



FRAGGING ON THE VERGE

CAN PRO GAMING BREAK THROUGH TO THE MAINSTREAM?

>> While the words "professional gaming" might draw little more than a blank stare from the majority of Americans, there is little doubt that the phenomenon of "e-sports" is one of the fastest growing competitive movements in recent history. Each and every day in this country and around the world, thousands of contestants are matching up either at organized tournaments or online to play video games for real-world cash and prizes. Some of the most talented, like famed champion Jonathan "Fatal1ty" Wendell, have managed to achieve the ultimate dream of kids everywhere: ditching the day job and earning a healthy salary from doing nothing but playing video games. <<





In many ways, professional gaming has already succeeded well beyond the hopes of its most ardent proponents. Now, the developing e-sport finds itself at a crossroads. Over the next year, most of the major players in the professional sports market will make a push towards the mainstream, including regular televised coverage of events and sponsorship deals with major tech, automotive, and lifestyle brands. Is pro gaming ready for prime time? Over the next few pages, we talk with the leaders in the field to find out.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS, HUGE GROWTH

"For the first time, I felt like I was experiencing what would be the future. I was really, truly experiencing something that was outside of myself," recalls Angel Munoz, president and founder of the Cyberathlete Professional League, when asked about his first time playing Doom, id Software's iconic first-person shooter. In the years that followed, Munoz became a pioneer in professional gaming, quitting his job at a successful investment banking firm to start the video game website Adrenaline Vault. A few years later, he founded the CPL as a way of formalizing the already flourishing LAN party scene.

"People were having LAN parties, but they were disorganized," comments Munoz. "It was more for bragging rights. I really think CPL was the first organization to bring corpo-

rate sponsorships and standard rules to reinvent the way things were done to present it more as a sport."

Early CPL tournaments were small affairs, with the first event drawing only 300 people, including both spectators and competitors. "People look back and say, 'They only had 300 people! Three hundred people at a LAN party in '97 was a big deal,'" observes Munoz. "So, we were encouraged from day one.... The buzz started right there at that one event. From there, it escalated. A lot more companies got involved, a lot more people started participating."

Today, CPL events may have as many as 1,000 competitors being watched by more than twice as many spectators. CPL events take place in numerous countries around the world, including the U.S., Singapore, South Korea, Brazil, Australia, and China. Over the course of a season, the league will hand out over \$1 million in cash and prizes. All this activity has not gone unnoticed by companies like AMD, ATI, and Pizza Hut, all of which have signed corporate sponsorship deals for the CPL.



■ CPL founder Angel Munoz

NEW PLAYERS

In recent years, other professional gaming organizations have formed, each seeking to add a different dimension and focus to the growing sport. Some of the notables include the Global Gaming League, Major League Gaming, and perhaps the largest on a worldwide basis, the Korea-based World Cyber Games.

As opposed to the American-style sports league format that has inspired many prominent pro gaming organizations, the World Cyber Games drew its inspiration from a much older sporting tradition—the Olympics.

"The format is Olympian in its scope—at least the spirit is Olympian—but we're obviously annual as opposed to every four years," says Michael Artt, general manager of the World

Cyber Games U.S. division. "I think that's the spiritual model in terms of how the brand harmony through gaming."

The WCG currently operates in 70 different countries worldwide, with total partici-

pants in live events and online tournaments numbering a jaw-dropping 250,000 people. Each country holds a series of regionals and national finals in which players earn spots on the national team that competes at the World Cyber Games Grand Final. The Grand Final event, much like the Olympics, moves to a different host city every year. It was held in Monza, Italy this past year.

The CPL and World Cyber Games largely focus on PC games—especially the wildly popular team FPS Counter-Strike. Another organization, Major League Gaming, distinguishes itself as the only console-only league, placing a special emphasis on Bungie's ultra-successful Halo series. MLG president and COO Matthew Bromberg also emphasizes that the MLG is structured more like traditional sports leagues than the CPL or WCG. "It's a league," comments Bromberg. "It's seven cities and professional players are signed to the league and make money as pros. We have an ongoing pro circuit and there are rules and we have a players' association. These other guys are great, they're just not leagues."

Much like traditional sports, MLG recently made headlines for big money contracts when it signed a deal with the country's top Halo 2 team, Tainal Boss (led by Tom "Isquared" Taylor), to a \$1.25 million dollar deal, the richest offer ever signed in professional gaming.

(Continued on page 43)





(Continued from page 41)

THE PUSH TOWARDS THE MAINSTREAM

As professional gaming continues to make inroads among dedicated gamers and set attendance records with each passing season, many of the leagues are beginning to look towards ways of bringing the sport into the mainstream. As is usual, a big part of this push will include efforts to broadcast both lifestyle and live events on national television.

Recently, satellite television provider DirecTV and the CPL announced plans to begin programming that features both CPL events and gamer personalities. A pilot episode aired in October, and Munoz confirmed that, in 2007, he expects CPL broadcasts to be a part of regular DirecTV programming.

Although DirecTV has a fairly limited audience at present time, Munoz feels the partnership could lead to bigger things in the future. "DirecTV only has a base of about 15 million anyway in the U.S.," he states. "But one of the things is that people need to remember about DirecTV is that they are owned by News Corp, which owns Fox and Fox Sports. They also own IGN and MySpace.

The idea is that this will sort of leak out from there and get carried by some of their other properties. That's why I think there's a true potential between the relationship between CPL and News Corp."

For its part, Major League Gaming has recently begun what is probably the most high-profile pro gaming television deal in the relatively short history of the sport. After kicking off in November, the USA network has agreed to run a series of seven one-hour MLG programs during the holiday season. Matthew Bromberg feels that this deal will be instrumental in putting MLG on the map for a new audience. "We had a number of conversations with a number of different networks — broadcast and cable," he said. "It was a long process, but ultimately we felt like the folks at USA understood this the best. They had a lot of experience with World Wrestling Entertainment and were really interested in getting behind it promotionally...and USA Network is the largest cable network in America. They are in 90

million homes, which is a pretty big deal."

Despite some coverage on the small network HDNet last year, World Cyber Games has yet to announce plans for regular U.S. television broadcasts. However, Michael Artz did confirm that negotiations are underway.

"Absolutely, 'Television is going to be a very big part of our future, and has to be,' Artz states. "We are talking to a number of prospective partners, all of whom are major global media players, because obviously we're interested in a global position."

Although nothing concrete has yet to be announced, the WGC does have a tremendous track record of success in other territories, especially in Korea, where following professional gaming is a national pastime on a scale not yet imagined in the U.S.

"In Korea, you'll get 50,000 people going to an event to watch two guys square off in a video game," observes Artz. "You've got three networks, two of them being the one and two networks for 12- to 34-year-olds,

that are 24 hour gaming networks. Imagine ESPN, but all video games instead of real sports nonstop, with an occasional stoppage for SportsCenter-type programming. It's absolutely, legitimately part of the fabric of entertainment."

WILL IT WORK?

It's clear that pro gaming will be attempting to break through to a more mass audience in the U.S., the question remains: Will the American audience, a good part of which still doesn't fully embrace the gaming lifestyle, be drawn to this new form of competitive sports?

In answering this question, Artz draws a parallel between the current situation of professional gaming and the history of other popular "alternative" sports.

"Ten years ago, where were the X Games? It was this tiny, little novelty thing," Artz comments. "Now, they get covered live like real sports. There's a lot of attention on those guys.... There is a huge base of people playing PC and console games online. Now, it's just a matter of educating the American consumer that you can play this thing and turn it



MLG's Matthew Bromberg



into a vocation if you're good enough. Even if you're not looking to turn it into a vocation, you can still turn to play in a tournament."

MLG's Matthew Bromberg feels that it's ultimately a matter of finding the right way to package. "We always believed that, if millions of people can watch other people play poker, if millions of people can watch people making left turns around a track at high speed [they can watch pro gaming]," he says. "There are certain things that you don't intuitively think of as making good television that turn out to be making great television when handled the right way."

He also stresses the importance of providing compelling personalities and human-interest angles for the casual audience. "Some folks can watch video game play live and understand it intuitively," Bromberg observes. "Some people are going to need a little more. It's not unlike a sport that people don't frequently watch in the Olympics—take curling for example. In order to make curling interesting, people need to learn something about these athletes and who they are. You mix that with 'let me explain a little bit about what curling is and how it works'...if you get that mix right, it's fun and interesting."

While the leagues are confident they can hit upon the right formula, others are more skeptical. Geoff Keighley, a veteran game journalist and host of Spike TV's *Game Head*, has a decidedly mixed reaction to the pro gaming broadcasts he's seen thus far.

"The reason I'm somewhat skeptical on whether this will become real, mainstream television is that the real gameplay is hard to present in a compelling way on television," Keighley says. "I think these games are fun to play when you're actually in control of them, but to watch them from afar, I find the action is far too fast-paced. It's very hard to understand who's which character and what they're doing. I play a lot of Halo, but I watch a Halo match on TV and while you appreciate these guys are having fun playing, but I'm not having fun watching. I think what works on television are the people and personalities and the profiles of the real, competitive gamers. But the actual competition—which should be the culmination of everything—is not very compelling to watch, bordering on boring."

Angel Munoz disagrees, citing the generation of under-30 gamers that have grown up with an intuitive understanding of gaming as the real core of its viewing audience. "Over

the years, we've invested a lot of time in promoting to the younger generation, like my son for example. He's nine years old, and was born in a world where there was something called professional video games. There's no distinction in his mind—it's all competition and he loves to go watch the best at computer gaming just as he likes to go watch the best at any sport," he claims. "Now, as a nine-year-old organization, we have people that participated in our events when they were 19 years old, that now are 28 and 29 and have families—that's our market. DirecTV agrees with us, that's the market that I address. I've been consuming traditional media at lower levels than previous generations anyway, and they would like to bring that generation back to television."

Whatever the outcome of pro gaming's adventures in television, it's clear that this new form of sports will continue to thrive, whether or not it's embraced by the mainstream. All of the leagues we spoke with reported impressive year-on-year growth in participation and attendance, a trend that should continue to grow as a new generation of game consoles draw more and more players into online multiplayer gaming. Also,

it's important to note that as webcasting and mobile video services for cell phones continue to gain more traction in the U.S., television itself will likely grow less important as time goes on. Munoz, who envisions a future where there are arenas in several major cities dedicated solely to gaming competition, feels that the Internet, which helped foster the pro gaming community in its early days, is the place where it will ultimately thrive as a spectator sport.

"As important as people think television is," he suggests, "we're big believers in technology and think that this is going to be the sport of the Internet. That will be where people go to watch our events in larger numbers than they watch it on television. We have our own online viewing solution we're going to be coming out with. I think as that becomes perfected, you can feel you're in the game. I want you to be able to go into a game in your home and feel that you understand the strategy that *Fatality* is using in the game. That is really the launching platform to take it to the next level." ■■■■

*by Geoff Keighley
and Angel Munoz*