

# A guilty pleasure to get you through quarantine—that's actually good for you

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Credit: Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University

Along with sourdough starter and Zoom calls, video games are enjoying a resurgence in popularity among people of all ages who are craving entertainment and social connection while stuck at home in quarantine.

As far as guilty pleasures go, says Amy Lu, an associate professor of communication studies and health sciences at Northeastern, video games are worth indulging in for the benefits they provide to a player's physical and mental health. One small caveat: She's not talking about just any [video game](#).

Lu is a proponent of [active video games](#)—games that encourage [physical activity](#), such as Ring Fit Adventure—as opposed to traditional games that require the player to only tap buttons on a controller or screen.

"This would be an excellent opportunity to try playing more active video games, or exergames," says Lu. "Active video games have the capacity to induce moderate to vigorous physical activities and additional mental health benefits. They can serve as a fun alternative for people to [exercise](#), especially under the current COVID-19 lockdown."

Lu says active video games can effectively help people meet the recommendations of the 2018 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, endorsed by both the American Heart Association and the World Health Organization (For children: at least 60 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity exercise every day; adults: At least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity exercise throughout a week).

What's more, active video games that contain a storytelling or narrative element, suggests Lu, may lead to increased physical activity levels and working memory.

Her own research supports these claims. In one, her team recruited 110 Northeastern students to play an active video [game](#) called Kung-Fu for Kinect on the gaming console Xbox One. To gauge whether adding a narrative element to an active video game would lead to increased physical activity levels and improved cognitive function in the players,

the researchers divided the students into two groups. One watched a narrative prior to playing, the other group did not.

What they found was that the participants who watched the back story prior to playing took 23 percent more walking steps and spent a significantly longer time doing moderate-to-vigorous exercise while playing than did the group that did not watch the narrative. Participants who played Kung-Fu for Kinect also scored far higher in a test of working memory administered after they finished playing when compared to participants who played a comparable sedentary game.

In another study, her team recruited 22 children between the ages of 8 and 12 and asked them to play Kung-Fu for Kinect. To rule out the possibility that the beneficial effect was caused by the addition of an animated video rather than the story itself, they created two animated videos, one that had a narrative and the other that didn't. Again, the researchers found that the group that watched the narrative spent twice as much time on moderate-to-vigorous exercise than the group that watched the video without the narrative.

This group would benefit most from playing active video games during quarantine, Lu says. After the pandemic forced schools to close, children are finding themselves bored at home, parked in front of their computers or televisions.

"Most are not following the exercise guidelines at all," says Lu. "I think it's less than a quarter of them who exercise enough. And especially during this lockdown when the schools are closed and the children have to stay at home, it's more likely for them not to exercise."

For those looking for inspiration and ideas, games and consoles such as Dance Dance Revolution, EyeToy, Nintendo Wii, and Microsoft Kinect are sure to activate the old sweat glands. Virtual reality consoles and

games, such as Oculus Quest and Beat Saber, are also good options. And if you can't get your hands on any of those right now? Online video platforms GoNoodle and an app called Sworkit are two excellent alternatives for children, says Lu.

"These would offer a really good alternative to parents during the lockdown, especially those who do not have a backyard," she says. "Or those who live in the city, for example, and don't have a safe space right now to exercise outdoors because there are a lot of people walking around or because the public parks have been closed."

For all the benefits active video games offer, Lu emphasized that they should not replace outdoor physical activity and sports in the long term. For one, games don't provide the same level of group dynamics that a team sport such as soccer does—or the benefits of fresh air.

She also warned about the effects of prolonged exposure to screens of any kind, especially on children's vision and mental health. And as with any physical activity, active video games could cause exercise-related injuries, albeit comparably less so.

"Anything has two sides," says Lu. "If people are playing too much of anything, that's not good, active [video](#) games included. But it is still better than being a couch potato during these trying times."

So go ahead: Dust off your Wii and play without guilt. You deserve it.

Provided by Northeastern University

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