



## EYEWITNESS

0207

## GAMING FOR DOLLARS

CORPORATE SPONSORSHIP IS PRIMING A NEW GENERATION OF PROFESSIONAL GAMERS. PC GAMER COUNTS THE BEANS

Gaming tournaments were once one-time shots at geek fame and comically large prize checks. Now, press releases tell of tournaments among full-time gaming professionals making a living on endorsements and a steady paycheck, rather than frags and losses.

Who's signing those checks, and can you really get paid to play, win, lose, or draw? You can...but you probably won't. Companies are ponying up as competitive-gaming sponsors, but the biggest money is going straight to the tournaments and league organizers; at the individual and team levels, the threshold for meaty, quit-your-day-job stipends is extremely high.

If there is a formula for success as an individual, it's win, win again, and drive lots and lots of eyeballs to the logos on your website. "We're looking for specifics about where we can get our brand out. We want website stats to see how much traffic [a competitor] gets," says Jennie Eckardt, global launch manager at Plantronics, which sponsors a number of events and players with what the company says is a 50/50 split of merchandise and cash. "Unfortunately, I'm not going to support a large team that has no chance of winning a tournament."

Picking a winner is tough, so many companies stay out of the handicapping business altogether and aim for the leagues. "[Our involvement] has primarily been on the tournament and event level. AMD, formerly ATI, has sponsored a number of leagues, with multi-million dollars," says Will Willis, AMD's senior PR manager. The company only recently began dipping its collective toe into clan sponsorship, but at a fraction of its overall event-sponsorship budget.

If nothing else, the leagues have primed the pump for com-



■ The PMS Clan: Who wouldn't want to sponsor them?

petitive-gaming sponsorship dollars aimed at individuals.

"I wouldn't say we changed the entire paradigm, but we happened to start when a lot of large corporations were becoming concerned about the changing habits of their core demographic, and they were looking for answers," says Angel Munoz, founder and president of the Cyberathlete Professional League. "But I have wounds from trying to pitch [the CPL], from the people who rejected us in the beginning."

It may sound like an inexpensive proposition for international conglomerates to pay a few gamers to train 60 hours a week on video

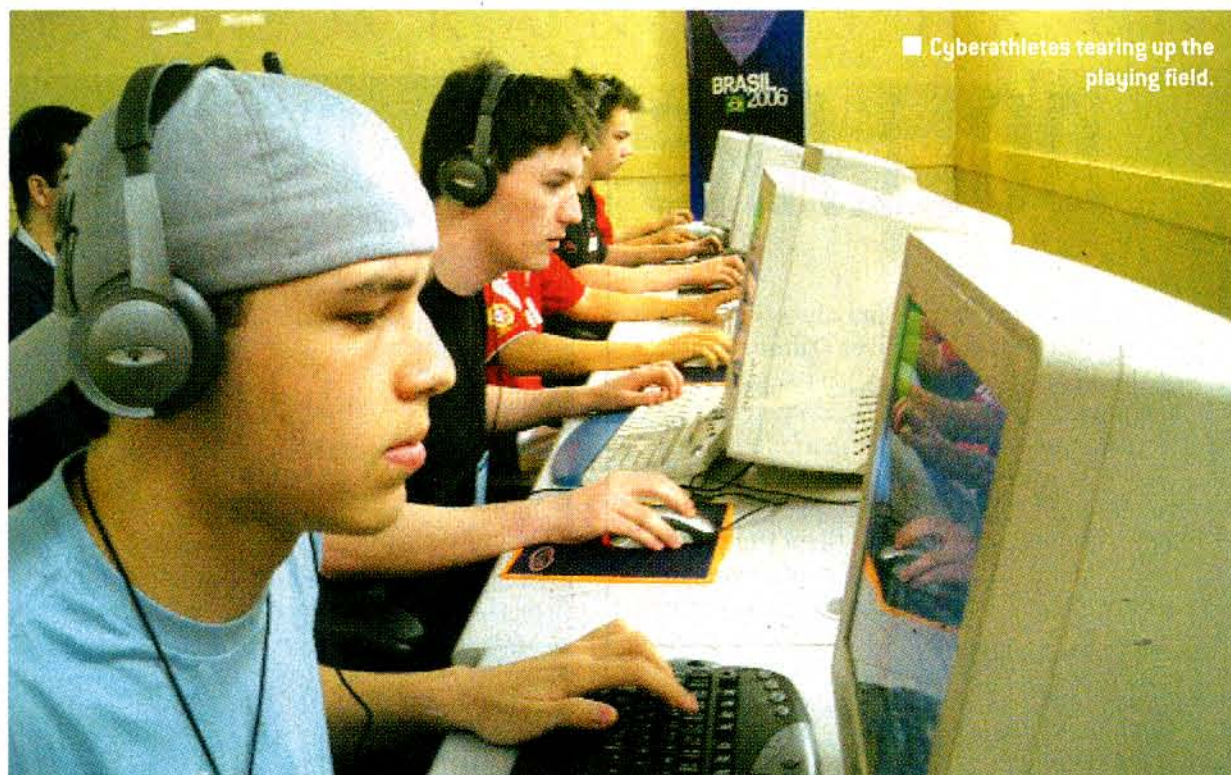
games, but the larger companies getting involved in professional gaming sponsorships still prefer to steer their support to the top of the food chain: the competitions and leagues themselves. Pizza Hut, one of the CPL's major sponsors, is wrapping up its first year of sponsorship, and while indications are strong that it will re-up, the company won't be fielding a *Counter-Strike* team anytime soon.

"There's an obvious fit—gamers are at home competing, they need to refuel and keep playing, and our pizza can be ordered online," says Chad Wadley, Pizza Hut's director of digital marketing. "But typically, as

a brand, we don't sponsor individuals. In the future, if there's a guy with national exposure, we may consider it."

Leagues typically have the kind of corporate structure and operating history that suits like to see before handing over serious money. Since many gamer clans are comprised of adults and minors, and since the groups form and break up at will, they're a little too unstructured for the folks controlling the checks. The few companies that have engaged in direct sponsorship deals with individuals and clans have colorful tales to tell. "These teams are variable. At one moment, they say they are able





to go to a CPL event, and then we find out they're not going because a player jumped to another team," Eckardt says.

Up-and-coming companies, on the other hand, are often more eager to support individual game players and emerging clans, but lack the resources to contribute gobs of money. "It's

long, because the expense is not prohibitive."

Fielding a team, or even a single salaried player, is beyond the reach of smaller companies, and even the bigger names are reluctant. "We would rather broadly promote the phenomenon of LANs and gaming than a specific individual. We think

many tournament gamers—and subsequently, a stumbling block to making a steady living off the sport—is that, unlike many mainstream tournament sports such as auto racing, golf, and tennis, the vast majority of the cyberathletics field finishes out of the money entirely. A golf or tennis pro can make a modest

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been our experience that by contributing our boards to LAN events, we get the game community to discuss the product," says Bob Costlow, director of sales and marketing at gaming keyboard maker Wolf King. "Unless you're Intel, you have to use your marketing budget judiciously. LAN sponsorship is something [we] can do all year

it's a more disciplined way of promoting online gaming," says Mark Vena, Alienware's vice president of marketing. "We get a lot of queries at events from cyber-celebrities asking if we will sponsor them, but we would rather not show any favoritism toward any individual gamer."

Another problem facing

income consistently placing in the teens. Not so in the gaming world, where prize money is often reserved for the best eight, or even just the top three finishers.

That dynamic drove Evan Bradshaw ("Nomadic") from the full-time competitive circuit after less than 6 months.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

**NORM's**

# RELEASE METER 0207

Parting ways with your holiday bounty

Now that you've got some holiday dough in the bank, you need to spend it on something. Here's a fancy little list to help you decide how long you let your gifted dollars collect interest before you come to your senses and get some instant gratification from them. As always, send release date tips and questions to [norman@pcgamer.com](mailto:norman@pcgamer.com).

## WINTER 2006

Anarchy Online: Lost Eden	Funcom
World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	Blizzard
Battlestations: Midway	EIDOS
War Rock	Elephant Ent.
Supreme Commander	THQ
The Sims 2: In Season	EA
LA Street Racing	Groove Games
Heart of the Empire: Rome	Atari
Pure Sim Baseball 2006	Tri-Synergy
War Front: Turning Point	Tri-Synergy

## SPRING 2007

Half-Life 2: Episode 2	Valve
Silverfall	Atari
Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway	Ubi Soft
Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar	Midway
Resident Evil 4	Ubisoft
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars	Activision
Dungeons and Dragons Online: Forsaken Lands	Atari
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	THQ
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	EA
Shadowrun	Microsoft
Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures	EIDOS
Rag Doll Kung Fu	Take 2
Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising	Sony Online
Warhammer Online	EA

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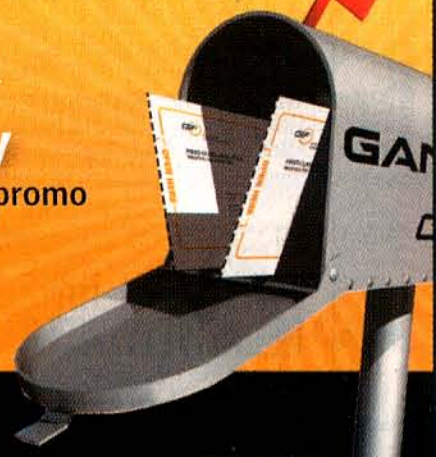


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# GAMING FOR DOLLARS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

Although a team sponsorship covered his travel expenses, he was unable to secure enough wins in his specialty game (*Quake 4*) to support himself at a competitive level. "Middle-tier players can pick up sponsorships where a sponsor will only pay for airfare and hotel—you won't get a salary on top of that, and when [tournaments] only pay out to the top three, it makes it really hard," Bradshaw says.



■ Celebrating a big win. Calm down, guys!

Of course, tournaments won't pay out more money until sponsorships and spectator investment build up the purses. Unlike in major poker tournaments, gamers aren't feeding the kitties with thousands of dollars just for the right to compete. "You really can't blame the sponsors—I blame the sport itself. It doesn't have too big of a spectator audience right now," Bradshaw says. "It should, if people could really appreciate what they're watching, but when you don't have that spectator draw, it's going to be hard for sponsors and teams to get the exposure they're looking for."

"It's not just about how well you rank—sure, that's important, if we spend money on a team, we want them to be visible. They don't have to win the whole thing, but they have to do relatively well," Willis says. "And we want them to be decent individuals."

What about the crown prince of sponsorships, Fatal1ty, who sports an entire signature line of PC parts and gamer accessories? He says about his own success, "You need the credibility of being a champion or a winner at this stage of the game, but you also need to have character like any other sports star," he says. "But remember, if your attitude is negative, and you're just too cool, sometimes, that can backlash and you don't get the more genuine deal."

Some organizations pull in significant

sponsor support despite not always racking up top-three finishes. Amber Dalton, leader of the all-female PMS Clan, isn't shy about acknowledging that being a competent woman gamer doesn't hurt marketability. "When sponsors are looking at where they're going to put their dollars, they're going to look at the groups...that get them the most media," she says. "Because of being women, we can typically hit male and female [enthu-

siast] audiences, which is really hard for the male gamers to do, and we can also hit mainstream audiences because we are unique."

Despite significant support from corporations, Dalton says she's spent \$34,000 of her own money on clan activities over the past two years. Lead sponsorship for PMS Clan in 2007 runs a quarter-million dollars, and Dalton plans to use the money for breadth rather than depth, add-

ing more players to teams on the clan's standard travel-stipend arrangement instead of instituting full-time salaries for the top competitors. In lieu of direct payment, she tries to get clan members side work in consulting or booth demo roles, and is currently looking for a major clan payday from a reality show pilot under development.

Taking head-to-head gaming from seedy LAN arenas to big-money weekly television in just over a decade would be quite a feat. "Things are changing. When we were pitching CPL as a sales and marketing opportunity back in the late '90s, a company would pull dollars from four or five different departments—they were juggling just to be able to sponsor us," Munoz says. "Now, we are in their sponsorship budget or marketing budget directly."

Will that be enough to create legions of stay-at-home salaried gamers? Don't bet the college fund on it. "I don't think [the money] has really grown over the last three years. It's the same faces over and over again, which tells me something," says Robert Krakoff, president of Razer USA, which has pulled back from some of its higher-profile big-money endorsements to favor broader, grassroots support. "Until somebody figures out how to market PC gaming like the X-Games, until it's a regular [television] special, there's not going to be big money." ❌

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### EPISODE 60

#### HOW THE WORLD OF WARCRAFT SOUTH PARK EPISODE WAS CREATED

"It was neat to read how they used a beta *Burnin' Crusade* server, and people would sometimes wa into shots and admins would [have to] insta-kill them." — GREG VEDERMAN

"You can't block off the street for filming in Azeri — GARY WHITTA

#### CHRISTIAN GROUPS' OPPOSITION TO THE VIDEO IN LEFT BEHIND

"Ironically, it's not that violent a game. The emphasis is on non-violent means. The problem is that the game sucks." — DAN STAPLETON

#### SECOND LIFE ATTACKED BY SELF-REPLICATING RINGS

"It's always been part of their model to allow the users to build things—I'd be surprised if they didn't see this coming." — JEREMY WILLIAMS

#### ON GARY'S AMAZING 40-POUND WEIGHT LOSS

"Well, I've said it before, but I honestly believe that the Wii could herald a paradigm where certain games could have a health benefit." — GARY WHITTA  
"How many calories do you expect to burn throwing your Wii-mote into your TV?" — DAN STAPLETON

### EPISODE 59 — Q&A SPECIAL

#### KEN FROM ARIZONA ASKS WHAT KIND OF MACHINIMA WE WATCH

"If you want to see an orgy of machinima, just go to [www.machinima.com](http://www.machinima.com). No orgy in machinima, though." — LOGAN DECKER  
"My personal favorite is the cover of 'the internet porn' in the *Warcraft* world." — GARY WHITTA

#### STEVEN FROM COLORADO ASKS WHAT WE THINK ABOUT GAMES PIGGYBACKING ONTO MOVIES

"It's not like those games prevent original [IP] from being developed." — Dan Stapleton

### EPISODE 58

#### ON CONVERTING A PLAYSTATION 3 FAN TO PC GAMING

"We were trying to get this contract to last a lifetime but our attorney said we had to have a time limit [our winner] won't want a PS3 in 3 years anyway." — GREG VEDERMAN

"A \$7,500 PC cannot in any way be reasonably compared to a \$600 PS3." — GARY WHITTA



■ Gary Whitta