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## Game Time!

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**Whether they're throwing balls or pounding away with noodles, many kids are exercising with interactive games. And they're having fun, too.** Photos courtesy of Sportwall.

Interactive games and fitness are becoming a hit with kids. But how will they with adults in clubs?

The school children, dressed neatly in collared shirts and khaki slacks, line up in rows of four with foam noodles in hand, patiently awaiting their next drill.

When they get their cue, these well-mannered children flip the switch and go into attack mode. The first kid in line runs up to one of the four brightly colored walls and takes aim.

Whack!

Later, after everybody's had their turn, the kids attack the wall with

rubber balls, a la dodgeball. The good news is no children are harmed in this game.

In another room in the school, a group of younger children try to keep step with an image on a TV screen. Other kids pedal as fast as they can on interactive bikes. One kid throws haymakers in an interactive boxing game.

The children are partaking in physical education classes as part of the PE4life Academy at Woodland Elementary School in Kansas City, MO. The way these kids exercise now may be how they exercise in the future. And as this active gaming trend grows, fitness club owners may have to take a long look at incorporating interactive games in their facilities.

"It is our contention, within three to five years, there will be an interactive fitness area or room next to every strength and cardio room in as many facilities in the country as possibly can afford," says one gaming manufacturer, whose company expects its business to more than triple this year.

Bringing video games into the fitness world appears to be a no-brainer. According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), computer and video game software sales in the United States grew to \$7.4 billion in 2006. ESA also says that 69 percent of American heads of households play computer and video games, and the average game player is 33 years old. But for the time being, interactive exercise equipment is being used primarily in kid-only centers or the kids club sections of larger for-profit clubs.

School children have been the focus of the importance and usefulness of interactive gaming with fitness. Naperville (IL) Community Unit School District 203 began using interactive bikes hooked up to a video game about seven years ago.

Phil Lawler, a Naperville middle school physical education teacher and the district's physical education coordinator at the time, wouldn't even buy video games for his own kids. Now Lawler, the PE4life academy director, uses the "enemy" as his ally.

"It is a total body workout, but the kids get into it," Lawler says. "You watch the kids work out on this stuff, and they're laughing and smiling while they do it. You go into a health club, and why do we have TV screens in the health clubs? We're just trying to distract them from their exercise. Well, this really distracts them from their exercise."

Naperville Central High School offers a learning readiness physical education class to its freshmen in the first hour of the day. The class has most of the latest interactive equipment.

The early morning active gaming classes may be helping to improve their brain skills and test scores. The school studied how well 15 freshmen did in a second-hour literacy class after exercising on the interactive equipment compared to 15 freshmen who took literacy class in the eighth hour of the day, long after their interactive physical education class. The first group of freshmen did far better

in the second-hour literacy class than the second group did in eighth hour.

"The improvement in the semester is about a half year difference between those kids," says Paul Zientarski, the instructional coordinator for Naperville Central's physical education, health and driver education department.

Cross-lateral movements during these games are especially important to brain improvement.

"We have lots of brain research that shows that anytime you do a cardiovascular workout, you manufacture new brain cells," Zientarski says. "Anytime you incorporate music and rhythm, that helps make the neuro connections up in the brain. We're starting to see improvement in test scores in reading and math as a result of the kids using [interactive equipment] in relationship to our P.E. classes. Besides being physically fit, mentally, it's preparing them for the learning process."

Naperville isn't the only school district that's going interactive. Sierra Vista Junior High School in Canyon Country, CA, raised money in March for new interactive equipment for its fitness center.

"We're hoping that other schools and other districts will model what we're doing," says George Velarde, the Sierra Vista Junior High physical education department chair.

Research from one interactive gaming equipment manufacturer shows that its product can help children with autism, attention deficit disorder and dyslexia. Children develop these conditions, according to the research, from inactivity in the early stages of life. This type of equipment can help re-stimulate children or help them "catch up" to where their development needs to be.

Besides brain function and classroom improvement, using interactive equipment in exercise for school-age children helps in other areas as well. Woodland Elementary saw a 59 percent decrease in discipline incidents and a 67 percent decrease in out-of-school suspension days from the 2004-2005 school year to the 2005-2006 school year after PE4life introduced the active gaming equipment to the school.

Lisa Witherspoon is a doctoral student at the University of South Florida in Tampa, FL, researching interactive equipment with elementary school children. Her subjects often leave the lab, which substitutes as their P.E. class, with faces red from exertion and making comments about it being "the best P.E. class ever," she says.

"I've seen kids come in that are overweight or maybe not the most athletic or maybe not the most competitive and they have found success," Witherspoon says. "They're able to be in the same room with these athletic kids that are great at team sports and be just as good if not better at these interactive games, so they can socially fit in with all ability levels."

The fight against obesity is the primary objective for most people associated with helping kids learn and use interactive games with fitness. The obesity issue is the main reason Ernie Medina, a preventative care specialist, co-founded the XRtainment Zone in Redlands, CA.

Unlike most interactive gaming centers such as Nexgym, which has two locations in Texas, or Fitniks in Santa Rosa, CA, or even the Energy Factory, a club in Tenafly, NJ, which has since closed, the XRtainment Zone is available for use by the entire family and promotes itself as a family wellness and entertainment center.

In addition to video games, the XRtainment Zone offers fitness classes, nutrition classes and health studies.

"We're sort of breaking ground in areas that haven't really been tested yet," Medina says. "All of us are testing it all at the same time."

Kevin Bolden is the president of the Nexgym facilities in Southlake, TX, and Plano, TX. Bolden, who expects to open 10 to 15 facilities this year across the United States, says an owner of an interactive gaming center could expect a return on investment between 30 percent and 50 percent.

"It is a very profitable business," Bolden says. "The reason that it's profitable for us is that we are a brand new model that targets a

whole group of kids that haven't been targeted before ... only children from ages 6 to 14."

Several YMCAs are benefiting from the influx of active gaming equipment, too. Billy George, the chief operating officer of the YMCA of South Hampton Roads in Virginia and North Carolina, says all 13 of his centers have IZones, or interactive zones.

George credits these IZones for growth in membership. In 2005, the YMCA of South Hampton Roads reported 28,140 units. In 2006, that number grew to 32,842, an increase of 14 percent. There were also about half a million new visits from 2005 to 2006, George says.

Many major fitness clubs have not totally embraced the active gaming trend. Gold's Gym spokesperson Dave Reiseman says that in most Gold's Gyms, kids can use the gym at 14 years old if they are supervised and 16 years old if unsupervised.

"It's not something we've really integrated into the gyms yet," Reiseman says about active gaming, "but by the same token, we're always evaluating new technology, new equipment. Five years from now, who knows?"

The XRtainment Zone sits on top of a 24 Hour Fitness, which announced a partnership with an interactive game company two years ago for the use of its product in the 24 Hour Fitness kids clubs.

Spectrum Athletic Clubs, which has 22 clubs in Texas and California, doesn't invest a lot in active gaming equipment, according to Matthew Stevens, CEO of the company.

"We have found that the key to the success of [our kids clubs] starts with the programming directors," he says. "So we've invested significant money into our people more than into an audio-visual solution." Besides, he adds, the active gaming systems are only used when a club has the right people programming the activity. That being said, the company does offer an interactive gaming wall at some of its kids clubs and offers large play structures at most.

Medina has noticed a problem when club owners or staff members don't know how to use the interactive equipment.

"They'll get this piece of equipment. They'll set it up in there," Medina says. "But because people are unfamiliar with it or don't know how to use it, then it doesn't get used and it just takes up space. People end up returning it, selling it or say, 'See, it doesn't work.'

"Because of that learning curve and the novelty of it, you need to have somebody dedicated that could either do classes or run people through it until it finally got to the point where [it would be like] people know how to use a treadmill."

Bolden hires mostly high school and college-age people at his Nexgym facilities.

"They are particularly effective because they grew up with a lot of this technology, so they understand it," Bolden says. "They interact very well with the age group of 6 to 14. The technology itself is pretty intuitive. At birthday parties, kids have to come in off the street and be up and running on this equipment in seconds. In our design, it's intuitive enough for them to do that. It doesn't take very long for kids to pick it up and manage the technology on their own. It seems to be faster for the kids than it does for the adults."

Brian Jaccoma, the fitness director at The Club@800 Squash & Fitness in Rye Brook, NY, is supportive of the active gaming movement and has been in the market for a piece of interactive equipment. Jaccoma wonders, though, whether the cost of these types of games is too expensive for clubs and schools.

An interactive dancing piece of equipment runs about \$500 to \$600. Gaming bikes cost anywhere from \$1,200 to \$1,800. Some interactive systems could cost as much as \$7,000, and that does not include screens, TVs and any other additional units. Another thing to keep in mind: In 12 to 18 months, one manufacturer says, products will have new technology.

Stephen P. Roma of Work Out World is interested in putting interactive gaming equipment in the child-care area at one of his clubs in Middlesex, NJ.

"If we can add value to the experience of the child coming to the facility when mom and dad drop the child off, the child is going to want to be there; the mom and dad will want to be there," Roma says. "It's just a good environment full circle for us."

However, Roma is not sure about adding interactive equipment to the main part of his club. Roma doubts that the 20-something or 30-something gamer crowd will want to join a club simply because of the gaming equipment.

"Unless it's entertainment driven, I don't know if I'm ready to buy into that," Roma says. "I don't think I would invest money in it at this point."

In the future, though, club owners may have to tailor interactive equipment for their adult members, many of whom will have grown up exercising with all the games they used to play as kids. So instead of the normal background noise of treadmills running and barbells clanging at clubs, you might hear more sounds like whack!

"It's not going to be enough that there's a TV screen in front of them," Bolden says about future members. "Over time, I think you're going to see a lot more interactive technology introduced into the adult gym."