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THE AGE Thursday, June 4, 2009

Staying ahead of the game

A Melbourne researcher wants to beef up Wii, potentially connecting table tennis players across the globe. By **Jason Hill**.

THE game that lets players enjoy virtual tennis and tennis bowling matches in their living rooms, Wii Sports, is one of the most popular video games of all time, selling more than 45 million copies.

Sports are cool, it can be a fun bonding experience with friends and family. But a PhD researcher at the University of Melbourne wants to take the concept further and use sports games to connect people over vast distances.

Perin Mueller has been awarded the most prestigious Fulbright Fellowship Scholarship in Technology to continue his research at California State University into developing games that combine the advantages of sport such as physical exertion and social bonding with the benefits of networked computers, allowing players to compete over big distances.

Schulz "sports over a distance". Mr Mueller has developed prototypes of games using networked computers, using networked computers and peripherals for sports such as tennis, soccer and boxing.

For example, the game Breakout for Two has two players at opposite locations, kicking or hitting a ball against a wall, drawing a trajectory image

of the computer. Players try to be the first to smash a series of points scattered onto the video page.

Mr Mueller says he began research into playing sports over the internet because he wanted to find better ways to build connections between people separated by large distances.

Although there is technology

such as instant messaging, mobile phones and Skype, these technologies are designed for business environments and work best in task-focused environments where people already know each other.

"I found that sports, on the other hand, can enable very intimate, social and trusting relationships, even between

people who have never met before."

While most video game users play with fellow friends using fast chat to head off any competitiveness, Mr Mueller says digital games offer great benefits for long-distance gaming.

His research showed that the use of video not only helps in

communicating emotions (such as seeing a smile on the other person's face), but is also used by players to communicate what their opponents are going to do next. If you see your opponent preparing a backswing you can react accordingly and it forms part of the social glue between you and your remote opponent."

Mr Mueller has presented his games and research at conferences around the world, he says. "Researchers from many disciplines, such as game researchers, psychologists, computer scientists and sports researchers, agree that I am on to something when I talk about the link between exercise and social play," he says.

"Creating better games that make use of this link has huge potential for more emotional, engaging, healthy and social games, and thinking has the opportunity to make a big contribution to a way that sports alone cannot."

Mr Mueller says Wii success has highlighted that movement is what people like to do in video games to help maintain fitness, and he hopes his research will show companies how to offer more engaging multiplayer experiences.

For the latest gaming news, visit [http://www.4mat.com.au](#)



Perin Mueller has developed games using networked computers and peripherals for sports such as tennis, soccer and boxing. He is shown here playing a tennis game on a Wii console.

Floyd in "the Age", Australia's major newspaper, [online](#) and offline.