

THE GAME GOES ON AT CYBERJOCKS

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Author: BEN ALLEN- NEXT CORRESPONDENT

The rooms are dark and neon-lit. There are lights of bright red, purple, blue everywhere. Techno music and gunshots are heard in the background. Computers are everywhere. The people seated at them are wearing headsets and seriously carrying out their tactics. These players are fighting a battle -- a virtual battle, with strafing, snipers and tanks -- against the people in the other room, and with the teammates sitting next to them.

This isn't the Pentagon war room -- this is CyberJocks, the next best thing.

Welcome to CyberJocks, "the next generation in competitive gaming," a brand-new place where computer and video games are played on a network (LAN) of computers and consoles against your friends, who are now your teammates and allies -- or your enemies.

CyberJocks, on Sheridan Drive in Amherst, has 44 computers, and also has console systems like Playstation and XBox. You can play literally any game you want against a group of your friends or other players already there. There are six gaming rooms -- a large one for computers, a medium-size one for the console games, and four small gaming rooms for playing with your team in tournaments and leagues.

Whether you want to play war games, strategy games, sports games or role-playing games, CyberJocks has them all. You can play by yourself, against computer-simulated players, or against the people around you. You can communicate with your teammates via the headsets and microphones provided.

The computers are all state-of-the-art and very fast. The computer cases themselves are overhead and neon-lit from the inside. The computer servers, the computers that the games themselves are hosted on, are all located inside CyberJocks and are also state-of-the-art. Comfortable "executive" chairs are at each computer and screen. If you don't want the enemy team to overhear your team communication, you can just hop in the other room.

If computers aren't your thing, you can go in the back room, plop down on a leather couch, and play Playstation on a big-screen TV. Or, if you just want to get a feel for the place and look around, you can watch the current games being played on overhead screens.

The players, whether novice or experienced gamers, are all friendly and get to know each other mainly by the aliases used in-game. The players are of different ages, interests and genders. Everyone from athletes to lawyers have been seen playing there. Ages range from elementary school students to retirees, although a majority of players seem to be high school-age.

CyberJocks is in the process of developing a food system that will let you order pizza, submarine sandwiches, and even tacos, and have the food delivered right to your computer. This is for those who

cannot be bothered in the middle of their game to get the food themselves.

Players of all skill levels play, too. People who have never even played games before seem to get addicted as fast as everyone else. They often are heard screaming, "HOW DID HE SHOOT ME? I WASN'T EVEN IN THE SAME ROOM! HE MUST BE CHEATING!" Yet they seem to have as much fun as the people in the next room laughing at them and going off for their next in-game kill. There is often a lot of taunting and screaming going on between players of opposite teams, across rooms, but hey, it's all in fun.

CyberJocks has a spectrum of skill levels for their video games, but a lot of the regulars with high skill levels have interesting stories to tell. Dwane Covert, a sophomore at Kenmore East, plays in the CyberJocks Counter-Strike league, and started playing a few months ago. (Counter-strike is a team-based, strategic, multi-player game in which a team of terrorists face a team of counter-terrorists.) Dwane's alias is "MrMagnetix." He is currently starting a clan (a competitive team) called "Team Special Ed." "I haven't played in any big tournaments but just small ones at CyberJocks," he said. "We play some on Fridays or Saturdays at CyberJocks; it all depends on the crowd that is there."

Covert's favorite weapon is the M4A1 assault rifle, and he is quite sneaky with it. "One time I followed a guy for two minutes before he realized I was behind him, and the only reason he found out I was behind him was because I got him in the back of the head."

Aaron Lepsch, who goes to Devry University in Columbus, Ohio, has played Counter-Strike for several years. When he first started playing in 1998, he made a clan called "Elite Soldier Militia" with some of his friends. They are now the top team in Ohio. Elite Soldier Militia has been to national tournaments, including the Cyberathlete Professional League, the biggest one in the nation. Aaron and his clan-mates have even been sponsored before and won big cash prizes.

CyberJocks and its Counter-Strike leagues and competitions are more relaxing for him and a lot different than big competitions. "Friendly games are nothing like playing in the big tournaments" where teams compete for money and sponsorships, Lepsch says. "There is a lot more pressure involved to execute and if you're having a bad day, then you might as well pack your bags and go home."

Alex Keeler, a junior at Grand Island High School, plays under the alias "AKA God" and also plays Counter-Strike at CyberJocks and is quite good, as many CyberJockers will tell you. His favorite game, however, is Natural Selection, a first-person shooter strategic game that is also team-based, with aliens vs. Marines. Keeler is one of the best Natural Selection players in Western New York, and also has a clan of his own, the Storm Troopers of Death. He is currently in the process of starting up a Natural Selection tournament at CyberJocks.

CyberJocks

Address: 3311 Sheridan Drive, Amherst, NY 14226

Phone: 837-2600

Hours: Monday to Thursday 3 to 11 p.m.

Friday: 3 p.m. to 4 a.m. or later

Saturday: 11 a.m. to 4 a.m. or later

Sunday 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Cost: Gamers pay \$5 for a credit. A credit buys an hour of gameplay on weekends, 90 minutes on

weekdays. You can buy five hours for \$22.50, 10 credits for \$40, and 20 credits for \$75. There are LAN parties where you can stay all night for a fixed rate, usually \$20.

Ben Allen is a senior at Grand Island High School.

DEREK GEE/Buffalo News

Mike Cooper, 15, is intent on his network game at CyberJocks.

The main room at CyberJocks features guys with headsets, locked in a virtual battle.

Gamers play Playstation 2 football on a giant projection screen at CyberJocks.

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