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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 hitting machines in their backyards. We sports in one of the most popular video games of all time, shifting more than 47 million copies.

A person who has played Wii Sports can confirm 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.

Florian Mueller has been awarded the most prestigious Ruffell Fellowship 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.

Indeed, sports over a distance? Mr Mueller has developed prototypes of games using networked computers, video-conferencing cameras and sensors for sports such as tennis, soccer and boxing.

For example, the game Breakout for Two has two players at opposite locations, knocking or hitting a ball against a wall, showing a live image of the computer. Players try to be the first to reach a series of points scattered onto the video image.

Mr Mueller says he has begun 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 well-forecast environments where people should 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 friends, 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 it also helps players to see what their opponents are doing in real time. 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 game 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 it is one of something which is about the link between emotion and social play," he says.

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

Mr Mueller says his success has highlighted that computers are well suited to help maintain fitness, and he hopes his research will allow companies how to offer more engaging multiplayer experiences.

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Florian Mueller has developed games using networked computers and sensors to connect people across vast distances. He is shown here playing a tennis game on a Wii console.

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