

GAME ON

Do you struggle with “conventional” workouts? Are you bored with exercise? Do you hate going to the gym? Perhaps it’s time to give virtual reality fitness a whirl. As a recent convert to this new frontier of training, **Rosie Mullender** asks the experts: can you get a good workout by... playing games?

We’ve all been there: your alarm goes off for your early morning run or gym session – and it all feels like too much effort. In that split second, you make the decision that it’s just not worth getting out of bed for, so you hit the snooze button and miss out on yet another workout. But what if there was a way of keeping fit that actually made you *want* to get out of bed?

Virtual reality (VR) fitness, or “gamerising”, is the next frontier in home workouts. A step up from *Wii Sports*, which saw more than 82 million people bowling, golfing and boxing their way to fitness in two dimensions, at-home VR headsets immerse users in a variety of three-dimensional video games.

Studies suggest that energetic VR apps have the potential to make a positive impact on our physical and psychological fitness comparable to traditional forms of exercise – and some experts agree that the future of fitness may well lie in our own lounge rooms.

“VR exercise has the potential to improve cardiovascular fitness, body composition, muscular strength and endurance, and flexibility, depending

on the type of exercise played,” Dr Zan Gao, who co-authored one of those studies into the effectiveness of VR exercise, tells *Body+Soul*. “It may also enhance the psychological benefits of physical activity, such as enhanced mood, and increase the chances of long-term adherence. VR exercise could also potentially aid in the treatment of mental-health issues such as anxiety and depression, particularly during the pandemic.”

My own journey began after I played a demo round of a VR game in which you slash a pair of laser swords through glowing blocks in time to music. I was filled with joy, broke a significant sweat – and was instantly hooked.

Deciding it may be cheaper in the long run than an unused gym membership, I bought myself an advanced all-in-one VR headset called Oculus Quest 2 (which retails at about \$480 for 128GB), and began exploring the world of VR gamerising. It’s an ideal place for people who aren’t motivated by more conventional workouts.

“VR can be a great tool for reluctant exercisers,” says Edwina Griffin, founder

of the AtOne meditation and mindfulness virtual reality app. “The bright flashing lights, music and constantly moving obstacles mean it feels natural to move fast, and it provides a great distraction so you don’t focus on how hard you’re working. It [also] reduces potential barriers to exercise, such as travel, worrying about what you look like and the need for gym gear. You can access workouts wherever you are, tracking and measuring your results.”

My VR headset also comes with a pre-installed app called *Move*, which allows you to set calorie and movement targets for the day, and estimates your energy burn using your personal statistics along with headset and controller movements. So far, most games I’ve tried have burnt about 250 calories an hour – about the same as a bike ride – and I’ve purchased dancing games and boxing apps where I can spar in a virtual gym. There’s also a virtual climbing wall that provides a great arm workout if I add a set of wrist weights.

There are downsides to consider,

however. “Some may experience motion sickness while playing VR exercises,” Gao warns. “Others may feel discomfort while wearing the headset for a long time and prolonged VR playing may be bad for players’ eyesight.”

Griffin adds, “You probably need to stick with your gym sessions for supervised weight training and muscle strength. Plus, you need to be aware of your technique because you don’t have anyone checking it.”

But in the three months since I’ve started “gamerising”, I’ve lost more than 6kg, have noticeably toned up my arms and legs, and find myself feeling excited about working out. Now that I’ve discovered VR fitness, I think I’ll be waving goodbye to those early morning gym sessions for good. ●



If you don’t want to shell out for a VR headset, find out how you can still keep up your fitness from home with virtual walking tours. Head to

BODY+soul.com.au

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; SOME PRICES SUBJECT TO EXCHANGE-RATE FLUCTUATIONS

5 VIRTUAL REALITY FITNESS GAMES FOR BEGINNERS



Box VR
Duck, jab, weave, hook, and punch your way to fitness with this award-winning boxing VR game. \$44.95, store. playstation.com



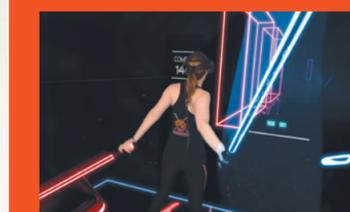
Dance Central
Get your groove on by learning choreographed dance moves alongside your favourite tunes. \$46.99, oculus.com



Racket Fury: Table Tennis VR
Compete against players from all over the world – without leaving your living room. \$27.30, oculus.com



Ninja Legends
It’s your childhood ninja dreams come true as you use claws and katanas to defeat your enemies. \$30.95, store. playstation.com



Beat Saber
Arm yourself with laser swords and rhythmically slash through the cubes – aka beats – as they hurtle towards you. \$46.99, oculus.com

MIND (VR) SET

Virtual reality can also be used to improve your mental health. Edwina Griffin, founder and director of the AtOne virtual reality meditation app says there are several ways VR can benefit your mental health.

“There’s extensive research on the benefits of meditation, but many people find it difficult to do, and it can be hard to get into the deep space where they feel the benefits. It can also be hard to find the space to do meditation at work, school or even, sometimes, at home,” she says.

“One of the exciting things about VR technology is that we can create beautiful worlds... and our subconscious doesn’t know the difference. We can train our mind in a relaxed space and repeat positive experiences to help build and strengthen positive neural pathways in the brain. One of the challenges in the past with wellness and health has been collecting meaningful data, but VR apps fast-track people’s meditation experience by using the multi-sensory approach of VR – and they can measure and track mind fitness in categories such as focus, recovery and engagement at the same time.”