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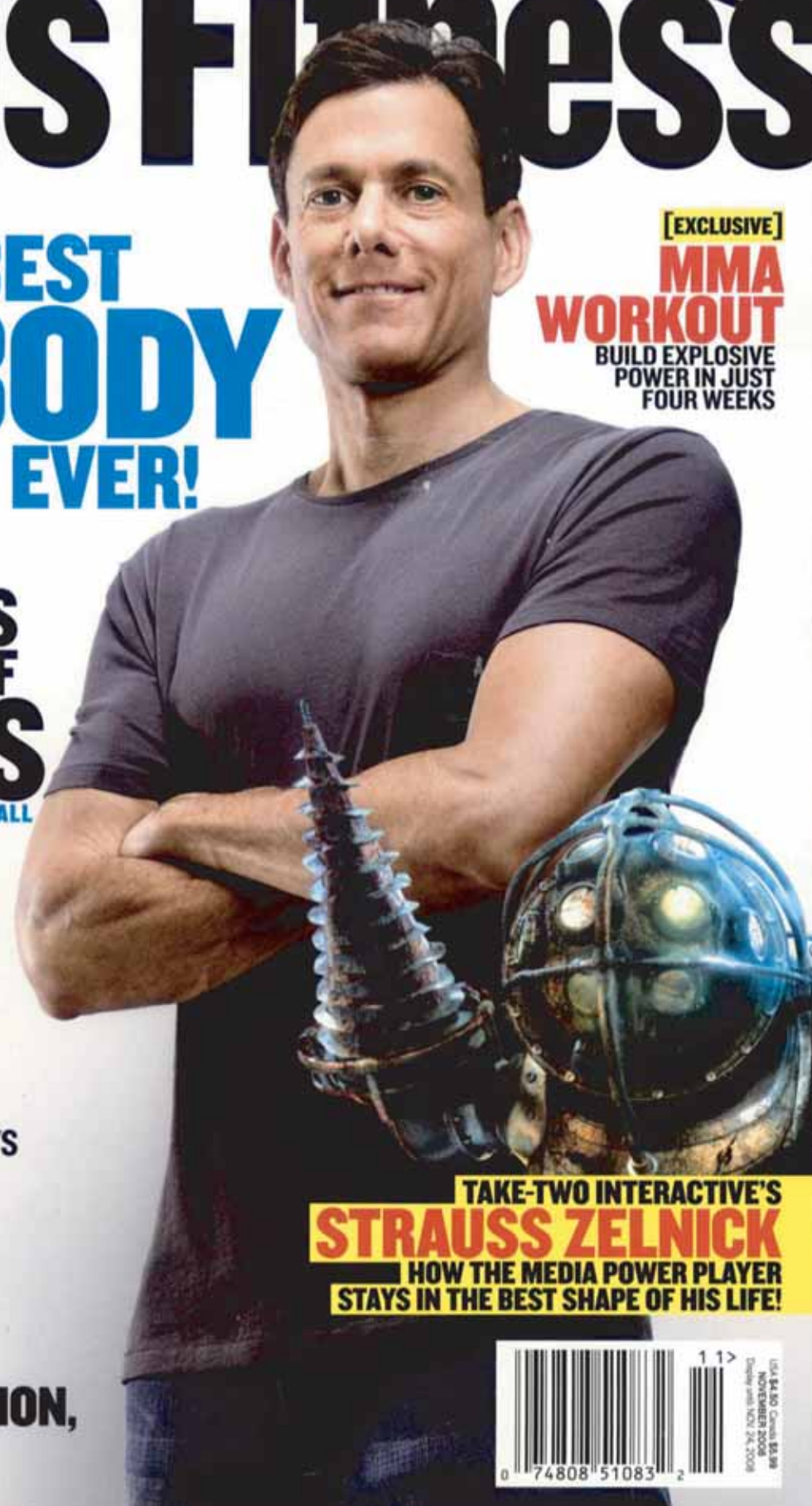
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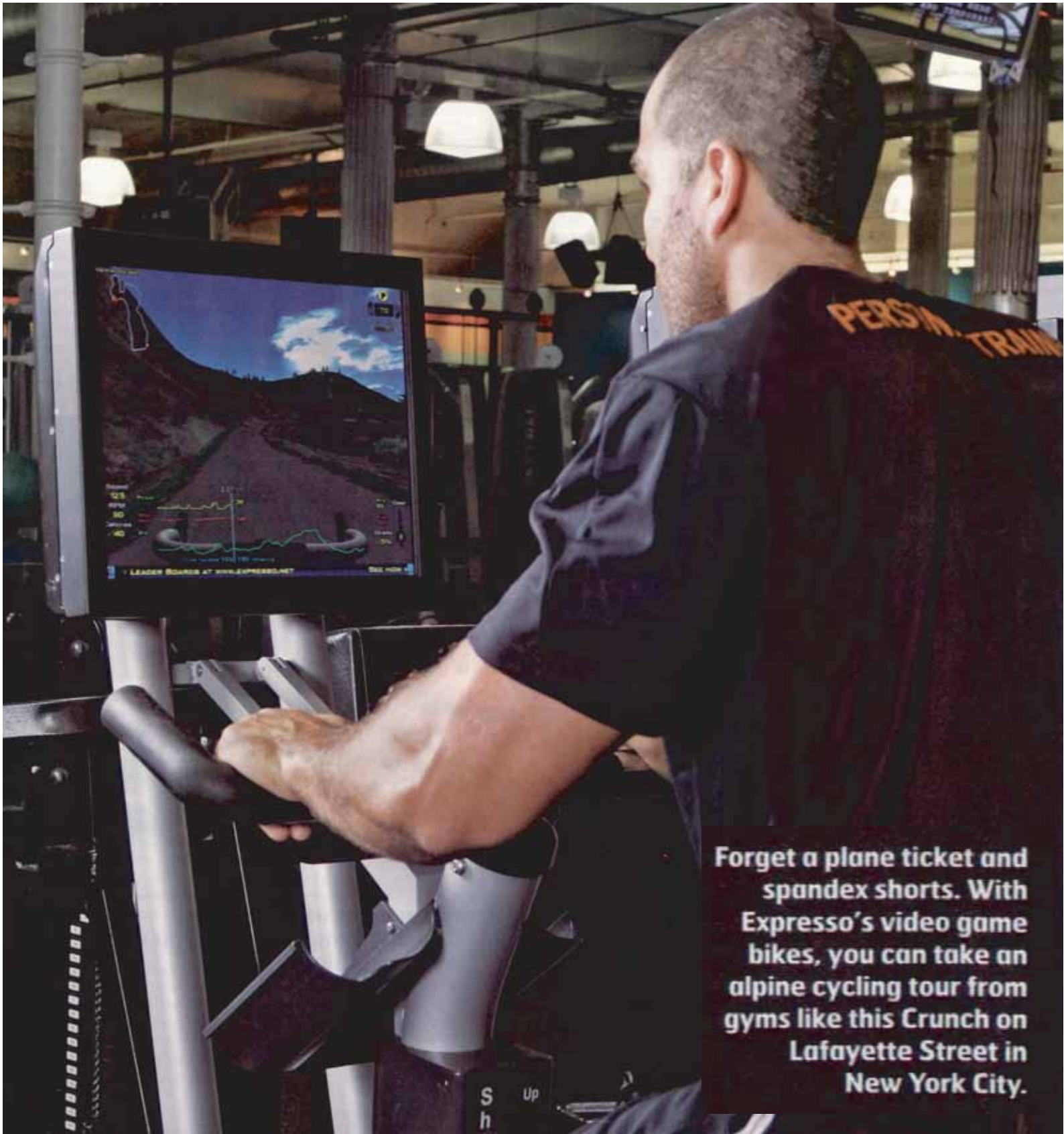
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Forget a plane ticket and spandex shorts. With Espresso's video game bikes, you can take an alpine cycling tour from gyms like this Crunch on Lafayette Street in New York City.

VIRTUAL FITNESS: TOMORROW'S REALITY?

THE SUCCESS OF THE WII FIT IS BREEDING A SWARM OF INTERACTIVE EXERCISE VIDEO GAMES. BUT HOW EFFECTIVE THEY ARE REMAINS A SOURCE OF MUCH DEBATE.

BY **DAVID KUSHNER**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **LAUREN FLEISHMAN**

It's another perfect summer day in Southern California, but the next innovation in fitness can't be found rollerblading down the Santa Monica Pier or pumping iron in Venice Beach. It's being demonstrated at the sprawling downtown Los Angeles Convention Center, where pasty dudes with half-grown beards roam the halls in T-shirts with slogans like "I Probably Killed You Online" and "Caution, I Byte," as a voluptuous blogger in satin black pants, red vinyl boots, and oversize aviator goggles plays virtual drums.

Attendees at the video game industry's annual E3 convention, where leading publishers and developers demo upcoming games for an invite-only audience of buyers and gaming press, have never been confused with triathletes. But this year there is distinctively more activity throughout. Conventioneers are jumping, throwing, and jogging in place, thanks to a burgeoning new category of video games aimed at getting gamers off the couch.

Fitness-oriented video games are invading the living room and the gym, vowing to work out more than players' thumbs. Earlier this year, Nintendo, whose popular Wii system is ground zero of the video-fitness craze, introduced the Wii Balance Board, a wireless pad that senses the user's slightest movements when he stands upon it. Wii Fit, the pioneering game for the board, offers a detailed fitness regimen,

leading gamers through a series of postures and strengthening exercises while providing immediate feedback. It doesn't sound much like a game, but players have responded overwhelmingly, snatching up more than one million units in the first two months of its release, marking the dawn of the sweaty new future of fitness titles.

Soon, players will begin to see more fitness games, beginning with *Jillian Michaels' Fitness Ultimatum* from Majesco. Michaels, the host of the hit TV show *The Biggest Loser*, will lend her face and bod to this Wii-exclusive title, which challenges players to run through a course of calisthenics. The user selects a choice of regimens—Weight Loss, Strength Training, Intervals, or Hill Climb—and then gets to work. On each exercise, the board measures the player's balance, detecting how much they shimmer and shake. The more steady the set, the higher they score. There's also a new series of athletic games for the body-moving Nintendo home console, *Wii Sports Resort*. Debuting in spring 2009, it will expand the roster of virtual activities from already popular titles like tennis and boxing to include fencing, Frisbee, and Jet Skiing.

Many in the game business think there's plenty more sweat to drain from the Wii. Most bullish is Electronic Arts, the video-game industry's top-selling publisher and makers of the mainstay sports franchises like *Madden NFL* and *NBA Live*. "We think we can take a more Western approach to fitness," says



Expresso riders can race against their own past performances.

Dave McCarthy, executive producer of EA Sports, "something a little more active that gets you moving."

At the moment, iterations of these games for the Wii allow players to, say, toss a football by mimicking a throwing motion while gripping the Wii remote. But there's a more authentic, full range of motions that EA is eager to tap. Its solution: a new peripheral that would allow players to strap the remotes to their arms or legs to facilitate more athletic movements, from

running to jumping jacks. Right now, there's no way to jump on the Wii board (at least if you weigh more than an Olympic gymnast), but utilizing the remotes with a strap is a simple but powerful step toward full-body immersion into the video-game fitness realm. "This will not only measure position," he says, "it will measure intensity: how strong your thrusts are, how high you jump." Microsoft and Sony have similar plans for their respective Xbox and PlayStation 3 consoles, utilizing cameras with motion-tracking technology. The upcoming Xbox 360 game, *You're in the Movies*, for example, requires gamers to duck, jump, and leap to film action scenes that are later dubbed into a home-brewed movie.

Naturally, as more fitness games are created, they will move out of the home and into the gym. This is already happening at some clubs, such as *Galaxy Fitness* in New York City and *Crunch*, which has 30 locations nationwide. Each is exploring

ways to bring the Wii and other game titles into facilities as a fun and new way for members to feel the burn. Ken Worts, chief operating officer of Crunch, says the games are a way of appealing to a new generation of fitness enthusiasts. “A club is not just about a treadmill and a bike,” he says, “it’s about creating an environment where it’s fun when you come to the gym.”


A host of companies are racing to engineer specialized exercise machines that deliver both a solid workout and games. This fall, Expresso Fitness is rolling out the third generation of its video game recumbent and upright bikes. As users pedal, a game screen shows “them” on-screen, making their way up and down hills and around bends. There will also be an optional gaming element; a trigger under the bike grip will allow gamers to shoot dragons closing in on “them.”

Brian Button, CEO of Expresso, a fitness technology company, says gamers are just two years away from being able to play their favorite console title—like *Halo* or *Resident Evil*—on a gym machine. The delay is a matter of market penetration. There are only an estimated two million cardio machines in the world versus tens of millions of home console machines. But the success of the Wii Fit shows the market is still in its infancy. “You’re seeing recognition that [fitness] games are not frivolous, but effective and fun and get good results,” says Button.

Of course all this begs the question: Are fitness video games really as effective as good, old workouts? Dr. Cedric Bryant, chief science officer of the American

Council on Exercise, says yes, depending on who’s playing. “For certain populations that have been inactive for any number of reasons, this serves as way to get them engaged in some level of activity,” he says. Examples include not only pizza-heavy gamers but, say, senior citizens keeping their joints loose with Wii bowling at the assisted-living facility. Some grade schools have begun incorporating wildly popular fitness games—such as the ubiquitous boogie-by-numbers dance pad game, *Dance Dance Revolution*—into their physical education programs.

For guys who exercise regularly, though, a video game workout may not be enough...yet. A study conducted in July by Bryant’s group found that gamers typically burn 432 calories per hour playing Wii Boxing, far less than the amount zapped cycling or running (590 calories). Ben Sawyer, project co-director of Games for Health, an organization devoted to enriching the health care applications of video games, is working with researchers and scientists to get game companies to further develop their hardware, software—and their thinking. Sawyer imagines, for example, a future when a home video-game console

is a sophisticated machine that offers both biofeedback and customized exercise programs, delivering the value and rigorous workout of a personal trainer. “A console could become like a virtual gym with a subscription,” he says. Instead of playing one game, in other words, you essentially join the Nintendo gym for a monthly fee, and download new workout routines as you progress. Sweatband not included. 

“You’re seeing recognition that [fitness] games are not frivolous, but effective and fun and get good results.”

—Expresso CEO Brian Button