

SHOOTING DOWN STEREOTYPES

DISABILITY NO BARRIER TO ESPORTS

Japanese players with special needs aim to make it big in competitive gaming

TOKYO

STREET Fighter player Shunya Hatakeyama has muscular dystrophy, so he uses his chin to launch devastating combos. He is not the only Japanese gamer proving that disability is no barrier in eSports.

ports revenues estimated at more than US\$1 billion, and many think it could one day be at the Olympics. The sector is not as big in Japan as in eSports-crazy China and South Korea, but it is starting to take root.

Keen to offer Japanese gamers with disabilities a chance to be part of the action, social welfare worker Daiki Kato founded a company called ePara in 2016.

Kato's firm employs players such as Hatakeyama and Kitamura, who are both 28, and gives them time to practise around their other duties, which include working on the company's website and helping organise gaming



ePara enthusiast Shunya Hatakeyama, who has degenerative muscular dystrophy, practises playing video games at his home in Shiwa, Iwate Prefecture, Japan recently. (Inset) Blind esports player Naoya Kitamura playing a video game during an event in Tokyo.

AFP PIX

he was 6.

He has always loved fighting games, but over the years his muscles weakened so much that he could not hold a controller.

Depressed, he quit playing for six years until he and a friend decided last year to design and make a custom controller that he could operate with his chin.

Using his fingers to press buttons on his computer keyboard, Hatakeyama says he quickly got back into the groove.

Now he also coaches other



thinks manufacturers will start to sit up and take notice.

helped — depending on the circumstances, we can help people

Naoya Kitamura, who is blind and relies on sound to play beat-'em-up game *Tekken 7*, also hopes that his skills in a billion-dollar industry will help make society more open-minded.

"I'll block a move and the sound it makes will tell me what kind of move it was," Kitamura said.

"Then I'll react and make my move," he said, demonstrating a dizzying attack with *Tekken* character Lucky Chloe.

Competitive gaming is booming worldwide, with global eS-

ports and helping organize gaming events.

Hatakeyama mostly enters *Street Fighter V* tournaments that are open to anyone — disabled or non-disabled — and said the beauty of fighting games was that "you can overcome handicaps and compete against different people".

"When I play in a tournament I don't want my disability to be an issue. I want to move people with the way I play."

Hatakeyama was born with degenerative muscular dystrophy and has used a wheelchair since

players with disabilities, talking them through complicated combos and offering tips on different characters.

"If I had never played fighting games, I don't think I would try to find solutions whenever I encountered something difficult," he said.

Many of ePara's gamers are new to eSports and do not have much experience of competing in tournaments.

Company chief Kato believes there is a growing market for gamers with disabilities and he

Kato wants to use eSports to showcase the talents of people with disabilities, saying many people in Japan "don't have much chance to interact" with them.

Kitamura, who has microphthalmos and has been blind since birth, says eSports can help change the perception that people with disabilities "just need assistance".

"I'm really good with computers and I can do a lot more than some people who can see can do," he said.

"It's not just about being

out too. It's about cooperation."

Kitamura thinks the term eSports itself also helps, projecting the image of serious competition rather than "just people playing games".

Kato says there is "no need to distinguish between people with or without disabilities in eSports".

"That's one interesting thing about it," he said.

"Whether you're in a wheelchair or not, it's the same rules and the same competitions." **AFP**