

Wii will rock you healthier

The son of Wii is soon to arrive in Britain, one of a new breed of interactive games that promise to reinvigorate the console generation by adding fun to getting fit, says **Mark Harris**

By any measure the Nintendo Wii was the runaway success story of 2007. In the run-up to Christmas, queues formed outside shops as parents fought to get their hands on one and Nintendo brought in extra machines from Europe to cope with demand.

Now the company is hoping to cash in on the phenomenal success by launching an accessory that it claims makes games even more enjoyable. The Wii Fit costs £70 and is launched next month, but we have managed to get a device flown over from Japan for an exclusive test (see below). It uses a pressure-sensitive balance board (about twice the size of bathroom scales), which the user can stand on and control game play by changing position and redistributing his or her weight. It automatically and wirelessly connects to the Wii console, and is sensitive to the slightest movements. One minute you may be attempting yoga poses such as the "sun salutation", the next you might be slaloming down a virtual mountain or trying simultaneously to keep up three digital hula hoops. It even turns itself off.

Video games have had a bad press of late. Lumped

with a junk food diet and lack of exercise they are seen as contributors to the nation's growing obesity problem, not to mention the claim that some of the ultraviolet games encourage violence in the players.

Instead of slumping on the sofa, Wii players have to stand up and use wireless controllers to simulate sports such as bowling and tennis. A recent study by Liverpool John Moores University found that teenagers playing Wii games burnt over 50% more calories than when playing sedentary games. Add that up over a 12-hour gaming week and they'll be burning nearly 2,000 extra calories.

The Wii Fit takes this further: it can sense how you're standing and moving by measuring your balance point — and the better you do, the more exercises and games you will unlock. The supplied mini-games involving ski jumps, football headers and tightrope walking are great fun, albeit basic, and provide a muscular workout. "Traditionally, exercise has been seen as a solitary and boring activity," says Robert Saunders, a Nintendo spokesman. "Wii Fit can change that. You get direct and instant feedback, and a lot more interactivity than with exercise DVDs."



When standing on the Wii Fit, it senses body movements and replicates them on screen

However, the games giant is keen to distance itself from any health claims. "We're not saying that it will help you to shed tens of pounds or provide the solution to any health problems you might have," says Saunders. And even the university research, which was funded by Nintendo, concluded that simply playing the Wii was not strenuous enough to count towards the government's recommended amount of exercise for children of one hour every day.

Just as games makers are starting to bring sport into the living room, other companies are trying to computerise the playground. Progressive Sports Technologies, a spin-off company from Loughborough University, has developed the world's first digital climbing frame, the i.play. The solar-powered i.play features interactive buttons, dials and knobs, together with an electronic scoreboard. When children wander past, a motion-activated voice calls them over to play energetic games that develop their speed, dexterity and stamina. Like a games console, the i.play offers multiple levels of difficulty, and children can track their scores on its built-in screen or view them in online leagues.

"Stealth exercise is at the heart of i.play technology," says Professor Mike Caine, the co-inventor of i.play. "If you make play equipment interesting enough, children will push the boundaries of their abilities in the same way they do with computer gaming, as they are so focused on improving their score. This distracts children from the discomfort of high-intensity exercise, making them more likely to exercise for longer or harder, which in turn maximises the health benefits."

Its effect in the playground has been dramatic, according to Gary Smith, head teacher of Market Field special needs school near Colchester, the first school to install an i.play. "It creates a totally different dynamic. It gets the kids doing things without them realising it: moving, stretching and bending. It also teaches them co-operative play. We've got year 11 pupils helping the younger ones to use it — it's totally self-supervising."

At £24,000 a pop, the i.play would buy an awful lot of rounders bats and footballs, admits Smith. "It is a costly piece of equipment but I believe that special needs children should have the best. And because of its competitive element, the i.play has longevity as well as novelty. I don't think it replaces traditional playground activities and I wouldn't want it to."

But the continuing digitisation of fitness seems inevitable. Nintendo Wii's are selling out, i.plays are appearing in schools and high-tech interactive gym equipment is starting to find its way into homes.

Trixter Europe recently launched an exercise bike that means keen spinners might never want to venture onto crowded, fume-choked real streets again.

The X-Dream (£7,000 from Harrods) combines a static mountain bike chassis with a 17in monitor showing realistic bike races. You can tackle computer-generated trails over mountains, through forests or just along wonderfully car-free roads. The courses get steadily more challenging and you can link together up to six X-Dreams for the ultimate cycling showdown.

As the fitness industry (worth £5.6 billion in the UK last year) and the games industry (£1.8 billion) continue to converge, there is no guarantee that children will lose weight, although it does look likely that some fat cats will get a little bit fatter.

Bend me, shape me, any way you want me

I'm dubious. Very dubious. The sleek white Nintendo Wii Fit balance board in front of my TV screen looks a little intimidating. I'm not a computer-game girl and virtual yoga seems an odd concept. And as a yoga teacher, it might even be good enough to put me out of a job.

At least the Wii Fit is easy to use. Children, technophobes and drunken students will find it startlingly straightforward (yes, even I managed it without a hitch). A bendy virtual yoga teacher (male or female, take your pick) explains each posture (or asana) in detail to a background of tinkly Zen music. Most postures involve standing on the board with one or both feet, or occasionally placing your hands on it.

The program starts with a series of beginner postures. Practising these unlocks increasingly advanced exercises, so a total novice can't attempt a shoulderstand and end up groaning on the floor. Nearly all of the first postures are

suitable for beginners, although a couple would be better placed further along in the program. The postures include standing balances, where Wii technology comes into its own. In "tree" balance, a circle on the screen shows how your weight is distributed; the more you wobble, the more erratic the pattern. Focusing on the screen holds your gaze and allows you to concentrate on the task in hand — both fundamental aspects of yoga.

In a standing forward bend, the board showed which leg held more body weight (a significant imbalance can lead to back problems and other aches) and helped me remain stable as my head moved towards my shins. This was excellent for improving general body awareness and correcting postural imbalance. However, in "downward-facing dog", with my feet on the ground and hands on the Wii board, I felt very unstable, fearful of my hands slipping forward and unable to look

at the screen without straining my neck. Earning a score for every posture isn't exactly a yogic concept. Yoga is not a sport; it encourages students to work in an uncompetitive way and be physically and mentally content with wherever they are.

As a beginner's guide, or to attract new people to yoga, I can't knock it. Wii Fit yoga is a well thought-out, safe program with detailed instructions that encourage body awareness. But all the stopping and starting affected the flow of sequences, which is an important part of many yoga styles, and the lack of variety felt tedious. It also failed to offer an overall yoga class — there are no warm-ups, few dynamic movements working with the breath and no final relaxation. Yoga needs only floor space and some stretchy trousers, so Wii yoga just overcomplicates a simple system that has worked fine by itself for the past 2,000 years.

Janine Thomas



Thomas makes the sign of the tree, the reverse triangle and warrior II

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