternoon. Stationary bikes with ride simulation videos, monitors that track vertical jumps, and a rock wall compete for attention against a trio of screens that prompts exercisers to run in place, dodge obstacles, hop across hurdles or simulate a boxing match.

Along one wall are video games with cameras that show the users onscreen hitting imaginary baseballs or playing air guitar. Along another, core training comes in the form of video games in which users stand up and move controls, engaging torso muscles. Kids hop from one machine to another, spending five minutes here, five there. Most focus intently on a game when they're in the throes of it, then dash off to find something else, or hook up with friends to play. "Dang, that's hard!" says a girl

maneuvering a video simulation. Some work up a sweat, while others — especially those on bikes — get so caught up in the video they pedal only intermittently.

If some game and video makers are to be believed, in the future this is what we'll all be doing at the gym.

For children and preteens who have grown up with game controls in their hands, exergames are a natural. But as more tech-savvy apparatuses hit the market, the games are beginning to move beyond the mini-exerciser market. Some are finding their way into high-end clubs, YMCAs, rehab facilities and sports training centers.

Here, at the 8,000-square-foot Redlands gym, the games are *the* focus — not just a sideline — meant to bridge those kid and adult exercise worlds.

"If they desire, they can do all this stuff together and get a good workout," co-founder Joel Peterson says of families. A former attorney, he's such a believer in the exercise-as-fun-for-all concept, he left his practice to become chief operating officer of the place.

Like other believers, he's betting that the blend of entertainment and exercise is what the future holds for everyone, not just kids. Considering that avid gamers are in their 30s and 40s, it's not that much of a stretch to think exergames might pique their interest as well.

"As the technology gets more seamless, I'm sure that's the way our world will go," says Greg Welk, associate professor in the health and human performance department at Iowa State University. "There will be less separation between activity and entertainment.

After all, a 2006 study in the journal *Pediatrics* showed that, when playing video games that prompted them to move, kids expended more than twice the energy than they did sitting in front of a TV playing games. If such exercise can benefit kids, who have notoriously short attention spans, some gyms are betting their more rational elders will see the appeal as well.

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More fun than PE

At the XRtainment Zone, Abryana Gittens, 9, is pedaling at a good clip on a recumbent bike. She's been coming to the gym since January, and, to her, it's a lot more fun than PE at school. "You can do different things here, like Trazer," she says, motioning to the Cybex Trazer, a video machine that tracks movements such as vertical jumps.

Not only has she lost weight in her stomach and found that her clothes are fitting better, "it feels like I'm having fun," she says. "I don't feel like I'm exercising."

Neither does 9-year-old Christian Hagi, who also has been a member for four months. "It's about the fun stuff that's happening around here," he says, "like meeting friends and doing a lot of new stuff." He's worked up a sheen of perspiration after maxing out on Dance Dance Revolution, which he works like a pro, seldom missing a step. "I'm losing pounds, gaining muscle and all that," he says, still a little out of breath.

But exergames' potential is frequently proving a difficult sell to adults. Although the gym encourages parents to sign up with their kids, that doesn't always happen. "I think this is such a new concept that they're still viewing it as a kids gym. We try to reeducate them a little bit," Peterson says.

Ernie Medina Jr., co-founder and chief executive, believes the gym appeals to "people who are bored easily with traditional fitness clubs." Being here, he says, is more like being in an arcade than a health club, with a mixture of adults and kids.

Mainstream gyms, however, are reluctant to commit to exergames, even though cardio equipment manufacturers and exercisers have embraced integrated televisions and MP3 players.

Many exergaming machines seem too complex or alien for those who haven't had many close encounters with Xboxes or Wiis. Some of the machines can be costly and take up a lot of room. And not everyone has the confidence to flail around solo in front of a video screen in the middle of a crowded gym.

"If something isn't familiar, there's

definitely a hesitancy," says Matt Messenger, a spokesman for Bally Total Fitness. He believes that some adults perceive them as too kid-friendly and not offering a serious enough workout but adds that maybe they shouldn't.

"The 'fun' aspect of it is not necessarily seen as attractive," he says, "but it should be. It's something that can get more and more people involved and get them to see exercise doesn't have to be a chore."

A handful of Bally clubs have Dance Dance Revolution in kids' areas, but nothing so far for adults, although the chain continues to consider new equipment, including exergames.

Video-integrated bikes are bridging the gap to a degree. ClubSport, a chain of upscale gyms in Northern California, Oregon and Nevada, has offered Espresso Fitness bikes for about two and a half years. Members were a little reticent to try them at first, says Ralph Rajs, vice president of operations/wellness for the Pleasanton, Calif.-based parent company Leisure Sports Inc., but they gradually came around. At peak time, most of the bikes, which look like regular stationary bikes with video screens displaying various simulations, are busy.

Although he calls it a "niche piece" and believes exergaming has a future, most people, he believes, still prefer watching their favorite TV show or plugging into their iPods. "I think that's more mainstream, and for most people, that's the diversion they're going to look for."

Welk isn't so sure that games will be the next distraction. "The problem with

some of these approaches is that they're too much of a fad," he says, "and will lose their appeal after a time. People who report regular involvement with exercise find their own enjoyment in it — they're motivated internally rather than externally, like with some game."

Games may help the unmotivated to get to that point, he adds, but the ultimate goal should be developing an "active identity," not necessarily a passing infatuation with a video.

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Going for all ages

One manufacturer hopes its new machine will be a hit with adults as well as kids. The Motivatrix MX9, which debuted at a fitness trade show in March, has a sleek, sophisticated look and plays fitness routines as well as games; users follow along on a touch-sensitive pad.

Price tag: \$7,900, about the same as a top-of-the-line treadmill.

"The main thing behind turning someone who doesn't exercise into someone who does is finding something they like to do," says Parrish Graumann, fitness director for the Las Vegas-based Motivatrix. He's betting that something might just be in the realm of exertainment. But the company didn't want to limit itself to the middle school crowd, hence the fitness video programs. "We wanted to have our users be in their 20s and 30s — those are the ones who are trying to get fit," he says.

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