

There's a revolution going on in living rooms, nursing homes, even in gyms across the Red River Valley. People are tuning in to tone up. It's called Exer-gaming and it's easier—and way more fun—than you think. And believe it or not, it's all thanks to video technology.

21st Century **FITNESS**

By Patricia Carlson

Last summer, Angie Sauvageau's husband gave her a Nintendo Wii console and a Wii Fit software program. "I had heard about it and asked him for one," she says. Sauvageau, of Fargo, says she puts in about a half hour to 45 minutes three times a week. "I do everything it came with. I love it," she says. "I hula hoop, do the tight rope, jog in place; it has a stepping routine." Sauvageau started working out with her Wii in July. She's now 14 pounds—and counting—lighter.

WHAT'S A Wii?

The Wii is a home video game console produced by the gaming giant, Nintendo. It was released on the mass-market in December 2006 to glowing reviews. As of December 2009, the Wii was crushing its closest competition, Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3, in worldwide sales. Nintendo has said Wii's popularity is due, in part, because it targets a broader audience than the traditional gaming consoles like the Xbox and PlayStation. Perhaps the biggest reason Wii has

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such a huge following is that it offers a coordinating, first-of-its-kind at-home exercise video game called Wii Fit.

Wii Fit launched in North America in May, 2008, shortly after becoming a top-selling video game in Japan, where it was created. It quickly took America's video game aficionados by storm. The software lets users choose from four different categories of fitness routines: Strength Training, Aerobics, Yoga and Balance.

Annie Young, Group Fitness Coordinator at Meritcare's Southpointe facility, says one of the reasons Wii Fit has taken off is its appeal among all age groups. "You can include the whole family," she says. "You can include the youngest member up to Grandma and Grandpa." Young says Wii Fit is the first cross-generational video game she's heard of. Plus, she adds, it's easy to use.

Wii's effectiveness as a weight-loss and fitness tool depends on a lot of factors, such as people's age, current fitness level, weight, and what effort they're willing to put forth while doing the exercises, says Young. She says Wii Fit will certainly be a vigorous challenge for the 26.6 percent of Americans who are obese or for those who don't exercise on a daily basis. "Yes, it's getting them up, and that's fabulous because it's doing more than they did before," she says, adding, "And we, as a society, are healthier for it."

Experts agree that exer-gaming is a great choice for families to work out together. "I've even heard of people hosting Wii parties," says Young. And it's a fun way to get children and teens off the couch and moving. "It's developing activity. If we let them sit in front of the TV, that's a habit we're teaching them," she says. "If they're sitting, they're not being fit. Anything you can do to get them active is good."

One age group who has embraced exer-gaming is the elderly. Retirement homes across the Red River Valley have added Wii to their roster of activities. Laurie Schnabel, Community Life Coordinator for the Cedar Square unit at Bethany Retirement Living in Fargo, says residents enjoy the system.

Three times a month, up to a dozen patients gather to challenge themselves—and each other—in games like boxing and shooting. She says the exercise is good



Photo by Chuck Thorne

Bethany Retirement Living residents Janice Thoreson, right, and Colleen Rienstra play Wii bowling on a recent Friday as part of their fitness regimen.

not only for their bodies, but also for their minds.

"They're thinking, they're laughing, they're using muscles and having a good time all at the same time," says Schnabel.

Wii is too rigorous for some patients (they'll cheer on the ones who are playing), but some of the games, like bowling, bring back memories for others. "I have one lady who was in a bowling league when she was younger. She's not able to do that now but when she can do the Wii she does a great job at it. She tells me she feels like she's bowling again," Schnabel says with a chuckle.

New exercise technologies have stretched beyond what you can do in your home, though. Local gyms now sport virtual reality games for both kids and adults.

A couple of years ago, both branches of the YMCA of Cass and Clay Counties converted some old racquetball courts into their XerZone, a virtual gym filled with computer games that help kids (and adults) break a sweat. Exer-gaming experts say these games are the smart alternative to playing video games the lazy way. Emma Lintelman, a membership staffer at the Y, says XerZone is an ideal way to combine the technology that kids are growing up

with and the heart-pumping activity they need. "Kids these days are so involved with technology and video games," she explains. "The Internet is so huge that I think it's easier for kids to not stay active. This brings those two worlds together."

Some Exer-games available at the Y are Dance Dance Revolution, a game that combines music and dance moves, and requires a high-level of foot-eye coordination and stamina; Cybex Trazer, an interactive virtual world where reaction time, acceleration speed and power are tested; Sports Wall, similar to the whack-a-mole carnival game where you throw balls at a board that lights up in random spots; virtual skateboarding and snowboarding, similar to a Wii Fit exercise.

Lintelman says XerZone is packed during after-school hours and on Saturdays. "It really appeals to kids eight to 15 years old," she says. "We throw birthday parties in there, sometimes even our staff goes in there and I've seen families come in and all compete on Dance Dance Revolution."

Another option popular with adults is virtual cycling (sometimes called "spinning").

There are two different forms, locally,

of virtual cycling and they both offer an intense aerobic workout.

The first involves what looks like a traditional stationary bike but has a television screen attached to it at roughly eye-level. You can then pick unique workouts of varying difficulty on a series of virtual terrains. It's up to you how hard you want to push yourself. Some elite cyclists train this way.

There is even a Virtual Cycling League on the Internet where cyclists compete against each other in distance and sprint races, even criterions.

The other involves a class where you're watching the scenery fly by on a big screen. This simulates more of a group ride where you're all working together to stay with the pack. At various intervals—often matching what you're seeing on screen—your instructor will tell you to increase the bike's resistance or to speed up your pedaling.

This atmosphere is best suited to people who like socializing while exercising and find motivation by watching others exert themselves, too.

While there is little argument that Exer-games like virtual cycling and Dance Dance Revolution provide people with a workout, the jury is still out on Wii Fit's overall health benefits.

In fact, the American Council on Exercise (ACE) ranks Wii Fit as the most ineffective video game when it comes to impacting people's health. ACE studied several games in the past three years and found that Dance Dance Revolution offers the best video game workout.

That comes as no surprise to 83-year-old Jim Bastian of Fargo, who has owned a Wii for more than three years. As a lifelong follower of technology and an avid tennis player, Bastian was immediately curious when he read about Wii. He was one of the first people in the Red River Valley to own a Wii.

"I stood in line for four hours in the snow just before Christmas. I had (ticket number) 27 (at the lottery) and they only had 24 Wii's to sell," Bastian recalls. He finally bought his Wii at the second lottery in town and it became an instant hit in his household.

Bastian says at first, he and his wife Helen, played Wii almost everyday. "We really enjoyed the tennis game," he says, because the wireless remote allowed him to mimic actual tennis swings, from ground strokes to lobs.

But Bastian says he and Helen have concluded the video game system is more for entertainment than it is for exercise. "If you really follow the program, you can work pretty hard," he says. But for someone as fit as he is, Bastian says he doesn't get the quality of workout he does in the gym. "In terms of going to the gym versus Wii Fit, I think we'd go to the gym," he says.

Some fitness experts worry that working out with video games may turn into a crutch. Kelly Kissell, Personal Training Director at Courts Plus Fitness Center, says he's concerned that people will exercise only when there is a game or if there is a screen in front of them. "People, especially kids, need to get back outside getting fresh air and getting back their imagination and creativity," Kissell says.

But Kissell concedes that he doesn't see exer-games going anywhere. "I think technology will play a huge part in the way we exercise in the future because life today is all about technology," he says, adding, "Anything is better than nothing.

family

National Wear Red Day

February 5 marks this year's American Heart Association's "Speak Up to Save Lives" campaign where people all over the country don crimson clothes in support of family, friends and strangers who are affected by CVD.

As part of the campaign that day, NBC Universal and Go Red for Women will show a TV special, "Go Red for Women Presents — Choose to Live," which can also be viewed online at goredforwomen.org.

Whatever we, as a nation, have to do to lower the obesity rates, I am on board. If it takes video games to make people exercise, I am all for it." **f**

Patricia Carlson is the alter ego of Valley News Live reporter Tricia O'Connor. Check out her blog at www.talesofan-almost-mommy.blogspot.com

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