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## Video games get kids off sofa

By Jason Gibbs/Sun-News reporter

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LAS CRUCES — If NMSU computer programmers are successful, the days of teenagers staring with glazed eyes at a flickering console are soon to be a thing of the past.

Instead, imagine youngsters bouncing, dancing, boxing, bowling, playing baseball and any other number of aerobic activities while interacting with friends and family — but still in their living room.

This is definitely not your dad's video game. If you doubt that video play has evolved beyond the days of Pong and Pac Man, drop by the Learning Games Lab on the New Mexico State University campus sometime. You may even want to wear a helmet.

The lab will benefit from a USDA Children, Youth and Families at Risk grant, in which NMSU will share a \$1.5 million award over the next four years. The grant will be shared by NMSU, California State University-San Bernardino, the Maine Medical Center and West Virginia University.

The goal? Design video games that draw children and their families into more shared, physical activity, said Barbara Chamberlin, an extension instructional design and media specialist and an assistant professor at NMSU.

The lab, which is staffed by college students, is a techie's dream. Large screen televisions flash the latest interactive games, where middle school consultants rate, rank and rock out on the latest interactive technology.

"It's more than just regular console games, it's more realistic," said 12-year-old consultant Tre Diaz, a Lynn Middle School student. "It's exercising and it's got to have good graphics."

Diaz and fellow consultant, 13-year-old David Martinez of Holy Cross Catholic Schools, were bowling Monday during a testing session. In addition to checking out the latest games that get kids (and adults) moving, the students are learning basic programming and video design.

Another consultant, 12-year-old Alex Soto of Sierra Middle School, said if interactive video games didn't exist, she'd spend her free time reading books.

"I like the exercise games the most," she said.

Mandolen Sanchez, a 13-year-old from Camino Real, agreed.

"It's fun getting to play cool games and learn about them," she said. "I think (interactive games) are more fun because you are interacting with the games instead of just sitting down."

The grant will fund research into what attracts students to more active games, including good graphics, characters that children can relate to, music and, of course, physical activity. Ultimately, it's a tool for families to enjoy physical activity together, combat childhood obesity and foster better social relationships between youngsters and their families, Chamberlin said.

It will also result in Web sites designed for schools, families and after-school programs to learn how to introduce educational and physical games into programs. Recent studies point to exercise gaming — or exergames — as a boon to getting children active, even restoring positive self image to a degree where previously inactive children begin to take part

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in real-life exercise after playing video games, she said.

"Excergames ... get families playing together," she said. "We're at the point we are about to explode."

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