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HEATHER NEWMAN: Game faces on

Party at U-M Dearborn lets computer gamers get in some side-by-side play

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BY HEATHER NEWMAN

FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

The Apache helicopter circled over the metal-roofed hut, the whub-whub-whub of the blades clearly audible in Vladi Gergov's headphones. His eyes remained fixed on the door, where he knew his opponent was waiting. Five times before, he'd sent missiles hurtling into the flimsy building, turning it into a fireball.

But this time, a lone figure darted out, hid behind a nearby tank and fired one perfectly targeted blast from a rocket launcher. A group of men nearby hooted with glee as Gergov found himself tumbling through the air, a victim of his own game -- a specially modified version of a computer game called "Battlefield 1942."



ERIC SEALS/DFP

Computer gamer Keith Current, 33, of Warren played all weekend at the party on the University of Michigan-Dearborn campus.

Welcome to a LAN party, where you can die a hundred deaths from dark until dawn and still have a roaring good time.

Every weekend around Michigan, thousands of people pack up their computers, their monitors, their keyboards and headphones and mice, then head out to a local basement, meeting hall or college campus to join other players in a binge of video games.

Named after the computer connections that hook them all together, a local area network (LAN), the parties are a chance for gamers to

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hang out and chat, meet people in person that they play online, grab some food and listen to some music.

"They're fun," said Nick Czechowski, 22, of Oakland Township, a senior at Oakland University. "There's no computer lag. It's nice to just be able to say, 'Watch your right!' "

Gergov, 22, and Czechowski were at one of the biggest, called MPCon, at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Up to 150 people lug in their PCs for MPCon four times a year. But there are other LAN events that draw 15 players and more.

Some have tournaments, some don't. Some specify the games people will play. Others, like MPCon, make arrangements to support a few great titles, but let people bring and play anything they like, rolling with the crowd's choices.

At an MPCon party last month, Gergov and Flavio Cerrone, also 22, sat amid a sea of souped-up computers lined up on tables in a campus recreation hall. Around the room, gamers were fighting with and against each other on screen, sucking down cans of Mountain Dew Live Wire and Amp between bites of pizza and pulls on industrial-sized Pixie Stix sugar tubes, listening to trance and electronica spun by a DJ and swapping stories and game news with the people sitting around them.

Outside, a small crowd leaned casually against the wall in the night air, chatting. They wore the unofficial uniform of the event -- collared shirts, long shorts, hair trimmed short -- and didn't pause in their conversations to acknowledge the shouts of victory and moans of defeat that poured from the doors.

In the parking circle in front of them, another man prepared to join in the fray, carefully unloading the tall tower of his PC from his red Ford Escort onto a large rolling cart.

After midnight, when just about everyone who was coming for the night had shown up and set up, the lights were turned down. A rumble of approval rose from the gamers, the music picked up and the play got serious.

The tables where gamers sat, row after row, were illuminated by the eerie glow of the computers themselves, many of which had sides cut away to display neon tubes of light and other custom modifications behind glass.

Some computers spouted water-cooling tubes that made them look like aliens. Others had neon components lit by black lights.

LAN parties typically start on a Friday and last the weekend, wrapping up as

Gaming parties for PCs and consoles (like PlayStation 2 or Xbox) are held nearly every weekend.

Generally, you have to bring your own PC or console, and there's a modest fee of \$10-\$25. Some gaming parties are open only to those over age 18.

Here are some Web sites to check for events near you:

- Grim's Place, www.grimsplace.com
- LANParty.com, www.lanparty.com
- Blue's News (click on LAN Party List in the links on the left side). www.bluesnews.com
- HeadShot Entertainment, www.headshotent.com
- The LAN Party Coalition, www.lanpartycoalition.com
- MPCon, www.mpcon.org

people break down their PCs and pack them back in the car on Sunday morning.

Events that allow players under 18 (as MPCon did until recently) often have gamers crashing in the aisles in sleeping bags before getting up to play again. Most of the adults pop back to their houses, grab a shower, a meal and an hour or two of sleep, then return.

Jeff Lundberg, a 24-year-old who looks so young that he says he gets carded for R-rated movies, has been running MPCon since he helped found it four years ago.

Getting 140 gamers in the same room every three months is not just a social feat. It's also an engineering nightmare.

The group brings its own circuit breaker panel and miles of heavy-duty orange extension cords and network cables to connect all the PCs. Five beefy servers with multiple processor-chip brains inside host the group games, and specialized computer boxes handle the connections to the Internet.

The gatherings started in Lundberg's basement. When they grew to the point where people wouldn't fit -- and he started blowing multiple circuits every time they got together -- he knew he had to look for a bigger place to play.

Lundberg, a student at U-M Dearborn, is president of the Association for Computing Machinery, the student group that MPCon raises money for -- not that it often does more than break even. So it was a small step to reserve the hall space, even though he and his friends initially thought maybe 20 people would show up.

Now the \$25 events usually sell out within six hours of opening registration online.

At the last gathering, many people, like Gergov and Cerrone, were playing the modified version of "Battlefield 1942" called "Desert Combat." It updates the highly regarded military PC game with Desert Storm-style weaponry and scenery.

But there were also other shoot-'em-ups, like "Counter Strike" and "Unreal Tournament," and strategy games like "Warcraft III" and "Command & Conquer Generals." Some players brought games specifically to go head to head with friends they knew would attend. One man was playing "Dungeon Siege" against his younger brother at home over the Internet.

Everyone was playing against someone else, but the mood was friendly and welcoming. Even the shouted dialog between players who didn't use on-screen chat was cheerful.

"Hey, get this over here, Jeremy," called one player to another. "Get this gun. OK, try shooting me now."

That's not to say things don't get intense. People gang up on each other if they think someone's winning too often -- it was four on one against Gergov at one point -- and they celebrate their victories loudly.

"I've been gaming since I was 19, and I've broken keyboards and mice at people's houses" at smaller parties, said Keith Current, a 33-year-old in

information technology at DaimlerChrysler. "I'm too old now," he adds, chuckling, his casual attitude belied by the cold case of Live Wire sitting next to his monitor.

Larry Douglas, a 22-year-old Oakland University student and IT manager from Rochester Hills, remembers the days when he ruled the local gaming universe playing one particular title that's no longer on the circuit.

"I was never down during those two years because I could sign on and go" -- he slaps one hand against the other, palm side, back side, palm side -- "and go home."

But he still comes, and says he has a great time.

"As long as you're a gamer, it doesn't matter how old or young you are," he says. He described one man in his 40s who came recently, complete with executive chair and 21-inch flat-panel plasma monitor. The group cheerfully accepted him.

That's the kind of LAN party animal that Douglas aspires to be. "I'm going to keep coming," he says, "until arthritis stops me."

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