Armchair athletes

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He may not have the physique, the six-figure endorsement deal or the soap-star girlfriend, but Shane Magee is a sports champion in his own right. A fierce competitor, he uses a deft combination of skill and timing to thrash opponents - and, what's more, he doesn't even break a sweat.

Magee is the reigning Australian champion of FIFA 2005, an Xbox soccer game that simulates everything from strategies and stadiums, right down to the stubble on David Beckham's cheek.

A 25-year-old hotel manager from Brisbane, Magee is part of a growing community of armchair athletes who use Xbox Live to challenge each other in cyberspace.

"I'm very competitive," says Magee, who is known - and feared - by other online gamers as Mankind 79.

"You could say some of my goals are lucky, but they never are. I use a lot of skill to get them. I get my player in the right place, I get my ball in the right place.

"I play a lot, probably more than I should. Every single time I have free time, I practise."

Waging daily battles, Magee and his main rivals - a seasoned gamer called Devil in Heaven and Ironic Italiano, a precocious up-and-comer, vie for top spot on the game's international ranking system.

"At the moment, I'm ranked 50th," he says, "but the game is getting much harder now. The new game (FIFA 2005) has come out and I'm not practising as hard."

Last year, Magee took on allcomers, winning the Australian leg of the FIFA Interactive World Cup in Sydney. He jetted off to Zurich to take on the world's best in the tournament's final, where he was knocked out of the group stage by the eventual winner, Thiago Carrico from Brazil.

"It was so close. Any player there, if they had their day, could have won," he says.

"The organisers were saying over the course of the event that we were the eight best players in the world. They treated us as if we were professional soccer players."

Confirmation, perhaps, that sports gamers are finally gaining recognition outside their insular, online communities?

"Thousands of people attended [the Interactive World Cup] just to watch," says Jamie McKinlay, the national PR and promotions manager for Electronic Arts (EA) Australia, a company that started developing sports games in 1983.

More than two decades later, sports games constitute some 20 per cent of sales on next-generation consoles such as PS2 and Xbox. And with titles such as NBA (basketball),
Madden (gridiron) and FIFA soccer garnering a sizeable cult following, McKinlay says it's only a matter of time before we start recognising gamers as cyberathletes.

"These players pride themselves on being the best. They love nothing more than thrashing their mates at home on the couch or beating someone halfway across the world via online game-play."

To be the best, he says, they have to be very skilled.

McKinlay says that the game's authentic experience - a combination of licensed athletes, stadiums, branding and signature moves - is part of the attraction.

Gamers get what they see on TV or what they see if they go to the stadium to watch their favourite sport.

There is nothing that appeals more to a fan than to take control of a favoured team in their authentic kit and beat their No. 1 rival.

But with the growing sense of realism, is there a danger that the popularity of real sports may be eclipsed?

Not so, says Xbox product marketing manager Nick Segger: "They actually complement each other."

Games such as FIFA are designed to be a simulation of a sport. "They're designed to be as accurate as possible, so it gives [players] more of an incentive to actually go out there and try and do it themselves."

"One of the reasons that FIFA was very keen to pursue this tournament was that there's a huge number of consumers out there who enjoy gaming, and there's also the same amount of people who enjoy getting out there and playing sports."

Segger says that the interactive World Cup was a byproduct of last year's E3 games trade show, at which EA agreed to release more than a dozen titles supporting Microsoft's Xbox Live.

The competition, he says, was designed to raise the profile of virtual football and the real thing.

"It was the first event whereby gaming and the actual sport came together on the same day. Not only did we have a gaming contest there [at the Sydney finals], we had five-a-side tournaments and skill sessions as well.

"There's definitely a huge opportunity for these types of tournaments to continue to grow," he says.

Already, in markets like South Korea, professional gamers are earning more than $US100,000 a year by participating in corporate-sponsored tournaments.

And while the interactive world cup was a first for Xbox and EA, leagues like the Cyberathlete Professional League - believed to be the world's first video game sports league - have staged lucrative PC-based tournaments for the past seven years.

"There are a lot of gaming talents out there," says Segger.

"There are some extremely high standards of gameplay, both of how to play the game and of how to interact and get the best out of the console as well."
"In the US and Europe there are gamers who get paid to play and win in tournaments. They earn quite a lot of money and notoriety, particularly on the internet. If you go into the communities and fan sites there are seriously well-respected gamers, and personalities in their own right."

Segger says these tournaments have the potential to become a hit with fans and spectators - even in sports-mad Australia.

"At the event we had in Sydney, there were a lot of people there playing to win, but there were also a lot of people there to watch," Segger says.

"The spectator aspect is already there, it's just a matter of getting it out to a mainstream audience."

As for Magee, he's unfazed by all the hoopla. The again, he has bigger fish to fry - his mates.

"My highest winning margin is 10-0," he says. "I wipe the floor with any friend that comes around."