



GAME TIME  
Last month's  
iGames expo  
in New York

MICHAEL DABIN

# PLUGGED IN TO THE SCENE

The virtual & real worlds meet at computer gaming events BY STEVE DITLEA

**F**ive men in identical black jerseys, wearing headphones and microphones, are checking the terrain before them, weapons tightly in hand. An enemy soldier appears to the left, beyond a tin roof. "Craig, at nine..." "I see him." A click. A blast of bright red. One more opponent smoked.

Fans pack the stands and watch on large plasma video screens. With the group mostly males in their teens through 30s, the air is as full of testosterone as at a hockey game.

The weapons here are keyboards and mice attached to the fastest networked personal computers around. This game is Counterstrike, and thousands of dollars in prize money are at stake. Welcome to the burgeoning world of E-sports computer gaming gone professional.

Pro gaming is fast becoming the NASCAR of the PlayStation Generation. E-sportwise, New York has lagged behind cities from Dallas to Seoul, South Korea, but more and more tournaments have begun springing up. The next open competition in Manhattan takes place Saturday at GameOn NY, part of the Digital Life event at the Jacob Javits Convention Center. The PC game Unreal Tournament 2K4 will provide the arena for a virtual death-

match, with \$1,500 to the top player and a \$1,000 second prize. Also expected at the tournament are Les Seules, the "Swedish Girls of Gaming."

## E-DREAM TEAM

Abroad, pro gaming is reaching the level of national sport. In South Korea three 24-hour cable TV channels are devoted to showing gamers sitting at their computers, complete with play-by-play announcers calling the action. Last year, top Korean pro gamer Lim Yo Hwan made more than \$300,000 from prize money, salary and endorsements. The closest the U.S. has to Lim is 23-year-old Johnathan Wendel of Kansas City.

In team competition, North American E-sports' "dream team" is Team3D, led by Craig Levine, a 21-year-old NYU senior. Together with 18-year-old Manhattan College freshman Salvatore Garozzo, and teammates scattered in Virginia, Texas, California and Quebec, Levine and Team3D have earned \$40,000 in prize money so far this year, after topping \$100,000 in 2003. The athletic Levine, who enjoys playing active sports including basketball and hockey, sees no contradiction in competing in a chair, barely twitching two fingers, at a geek pastime involving computers. "It's like car racing," he says,

"you're using technology to compete, but it takes all of the players' skills to win."

For Team3D, pro gaming is serious business. To prepare for tournaments they train together over the Internet for up to six hours a day. When they travel to competitions, their plane tickets are provided by video card maker Nvidia and PC manufacturer HP (in addition to free hardware and stipends both companies pay team members). Also among their sponsors is Subway, the official sandwich of Team3D.

The growth of E-sports makes it a natural for promotional tie-ins by computer companies and lifestyle marketers. "Supporting Team3D has given us more credibility with the gaming community. They have quite a following," says Paul Morgan, product manager for HP's Compaq X line of high-end gaming PCs. Targeting all-night gamers, a high-caffeine soft drink called Bawls has become the E-sports energy drink of choice.

## HOOKING UP AT PARTIES

Reared on Long Island, Craig Levine gained his competitive edge at the age of 16 by playing at local gaming galas known as LAN parties. Held for years throughout the U.S. in suburban basements and hotel ballrooms as local area network (LAN) and bring-your-own-computer (BYOC) events,

such grassroots amateur gaming competitions have been rare in Manhattan.

"When I moved here from Oregon, I couldn't believe there weren't any LAN parties," says Eli Mergel, 28. Since 1998 he's been organizing and promoting his own gaming get-togethers. Many of his LAN parties, with 100 or more gamers on a weekend, are held in Brooklyn warehouses or garages. Admission to Mergel's parties typically runs about \$35 for 36 hours of BYOC gaming (Friday at 6 p.m. to Sunday 6 a.m.). But staging a party is hard work and can be expensive for the host. In fact, Mergel says he loses money on his LAN parties because of the money spent on renting a space and network cables, but the parties help keep his pro-am gaming team together.

For anyone interested in getting involved with E-sports, a good place to start is a neighborhood computer gaming center, like web2zone, just below Astor Place in the East Village. Paying an hourly or event-based fee provides access to state-of-the-art PCs and the hottest games. On the first Friday of every month, web2zone stages its All-Night LANsomnia Party from 9 p.m. to 9 the following morning. Admission is \$30 for 12 hours, but they supply computers. Game on. ♦