

A PLACE FOR GAMERS TO GATHER

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Bloodfish runs along a narrow stone ledge, a layer of clouds far below his feet.

"I'm going to be so dead, I don't know what I'm doing," he says, clicking a shot at a figure running ahead. In the distance, the spires of stone towers pierce the clouds. Bloodfish has had enough of demonstrating the computer game Counter-Strike for a visitor. "How do I get out of this?"

He looks down and steps off the ledge into the air. The fantasy landscape spins dizzily, then stops as he lands with a squishing sound.

Once he's logged off the computer, Bloodfish is Scott J. Turner, a technology entrepreneur who is taking a plunge of a different sort. His company, Parkside Computing, has sunk more than \$300,000 into a computer game parlor in Amherst called Cyberjocks.

The three-week-old gamer center at 3311 Sheridan Drive is part of a new trend in the electronic world. As gamers tire of playing against computer-generated foes, they are seeking each other out in high-tech arcades, making the sedentary sport less solitary. Team play and even organized tournaments are taking root among gamers, spurring the opening of parlors like Cyberjocks.

"A lot of kids come out of their shells here," Turner says.

"One of the biggest aspects of this is the social aspect," agrees his chief information officer, Aaron Kondziela, a 26-year-old who goes by the name Resonance on the network. "For computer geeks, there aren't a lot of social outlets -- this is the perfect place for them . . . where people share their interests."

Around the country, more than half the nation's 145 million computer gamers play with friends or family members, according to the Interactive Digital Software Association in Washington, D.C.

At Cyberjocks there are four rooms where teams or "clans" can sit together out of the main area. Players strategize and bark orders to each other over headsets, and Cyberjocks is looking to book parties and group events. An all-night network party Saturday drew dozens of gamers.

"Playing against the computer gets old," says "Smoothmother," known in the real world as Jack Burns, an 18-year-old from Grand Island. Software-generated opponents have become predictable for him.

One recent afternoon he battled five foes from Canisius High School on Cyberjocks' network, chasing them and being pursued through one of Counter-Strike's bloody virtual battlefields.

While group play over the Internet is an option, it is prone to frustrating slowdowns because of network traffic and transmission errors, gamers said. Also, it's hard to catch cheating by far-away foes, who can assign themselves special powers by tweaking the program.

"You can come in here and get on a game with people here," Burns said, staring intently at the sharply rendered graphical world on a 19-inch flat screen monitor. "I've been here every day since I heard about it."

Starting about 3 p.m. and continuing sometimes through the wee hours, gamers -- mostly young men -- enter the tinted glass doors. Inside, bright orange and yellow network cables run overhead in wire racks. The cables connect 44 computers to a stack of high-speed servers housed in a glass-fronted closet. Seven network servers, each with a pair of high-end processors, provide the horsepower to keep the games running. Blue and orange lights beam through windows in the computers' black cases while techno music pulses over the sound system.

Gamers sign up for a password and pay \$5 an hour to play one of the six games running on Cyberjocks network. If they're under 17 they need a parent's permission slip to play games rated "mature" by an industry board. They can also play, for \$10 an hour for up to four players, Xbox football on a mammoth 18-foot projection screen.

"It's a safe environment for kids," Turner says. There's no alcohol and, although there's plenty of simulated violence, Cyberjocks eschews adult-rated games that mix extreme gore with sexual content. A "parent-friendly" cafe zone with snacks and laptop connections is planned.

Cyberjocks is looking for ways to tap into the wave of interest in organized team play by running tournaments and perhaps sponsoring teams for national events, Turner says. Some top gamers have gone professional, earning a living from their tournament winnings.

Turner hopes to send a team to a nationwide Counter-Strike tournament this summer in Dallas. Seven hundred players have already signed up to compete for a share of the \$200,000 prize money in the Intel-backed event.

Turner launched Cyberjocks after a sharp slowdown hit his original business, installing high-speed Internet lines for Adelphia Communications. The cable company's bankruptcy filing froze money it owed to Parkside Computing. Now the company still does some network installation work, but Cyberjocks has become its main business thrust.

Outfitting the 7,000 square-foot building in a strip mall cost about \$230,000. Computer equipment added another \$100,000-plus, Turner says.

After being open three weeks, Cyberjocks has attracted 300 users with word-of-mouth alone, Turner says. He expects to multiply the customer base after a grand opening ceremony planned in April.

"We've gotten e-mail from people in Pennsylvania and Ohio -- all over," he says.

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MARK MULVILLE/Buffalo News

Participants play computer games at Cyberjocks at 3311 Sheridan Drive. Team play and even organized tournaments are taking root among gamers, spurring the opening of parlors like Cyberjocks.

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