PART III

Connecting Communities

Seventeen *Frag Together*

On a mid-August Thursday in 1996, a carload of young, straggly-looking men pulled up at a Best Western in Garland, Texas, a Dallas suburb. A group that looked like it hadn't spent much time in the local sun emerged into the motel's parking lot, dressed in T-shirts and shorts, joking happily with each other. They made their way to the main office, anticipation etched clearly into their features. While a bit ragtag, they didn't appear particularly rowdy. If anything, they looked a little on the geeky side. At worst, an anxious hotel manager might have thought they'd leave a mess of soda cans and pizza boxes behind.

Even so, there was something odd about them, and about the stream of others that pulled up in their wake. They were doubling or tripling up on rooms, though that wasn't unusual for young people without much money. Stranger were the big computer boxes they were carting in. These guys had the whole setup, with boxy machines and bulky monitors and lots of cords—definitely more than were needed just to plug in a computer. The manager of the hotel stared, confused. She knew they were coming; she had agreed weeks ago to let them use a small ballroom. They'd explained to her what would be happening (more or less), but it was immediately clear she hadn't entirely understood. There had been talk of a convention. She understood that. It was the computer-games part that was still vague.

While other cars pulled up outside, Jerry Wolski was inside the hotel's small ballroom, helping set up computers in rows on folding tables, and starting the tricky job of setting up network connections. The tall, thin twenty-two-year-old was a local, a freelance graphics designer from Dallas who'd started organizing this party a few months before with Kevin

Searle and Jim Elson. As the group finished the setup, *Quake* games began, and players' eyes focused intently on the 3D worlds spinning across their screens. Wolski watched with a smile, excited. This was good, he thought. It was working out.

A few of the other attendees were talking together animatedly, and called him over. "Hey," one of them said. "We're thinking we should challenge the id guys to a deathmatch."

"Let's send them an invitation. Tell them we'll kick their ass. That ought to get them down here," someone else said.

They could find the company's office easily enough. "Yeah," Wolski said. "We can drive it down there personally."

The group looked around for a piece of paper big enough for what they wanted to do, and found a marking pen to write with. They scribbled a message, and fourteen of the people there signed it, a good-natured declaration of war against id Software. Wolski, Elson, and a few others jumped in the car and headed for id's offices. They found Suite 666 and walked in the door. Their hearts were pounding—these were their heroes, after all, and this was the place where some of the best computer games in the world had been created. They walked to the front desk and held the paper out sheepishly. The tone of the invitation couldn't have been more at odds with the meek looks on their faces as they looked around the offices with awe.

The note was short, getting right to its point: "The ops of #quake cordially invite the guys at id to a MAN BEATING."

The event that Wolski and his partners had organized was the very first QuakeCon, with its genesis online in a virtual community built around id's new game. The title wasn't even out in the stores yet, but *Doom* and *Wolfenstein* fans had started testing it as soon as the company released its pre-beta versions onto the Net, and they'd been playing it avidly ever since.

Many had met on an Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channel called #quake, one of the hardest of the hard-core communities of network gamers. IRC, a sprawling ad-hoc network of networks, was still the haunt of fairly sophisticated computer users, often used to discuss the most arcane of

technical subjects, but it allowed anybody anywhere to set up a chat room on any subject. By this time, maybe forty people around the world were regulars in #quake, visiting to look for deathmatch games or simply staying to chat about the forthcoming *Quake*, other games, computers, networking, or anything else that crossed anybody's mind. It hadn't taken long before someone suggested meeting in person. They could call the event #quakecon, bring their computers, and turn it into a party. Wolski, Searle, and Elson lived in Dallas, near the Mesquite home of id, and they suggested hosting it there.

For Wolski, putting the event together had been one of the biggest thrills of his life. He'd grown up in a small town in Poland, and had come to the United States just five years before. Where turn-of-the-century immigrants had used the daily newspapers to learn about the language and culture, the community of gamers he'd found had been his main means of assimilating in his new country. He'd lived in Los Angeles for a few years, and when he moved to Dallas he found a core of gamers there that had sprung up around id. He spent almost every weekend gaming with groups at somebody's house or in rented hotel spaces, or just hanging out talking about games. Sometimes he worried about how much he played, but that did little to slow him down. "Ever since I was a kid, I've been very fascinated with video games, sometimes to the point of obsession," he said later. "QuakeCon and its organization was really a dream come true for me."

Their trip to Suite 666 cemented the success. The id developers, including Carmack, agreed to come to the hotel. Just minutes after they left, a breathless message appeared on Redwood's Quake Page, one of the first Web sites to provide daily news on the game and its community of players:

> *I just got off the telephone with Tim Willits of id (you were expecting some other company maybe?) a few minutes ago. He wanted me to let EVERYBODY know (because "I like your page the best" *grin*) that on Friday the 16th(tomorrow) at 7:00p.m. Central time, JOHN CARMACK and the gang (Tim Willits, Bear, Adrian Carmack, and possibly others), will be attending #Quakecon talking about Quakeworld, Quake II, and the future of gaming at id Software!!*

When Wolski heard of the post, his stomach turned. Word spread quickly through virtual gaming communities, and he knew they didn't have enough room in the hotel for everyone who accessed Redwood's site. Too many people and this could turn out to be a disaster; but there was little he could do about it now. All that was left was to sit back and hope that everything worked out.

Players continued to gather Thursday and throughout the day Friday. Some of the most voluble people online turned out to be quiet, almost painfully shy people in person. It didn't matter. They were among friends here. Many had come from Dallas or nearby cities and states, but players gathered from both coasts as well. Six people had even driven all the way from Canada. No matter what their origins, they had at least one thing in common: Each had a deep desire to play *Quake* with their newfound online friends.

The group, all men, spent much of the time in the hotel ballroom, connecting their computers and running around *Quake*'s dark virtual halls, shooting at each other. It was a different experience playing the games in the same room with your opponents. Many of the attendees had played together online, but live, you could feel the impact of your actions. You could hear people swear in frustration when you killed them. You could shout across the room at your opponent. By the time Friday evening rolled around, close to forty computers were in the room, and nearly sixty people were playing, more than Wolski and the others had planned for. The strain of all those machines was proving too much for the hotel's overworked circuit breakers, and banks of computers—sometimes even the whole room—would periodically go dark. "Fuck!" someone would scream. "I had you!" would come from another dark corner, and Wolski or someone else would have to go talk to an increasingly grumpy hotel staff about resetting the power.

Then came the id-ites. Carmack in his red Ferrari. Romero in his Humvee. The company's new CEO, Todd Hollenshead, was there, Willits was there, and reigning deathmatch champ and designer American McGee was there. They were mobbed by players and spent time signing mouse pads and CDs. People took photos in front of the Ferrari and the Humvee. Some of the players retired into the ballroom, where they played Romero, McGee, and a few others. McGee won more often than he lost. A group of worshipful technology-minded players gathered around Carmack out in the parking

lot, and the ordinarily taciturn programmer wound up answering questions for a full two hours about game design, id's plans for *Quake II*, graphics hardware, and even about Romero's departure from id.

The crew had brought along gear that could be given away as prizes at the event: two *Quake* CDs autographed by everyone at the company, a handful of other games, and T-shirts. Elson, maybe the most practical one in the bunch, quietly mentioned to Carmack and Hollenshead that the event had actually been pricey to put on. Running that many computers in one place was turning out to be expensive, and they hadn't budgeted for it. Carmack wrote them a check to cover some of the costs.

On Saturday came the double-elimination *Quake* tournament. A Dallas stalwart took top prize. On Sunday was a *Doom II* tournament. Wolski won this. But people were playing straight through, no matter what else was happening. The energy level was high enough that nobody slept much for two and a half days. When their fingers or eyes got tired, they'd wander around the hotel and talk, remembering stories from the IRC chat rooms, or make repeated trips to the local diner. They sat in the vinyl booths, nerves buzzing, drinking bottomless cups of coffee until the caffeine had rejuvenated their will to frag. Wolski and the rest of the tired men finally stumbled back into their ordinary lives Monday morning, images of dark underground hallways and coffee cups burned into their memories.

Inside the little hotel ballroom, it was easy to understand the nature of the community of gamers. All of these people had been playing games for years, although most of them had never met in person. Most had been avid *Doom* players, and at its core, *Quake* wasn't all that different. Both games were set in post-apocalyptic-looking worlds dripping with sci-fi horror atmosphere, and in both, the point of the game was to stay alive as long as you possibly could while mowing your way through digital adversaries. And even long before *Doom*, communities of players had gathered around games on online services such as CompuServe or GEnie, or on university servers.

Still, *Quake* was already changing things. The games were on the Internet now, and it was much easier for anyone with a dial-up modem to jump online and find a game. Once people found a match, or a server where

they could find a good game, they tended to come back—the same way a newcomer to a city neighborhood might find his way back to the same Saturday-afternoon game of pickup basketball week after week. Putting the games on the Net meant that game-playing communities were expanding, and that geographical barriers were breaking down. Wolski's group, drawn from around the United States and Canada, was evidence enough of that.

That tired weekend in the hotel ballroom grew over the next few years into one of the biggest events in the gaming world, as Wolski, Searle, and ultimately thousands of others began making the trip to the Dallas suburb every summer. Half pilgrimage to id's home, half convention designed to let people meet the people they'd been blasting into smithereens every night on their computer, it became over time a barometer for the health of the id gaming community.

These were unabashedly action games, with little of the role-playing or storytelling that were centerpieces of Richard Garriott's *Ultima* worlds. They were called twitch games for a reason: People with the fastest reflexes, who could process information more quickly and turn it into the right combination of digital motion and trigger-finger actions, were the most successful at avoiding the bloody fate of the slow. To be slow was generally to be dead, unless you were a master strategist or simply an incredible shot.

For all of that seemingly vigilante-encouraging content, by the time Wolski and the others arrived at the hot parking lot just outside of Garland, the bloody games they played had created some of the strongest and most populous gaming communities around. People were drawn to the games initially for the adrenaline rush and the action of the single-player games. These got the heart pounding, they kept players' attention rigidly focused on the matter at hand, and they were downright *scary* thanks to the mood-altering soundtracks, lightening-quick action, and terrifying creatures populating the games. As soon as players tried playing other people, the whole scene shifted. It wasn't for everybody; certainly, many people tried the deathmatches and found them intimidating or simply no fun. But for many more, it was an intoxicatingly different experience.

Single-player games, while gripping, had missed a vital element of competition. Deathmatches turned out to be more than a little like regular offline sports. The point was to beat the opponent. In the game it happened to be by fragging—or killing opponents—as many times as possible, but as

the games' defenders noted, even football was a form of ritualized warfare. Even chess itself was a violent game at its metaphorical heart. Realistically, the worst injury *Quake* players would suffer would be a sore hand from gripping the mouse too tightly.

Human opponents were more fun to play than the computer's artificial intelligence, particularly when you could sit in the same room. Screaming at somebody just before you pulled the trigger, sending your opponent into the afterlife—well, that was a big part of the fun. Many people discovered networked gaming at their workplaces, staying long after closing time to play with their co-workers. Sometimes they stayed to chat with other players online. Most of the games and the online services that rose to support them included a text chat function, which tended to start with lines like "EAT LEAD SUCKAH!" but often moved on to actual conversations about the game and game-play. Before too long, players realized they'd crossed some line to become genuine acquaintances or even close friends, often without ever meeting face-to-face.

To the outside world, this often proved inexplicable. Those standing outside the game community saw people, often young males, staring blankly into a computer screen with the express and singular intent of killing one other as often and as bloodily as possible. Critics from parents' groups to legislators would charge repeatedly in years to come that the activity could be nothing but damaging to players' psyches. But it turned out that the arena was a fantastic place to make what often turned into deep and lasting friendships, or at least in which to develop a sense of camaraderie and leadership often foreign to otherwise intensely computer-focused kids.

It proved not to be a paradox at all. They came for the competition and the killing, and they stayed for the community. In Wolski's case, the group of people he met playing *Doom* and *Quake* stayed connected, moving to other games over time, including slower-paced online role-playing worlds inspired in some measure by Richard's work.

"It's very interesting to see how life goes on. People get married, get new jobs, and their lives change, yet one thing remains the same: our common attraction to video games, both online and offline," Wolski said, speaking more than five years after his first event. People he met through the games had helped him start his own Web design company, and he now helped organize much larger events. "It's really interesting to me, because I must

admit that when I was younger, I was sometimes afraid that my obsessions with video games would maybe affect my professional life negatively, yet it is quite the opposite."

Eighteen *The First Superstar*

While Wolski and his #quake crew were to make a lasting impression on their particular branch of the gamer community, most of QuakeCon's attendees had been drawn deeply into online gaming circles after *Doom*'s release. The atmosphere of these first-person shooters was very different from that in Richard Garriott's *Ultima* games, encouraging players' competitive natures rather than posing ethical questions, and the shape of communities reflected this fact. As Wolski and others learned to link their computers together to play live games against each other, tens of thousands of people found their way online to play *Doom* through services created specifically for the purpose.

Out of that milieu, the first superstars of competitive play emerged.

The biggest of those early stars was a boy named Dennis "Thresh" Fong. A gaming virtuoso, he put a face on the community at a time when a curious world was trying to figure out just what made these gamers tick.

A slender, soft-spoken man with glasses and close-cropped hair, Fong in the early 2000s had the air of a young military officer. Although his mother was American, he had been born in Hong Kong and spent his first ten years moving around China with his father, a Hewlett-Packard executive. They eventually settled in the Silicon Valley suburb of Los Altos, where he slipped into the life of a typical American teenager after years in multicultural schools.

Fong was initially more interested in sports than in computers. He was the family jock, competing in national tennis competitions and starting a hockey club at school. That didn't leave much time for computers, although the house was filled with them—a byproduct of his father's employment. His

brothers—one older, one younger—were more interested in the technology.

When he was fifteen, a text-based MUD his brothers were playing finally piqued his interest. He started playing with them, casually at first, and then as competitively as he'd ever played his other sports. Unlike *Dungeons & Dragons* players who reveled in the communal storytelling aspects of their events, Fong found himself taking pleasure in the competitive hunt that made up the backbone of some of these new games. A few months into his MUD adventures, he found his younger brother playing a graphical game that involved wandering around dark rooms, shooting another shadowy figure, and being shot at in turn. It looked like even more fun. "Let me try," he said, and his brother let him slip in front of the keyboard.

"I didn't know I was playing another person," Fong said later. "Then I realized it was reacting too quickly and too intelligently to be the computer. I was tripping out. I hadn't played anything like it."

The game was *Doom*, and the trio started playing together, connecting their computers so their digital marines would appear in the same labyrinthine hallways. They'd created a virtual "The Most Dangerous Game," and pushed each other constantly. Eventually, they began to look for other players, gravitating to DWANGO, a new dial-up service aimed particularly at *Doom* players. The company was run by a Houston entrepreneur named Robert Huntley who had taken the old text-based bulletin board systems a step forward, configuring servers in a handful of regions around the United States so players could call up, see who was on their local server, chat with other people online, and then challenge each other to duels. The brothers played on the San Jose server, the one closest to their home in Los Altos. The eldest, Lyle, was the best of the three; indeed, before long he was viewed as one of the better players in the country.

Fong himself wasn't preternaturally skilled at this game. He was good, but not in the way Lyle was good. There were reasons, of course—his brother played more often, and had a better computer. For a competitive athlete, though, those reasons smacked of excuses. The same drive that had pushed him in tennis and hockey was at work here. *Doom* didn't take over his life; he still played tennis and other sports at school, and he didn't let *Doom* get in the way of hanging out with friends, but he was determined to improve.

The trick turned out to be in the equipment. Most people used the

keyboard to control character actions, and the mouse to change the direction of view, but Fong had started out using just the keyboard for all his controls. His brother Lyle was a trackball player, spinning the ball like he was playing *Centipede* instead of using a traditional mouse. That made Lyle faster. At first Fong resisted his brother's attempts to persuade him to change. When his brother went away to China on a summer exchange program, Fong decided to try out the trackball. He was almost instantly better, and was soon beating people he'd never been able to beat before. When Lyle returned, he found himself overmatched. He struggled to catch up, even trying the same trackball-keyboard setup, but in vain; Fong was too far ahead, and was soon all but unbeatable.

While their competitive home environment certainly sharpened their skills, playing against the same opponents every day was little better than playing against the computer. They began to anticipate each others' moves, which at times made it feel as if the games had pre-determined ends. Eventually they wanted to connect with and challenge other people outside the DWANGO server environment. Fortunately, they had a friend who hosted LAN parties, called Fragfests, where people were invited to bring their computers, network them together, and play *Doom*. These events grew until dozens of people were attending, in a way reminiscent of Richard's early *Dungeons & Dragons* groups. All that fragging online and in person had earned Fong a reputation on the San Jose DWANGO servers, where people referred to him by his game name: Thresh (a compression of "Threshold," as in "of pain").

By late 1994 Lyle was attending the University of California, Berkeley, and had switched to DWANGO's Oakland servers. This separation gave the brothers an idea. They liked playing through the DWANGO service and had made some close friends that way. But DWANGO had flaws: It was relatively expensive, charging two dollars an hour, which added up over weeks and months of play. Moreover, people in different cities had to make expensive long-distance calls in order to play an opponent on a different server.

Not satisfied with those options, the Fong brothers decided to launch their own gaming space built around the concepts they felt made for the best online matches. A local wireless phone company was running a promotion that gave customers unlimited night and weekend calling for no extra charge. They figured out a way to create a call-forwarding service

allowing people to call a cell phone number with their computers and be immediately forwarded to a modem. That was all they needed to set up a cheap DWANGO alternative. They signed up with a DWANGO rival called H2H as a franchisee, rented a small office in Sunnyvale for a bank of modems, then bought a single cell phone plan to forward people's modem connections automatically to the gaming service.

People streamed in, drawn by Fong's growing reputation. Many of the core players on the Bay Area DWANGO servers were already their friends and routinely played with the brothers in other venues. The brothers' company made good money, and ultimately undermined DWANGO's business in the San Francisco Bay Area. But Fong was getting bored with gaming. He was good enough now that the game wasn't difficult even against the best people in his region. He was a thoughtful player, having learned from tennis and other sports to study the game's physics and other players' styles so as to anticipate and counterattack at precisely the right moment.

Todd Gehrke, a Microsoft programmer and top-notch *Doom* player on the Seattle DWANGO servers, later told of seeing Thresh in action. Gehrke was dialing in to the Bay Area from the north and played with a higher ping rate due to distance, which meant he was playing with a potentially substantial disadvantage. [26] In this case, Thresh compensated for the difference in their ping rates by playing with a simple pistol as his weapon, while Gehrke played with the full range of vastly more lethal *Doom* weapons at his disposal. It didn't matter. Thresh won handily.

As gaming moved online and farther into the mainstream, executives from other high-tech sectors sought to use the advances Carmack and others had made to boost their own profiles. Perhaps the most prominent company to reach out to the young communities Thresh and his brothers had adopted was Microsoft, which in 1995 was desperately trying to convince developers that its DirectX multimedia technology, a part of its new Windows 95 operating system, could be used to make good games.

At the time, the company didn't have a great reputation for multimedia applications—those were still the domain of Apple Computer, although that company was losing ground fast—and most PC game companies still wrote

directly for DOS instead of for the Windows operating system. In hopes of breaking through this skepticism, a talented Microsoft programmer named Alex St. John went to id's John Carmack and asked if id Software could make a version of *Doom* running on DirectX.

Carmack agreed and gave St. John the *Doom* source code, and a team of programmers was hired by Microsoft to work on a version called *WinDoom*. With that in hand, Microsoft was able to convince other developers that its technology was strong and stable enough to support resource-intensive games. Other programmers started coming on board.

In large part to show off the new Windows 95 operating system's ability to play games, Microsoft decided to host a huge Halloween party that year for its game developers. In conjunction with this, it arranged with DWANGO to sponsor a national *Doom* tournament, where people on each of the company's regional servers would vie for a spot in a final-round tournament on the Microsoft campus, at the party. Deathmatch '95 would be the first time that the best *Doom* players around the United States would be able to meet and play face-to-face.

Gehrke signed up and almost immediately lost in an early qualifying round. But the tournament was on his own employer's campus, so he wasn't about to miss any of it. Fong, of course, was one of the finalists.

Microsoft went all out for the party, spending close to $1 million on props (including a giant volcano), food, and other entertainment. The company dedicated one of its parking garages to the event, turning it into a giant haunted house. Early DirectX game developers were invited to create their own sections, and scores of journalists came for tours. Id showed up with a band called GWAR that was famous for dressing up in freakishly cartoonish horror costumes and spitting fake blood on its audiences. The band brought along its own props: an eight-foot-tall vagina with a few dozen little phallic sculptures, and a giant penis-shaped monster. Microsoft's public relations staffers were horrified, but the id attendees loved it.

Even Microsoft's CEO, Bill Gates, got into the Halloween mood. The company created a video that projected him into a *Doom* background, where he ran around for a few minutes blasting demons with a shotgun. Afterward, he stepped onto a stage to address the crowd. While he was talking, a live demon—a Microsoft employee dressed up for the event—jumped into the room and started running towards him. Gates pointed the shotgun and

fired, snapping, "Don't interrupt me while I'm speaking." Above him, a giant Microsoft logo popped onto the screen, with the company's Internet slogan, "Where do you want to go today?," twisted just a little to read "Who do you want to execute today?" [27]

For the gamers in attendance, this was public relations fluff, even if it was cool to see Gates pay homage to their world. Most didn't see much of the show anyway—the Deathmatch competitors were cloistered in a little lounge for most of the day, and allowed out to see the trade show and party only under supervision. Worse, the matches were punctuated by equipment complaints despite efforts to set up an even playing field. Some competitors didn't like the Microsoft keyboards, the Windows 95 computers didn't support the mice that some players had brought along with them, and the games were played through a DWANGO server instead of by linking the computers together, as some players thought should happen.

None of it mattered in the end. The final match happened late at night, when janitors were already vacuuming the auditorium. Fong won easily. "It was here that I realized that, while I was good, there were people that were insanely good," said Gehrke, who'd stuck around to watch. "Obviously, they were aliens."

Already famous inside DWANGO circles, the eighteen-year-old Fong exploded into national notoriety after the Microsoft tournament. He had won a $10,000 computer (for the first time giving him a better computer than either of his brothers), as well as a lifetime supply of id games. Reporters started calling and showing up at his house. A profile of him ran on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*, treating him as emblematic of the new, confusing world of online gaming. He started getting well-paying sponsorship offers from technology companies.

Still, he went on with his ordinary school life. Many of his friends at school, the ones who didn't play games themselves, didn't even know he was a budding superstar. He wasn't the type to brag. He just didn't think it mattered that much.

In 1996, id released *Quake*. Fong wasn't excited about it at first. He didn't want to learn a new game. He'd spent enough time getting used to *Doom*, and

the prospect of starting at the bottom again and crawling his way through the ranks was distasteful. It was early in the history of tournament play, but his instincts were right—few players would ultimately make their mark in multiple game worlds.

He held out for months. His friends switched over and told him it was a better game. The ability to play over the Internet instead of using dedicated dial-up servers was a powerful new feature, and one that opened up the scope of competition; in theory, he would be able to match guns with people around the world. In practice, high lag times meant that games against people too far away would always be less than satisfying, but at least the potential was there. The issue that he and Lyle had faced—of playing on separate servers—wouldn't be a problem anymore.

Eventually, Fong gave in. He got a copy of *Quake*, and as he'd done with *Doom II*, he began deconstructing the game, familiarizing himself with the new weapons and looking for shortcuts that he could exploit. When he was confident of his skills, he launched himself into the Internet *Quake* servers, this time adopting a different name. He didn't want the baggage of his previous handle to follow him as he learned this new game.

As a means of anonymity, it didn't last. Other players recognized his style, realizing that this "Legacy" was actually Thresh. He reclaimed his name and joined a clan of former *Doom* players called IHOS, or International House of Spork. ("Don't ask," he would say later when asked about the name's origin.) As word got out, he found himself in the familiar position of being the old gun that everyone wanted to take down. "You basically fight and crawl your way up by beating well-known people. Then after you establish your reputation, you have to take on all comers."

While the size of the DWANGO population had limited the number of challenges during his *Doom* playing days, he was now getting up to a thousand emails a day from other trash-talking kids convinced they could knock the mighty Thresh off his pedestal. He had to play some of them to shut them up, but couldn't play all of them. Luckily, clanmates and former opponents (many of whom became close friends) often stepped in to respond to newcomers' taunts, challenging them to prove themselves at lower levels first. The community had hierarchies for a reason; it was an insult to everyone for unproven newcomers to think they could start at the top.

As money and media attention poured into the Internet sector in the

mid-1990s, Fong's community found itself pushed farther into the spotlight. Like Microsoft, computer hardware companies saw gamers as natural allies, or even advertisements. The best first-person shooter (FPS) players often had cutting-edge equipment, as slow computers made for disadvantages no matter how fast you were on the trigger. Like sports companies sponsoring athletes, Silicon Valley companies turned to competitive gamers to make the case for their products' ever-increasing speed and power.

The Red Annihilation frag-off, held at the 1997 Atlanta Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), provided the most public evidence yet of just how avidly corporate America hoped to reach this tech-savvy demographic.

Like Deathmatch '95, Red Annihilation was meant to bring players from around the country into one room. With Internet lag times still rendering direct play mostly impractical, gamers on the two U.S. coasts had developed rivalries and distinctive personalities, even explicitly identifying with some of the ritualized rivalry between West Coast and East Coast rap artists of the time. The tournament would let champions from each side face each other at last, and put trash-talkers' time and money where their mouths were. Anticipation levels ran predictably high. Id got involved, with Carmack even promising to donate his Ferrari as a prize for the winner. Even more than prize money, this was a symbol of radical success.

Fong and his older brother were representatives for the West Coast. Lyle made it to the top sixteen, but ultimately washed out. Fong cut a swath through all comers. He wasn't nervous. It wasn't in his character; even when his tennis team had gone to nationals, he had stayed cool. He didn't trash-talk, either. The East Coasters thought he was arrogant because he didn't talk very much, but he found he didn't need to. Other western players bragged on his behalf.

The game stage was set up as an eight-sided group of tables, with players facing toward the center and little cubicle walls ensuring contestants couldn't see each other's screens. The E3 crowd was kept behind the gamers, but could circle the stage and watch the players' screens. Before the final match, Fong met his opponent, Entropy, a kid about his own age, and they discussed which map should host their final game. Entropy seemed nervous. He had a reputation for being practically unbeatable on one particular map, and the luck of the draw had let him play on that level almost all the way through the tournament (only the final match was left up to the players'

choice). But he'd also seen Thresh eviscerate one of his opponents on the same map, and didn't want to take the risk that Thresh knew the lay of the land even better than he did. After a few minutes of cagey negotiation, they finally settled on a map that neither had played many times. They sat down on opposite sides of the octagonal stage to play, Carmack's cherry-red Ferrari glittering on display directly behind Thresh's chair.

For all the anticipation, the match proved anticlimactic. Fong lived up to his supporters' braggadocio, quickly taking control of the level's key strategic areas. "At that point, you have to make mistakes to lose," he later recalled. "I didn't generally make mistakes." By the time the game started its countdown to the final seconds, he was ahead 13 kills to -1—Entropy was shaken enough by the beating that he had accidentally blown himself up with his own weapon.

Something about the countdown caught Fong's attention. For the first time, he noticed the reflection of the Ferrari behind him in his own computer monitor. And for the first time in the entire tournament, he got nervous. Not at the prospect of losing, as that was at this point an impossibility. Rather, it was the certainty of winning, of being for all practical purposes the best in the world at this particular pastime, that momentarily shook him.

There was a red Ferrari behind him—John Carmack's Ferrari—and now it was *his*.

The awards ceremony was the first time the twenty-year-old had met the boyish Carmack. They chatted for a few minutes after the presentation of the keys.

"How are you going to get the car back to California?" Carmack asked Fong.

It was a good question. He didn't even know how to drive a stick shift. "I think I'm going to ship it," he told the developer.

Carmack thought about that. "I'll be right back," he said, and disappeared. He came back a little while later and held out a thick stack of bills. "That ought to cover it," he told Fong.

That hadn't been part of the deal. Fong counted it a few minutes later. It was $5,000, far more than he needed to cover the costs of the shipping. He took his friends and brothers to a local steakhouse that night, paying for it with Carmack's generous contribution, and had more than enough left over to pay the shipping bills.

The tournament marked another big change in Fong's life, as well as in the public's perception of gaming. For years afterward, when journalists wrote about the nascent "professional" gaming world, they routinely cited the story of Fong winning Carmack's Ferrari. The win helped convince Fong's parents that what he was doing was worth pursuing. "They had been a little concerned," he said. "But I remember the day they became okay with it was the day I brought home a Ferrari."

Fong would go on to win dozens of other tournaments. Once he hit his stride, few people beat him in individual games, and he never failed to place first in a set of tournament matches. His star power bled over to the industry at large. In 1998, he and a group of lesser-known but still stellar players converged on Candlestick Park, then home to the San Francisco Giants baseball team, for the launch of the Professional Gamers League (PGL). The privately owned organization wanted to do for computer gaming what Major League Baseball had done for that sport. Atari founder and video gaming legend Nolan Bushnell took the reigns as commissioner of the new league, and attending journalists were given trading cards featuring Thresh and other league superstars.

Fong and his brothers were already taking their gaming in a different direction. *Quake*'s 1996 release had essentially made their H2H dial-up gaming business obsolete. Since anyone with a modem and an Internet service provider (ISP) could find a *Quake* game online, dedicated services were no longer necessary.

The brothers thought they saw a new opportunity in the dot-com craze for community. After all, there was undeniably a gamers' community by this time, fragmented as it was by game, region, style of play, clan and guild, and any number of other differences. What was needed was a single home for all these people, a portal *by* gamers, *for* gamers. They called the new company Gamers Extreme and registered the domain name Gamers.com, and with that bit of nomenclatural luck and Fong's reputation, the new business was launched.

Fong kept playing for the next few years, but as new games gained dominance, he left the tournament circuit to focus on building the site.

The business flourished, surviving even when many better-funded Web businesses fell victim to the Internet crash. As the years passed, other names succeeded his as the World's Best Gamer, and younger players entered the scene knowing nothing of his reputation for excellence. But for the people who saw his rise—Gehrke, Entropy, and thousands of others—Thresh's name would remain a part of gaming history.

Nineteen *The Women Who Fragged*

In mid-1996, college student Vangie Beal found herself in an Internet café in Victoria, British Columbia, watching a group of her friends playing a game called *Doom*.

It was a guy thing. That's what some said, at least. Guns, demons, blood. Brutally fast action. Some of the men there were fanatic about it, dragging their computers to each other's houses and linking them together, just so they could dial up the local bulletin board all at once and play each other in the same room.

Obsessive, maybe. But a gender divide? She and her other women friends were skeptical.

Beal was hardly a stranger to either gaming or computers. A transplant to Victoria, she'd grown up in a tiny Nova Scotian town of barely 250 people, where entertainment had come in the form of arcade games at the local tourist campgrounds or Atari games at home. She'd picked up the computer bug on her own, teaching herself her own way around her middle school's Apples, and after moving across the country had started hanging out on local bulletin board systems, talking with the regulars and, increasingly, meeting them offline. Nowhere along the way had she paid any heed to the idea that computers and technology were male domains.

So why here? The women she'd met online and at the Net café agreed. They gave *Doom* a try. Learned how to shoot, strafe, and run. Soon she was mowing her way through little digital figures with rockets and shotguns, and—more to the surprise of other people than to her—she found it a blast.

At that point there weren't many women players like Beal, or at least their presence wasn't readily apparent in the world of *Doom*. At Microsoft's

Deathmatch ’95, female faces had been few and far between in the crowd, and even more scarce in front of the clicking keyboards.

This was true for other video games, too. Since the late 1970s, developers had known they were making games largely for teenage boys, and it was almost a happy accident when some significant demographic slice of women found something to like in a game. *Centipede* and *Ms. Pac-Man* had that appeal. Younger girls liked some of Nintendo’s *Mario* games, but women certainly weren’t flocking to *Doom* deathmatches. By 1994, a “girl games” movement had led a few game companies to try to appeal to younger girls with themes such as dating, shopping, and fashion. Titles with built-in appeal, such as the Barbie brand name, sold well, but most of the others didn’t. Critics accused the companies of reinforcing sexist stereotypes, while proponents said they were simply doing their best to expand a market with egregiously lopsided gender dynamics. [28]

Shortly after Beal and her friends started playing *Doom*, the first versions of *Quake* were released. This proved even more fun. The group would line up at computers next to each other at the Internet café, log on to the same servers, and proceed to shoot each other silly or team up against outsiders, screaming at each other across the room. Yet even in this apparently violently meritocratic society, where the only thing that really mattered was the accuracy of your rocket launcher, something was shifting.

The men Beal knew, many of whom had been playing *Doom* for years and were already good at *Quake*, were joining or starting clans that almost never included women. To be sure, Beal and the other women players had felt bits of this exclusion online before. Few women were playing, and the chatter on servers was often sexist, homophobic, or downright abusive. Now they found doors definitively closed. “It was like, ‘When you get better, you can join our clans,’” Beal said later. “But we *were* getting better.”

Instead of lobbying the young men to change their collective mind, the women decided to do them one better. And thus PMS—the Psycho Men Slayers—was born, the first all-female clan to hit the *Quake* server circuit.

The response in the *Quake* community was mixed. Guys weren’t always happy about playing women, particularly when the PMS-ers won. “There was verbal harassment and abuse. But to us it was funny,” Beal said. “A very sensitive female might have taken it harder.” It helped that they were a clan and that their own local friends were on their side. When the

harassment from some trash-talking player got to be too much, the PMS-ers would gang up on him. They had numbers on their side and the kind of confidence that came from flying together in the face of expectations. They weren't top-ranking players, but they were good.

It didn't take long for the rest of the world to see what they were doing. Other female players were beginning to make waves too, and the phenomenon of women carving out a decidedly separate spot in the community, with all the hard-edged, frag-driven determination of their male counterparts, fired imaginations. *Wired* magazine sent a photographer to Victoria late in the year, and the four PMS-ers were featured in a subsequent issue of the publication. Almost immediately, email began coming in from other *Quake* players, writing that they were astonished to see other women players, that they had imagined themselves to be the only ones. A few joined the clan, and before too many more months passed, PMS had gone international.

Even better, other all-female clans started up. Women's tournaments began occurring, and women started garnering more of a presence at the marquis QuakeCon tournament. One of the top women players, Stevie "Killcreek" Case, famously even beat John Romero in deathmatch play. When the PGL started up in 1998, several women's faces were on the player cards handed out to reporters and fans.

Yet as women's online presence grew, the harassment didn't go away. Women players routinely cited problems online that men didn't face. Cloddish pick-up lines were routine. Players were jokingly asked to star in pornographic movies, or assumed to be lesbians. Pornographic photographs with faces altered to look like prominent players were passed around servers. Even the Web sites that posted news and gossip about the gaming community tended to be very male-centric. For the casual observer, it was as if there were no women playing the game at all. That worried Beal, particularly given the response that her clan had elicited from women gamers. "Everything I've done since I was a teenager has been male dominated," she said later. "I have tough skin, and it didn't offend me. But I thought that other girls might look at these sites and say, 'That's stupid, that's not something I'd be interested in.'"

She realized women needed to do more than just form game clans and participate in tournaments. In hopes of carving out a space for women gamers, she launched GameGirlz.com, designing the site as a place where

women gamers could read their own stories, publish their own thoughts, and be exposed to the fact that plenty of other women in the world liked the same things they did. It wouldn't be dogmatic, and it wouldn't be particularly political, but it would provide a place where a more diverse community of gamers could grow. Launched in 1997, it was still going strong more than a half-decade later, long outlasting some of the most popular gaming sites online.

It might even have helped address the broader problems of exclusion, at least a little. By the mid-2000s, there was reason to think that the atmosphere was improving, both for women and other minority groups.

"Racial and sexual slurs are pretty prevalent online," said Caryn "Hellchick" Law in a 2003 interview. Law, a *Quake* player and columnist for the Planet Quake Web site, had been a longtime critic of the community's blindness to sexism and racism online. "But I do see a more general movement to eliminate the use of racial and sexual slurs among gamers. I'm not sure if that's because maybe the community is all growing up a bit together and realizing that we don't want that kind of behavior in our community, or if it's because of minorities being a bit more vocal and saying, 'Dude, I'm black and it ticks me off when you throw around those words like that.'"

Certainly, Beal and the PMS clan discovered something in their gaming years that was often overlooked. On its surface, *Quake* was about running and shooting anything that moved, seemingly channeling the simplest of teenage-boy power fantasies. In reality, it had become a social experience. It was a game happening in the context of a community that rewarded social participation. To be sure, it wasn't for everybody, no matter what gender. The quick responses needed, the simple goals mixed with complicated manipulation of the mouse and keyboard, and the content of the game if taken at face value added up to considerable hurdles for anybody not already hooked by something in the game's play. But Beal had tapped into a notion certainly shared by Garriott and his fellow *Dungeons & Dragons* players: that games, even those ostensibly focused on carnage and killing, were fundamentally about the people playing them.

"I can have a blast sitting in my room with thirty women from around Canada and the U.S. on the same server. We'll just talk, and someone will complain about her husband, or talk about her kid's new tooth," Beal said. "It's still social whether you have friends in the room with you or you have people with you out on a network somewhere."

Twenty *Feels Like Home*

Mike Duarte and Kevin LaMar sat in Mike's blue 1974 VW Beetle on their way to school, talking about games. It was mid-2002, and they were both students at De Anza College, a Silicon Valley–area community college.

"You know what would be cool?" Duarte asked.

"What?"

"It would be cool if we could get a big LAN party going. Bigger than the ones at the churches."

Eleven years after Carmack and Romero and the others had founded id Software, nearly a decade after *Doom*'s first release online, their work had radically changed the face of digital entertainment. Where Richard Garriott and the id developers had come out of communities steeped in *Dungeons & Dragons*, a new generation had grown up that was more comfortable with these fast-paced, complex digital game environments. Its members had been online at least since reaching adolescence. These new gamers still saw the value in playing face-to-face, in gatherings very much like Garriott's *D&D* nights. They just wanted to bring their computers with them.

Duarte and LaMar were at the leading edge of this cohort. Their friendship reached back to eighth grade, when they had discovered a mutual love for computer games. Over the years, they'd put together small parties, hosting gaming nights that had progressively outgrown the spaces they'd found for them. Gamers were no longer hard to find, and communities

were getting increasingly diverse. Indeed, by early in 2003, more than 145 million people in the United States, 43 percent of whom were women, would report playing some kind of video or computer game at least occasionally. In computer gaming circles, the most frequent players were older than thirty-five, and nearly two-thirds were older than eighteen. [29]

Still, there was a certain mysteriousness about these digital communities. Few people in the mainstream media, in censorious political circles, or often-skeptical parents' groups took the time to understand how different games attracted certain types of players, and fewer still sought to parse out the types of friendships and communities that developed. Gamers were still too often painted as a monolithic culture of strange boys staring blank-eyed at screens as they tried to blow things up. What was difficult to understand for those outside the communities was this idea that a vibrant social life could be embedded within the culture of online games. For those on the inside, like Duarte and LaMar, it seemed almost too obvious to be worth comment.

By this point in 2002, more people in the gaming community knew Duarte by his game name, Exar, than by his given name. He didn't look much like a killer: Tall and a little heavy, he had a habit of blinking deeply when he talked, almost as if wincing at his own words. He visibly composed himself when speaking to people who were older. You could almost hear his mother, sometime in the past, admonishing him to be respectful.

Like many kids in Silicon Valley, Duarte had grown up around computers. His father was the pastor at a tiny Foursquare Church in downtown Sunnyvale, a suburban community in the heart of the high-tech region. His mother was a secretary at the local grade school, and when he was younger, he had often stayed after school to do his homework while waiting for her to get off work.

In 1989 he discovered that one of his classmates had a pair of computers networked at home, and the gaming possibilities to be found there proved irresistibly seductive. Duarte had played other computer games before, but being able to play against friends over the networked systems was an entirely different—and wholly thrilling—experience. It wasn't long before his after-school homework sessions were replaced by almost daily gaming sessions. Duarte and his friend ran through a variety of games over the next few years, but were most drawn by *Master of Orion*, a strategy game

aimed at colonizing planets, and *Duke Nukem*, the sex-heavy, gory shooter.

While he enjoyed twitch games, *Doom* wasn't a favorite. Duarte had gone to his uncle's house with his father one afternoon so the men could work on a car together. During one of their work breaks, his uncle walked him over to his computer—the technical interest ranged across the family—and pulled out a copy of *Doom*. Later that night the boy had had nightmares that he blamed on the game's dark, intense setting.

Fortunately, he had more than enough choice when it came to finding games he *did* enjoy. In 1995, when Westwood Studios released *Command & Conquer*, Duarte got hooked. Based very loosely on the *Dune* novels and video games, this was a real-time strategy game that required players to control armies fighting for control of territory and a valuable spice–like commodity (called Tiberium) on a futuristic playing field that was itself perpetually in motion. Duarte and his friends squared off against one another regularly, moving armies while attempting to outmaneuver each other. It was intense competition—bragging rights were at stake—and the boys loved it.

No matter how hard he tried, though, Duarte was in a hole. He didn't have his own computer, and that meant he couldn't practice. He pestered his father mercilessly. The genesis of his desire might have been a game, but he told his dad he could use the computer for programming and doing schoolwork. His father finally relented, but there was a condition: Duarte would have to build the machine himself.

Duarte's father was a rarity, maybe unique to Silicon Valley: A pastor by vocation, he had taken a second job as technical administrator for the local county Department of Education because his church was too small to pay him a living wage. He could see that computer-related fields were already exploding in the early 1990s. If his son was going to be playing games on computers, he might as well learn how they worked and gain some valuable skills. He bought his son a wholly disassembled computer. The boy studied the components and instructions. His father helped out in a hands-off way, answering questions and pointing him to resources in books, but pressing the boy to learn the process himself. Here again was the familiar story: As with Garriott, Carmack, Vangie Beal, and millions of others, the route into computers and gaming ran not through formal schooling but instead through a self-directed course of tinkering.

His machine built, school projects and any actual programming took a back seat to the games themselves. Duarte moved on from *Command & Conquer* to *Star Wars: Jedi Knight*, a 1997 shooting game based on the *Star Wars* movies. The real draw to this game was its online capability, which let him expand his gaming circle to a vast degree. He formed his own clan inside the *Jedi Knight* game community, a group called the Sith Knights, and named himself "Exar" after a character in a *Star Wars* book.

"Playing on random servers itself wasn't all that interesting, but being able to play with other players that you talked with online every day was a real eye-opener," he said later. "I had friends from quite literally all over the world. It was an awe-inspiring change in my perspective on things. I came to the realization that the world really wasn't so big, if a bunch of kids could come together from all around the world and play a game together."

Merit mattered here more than hierarchy. Even though Duarte was just fourteen years old, he found himself leading his digital clan. Had he been a freshman on his high-school basketball team or the star quarterback, he'd have been a local celebrity. Instead his leadership achievements were lost on the general public. For Duarte that hardly mattered. There weren't many social situations in which he would have been able to meet people that much older than himself, much less be respected enough to be a leader. That was reward enough.

The more Duarte played the games, the more time he spent thinking about how he could link several computers together so that all his friends could play at the same time. By the time he hit eighth grade, he and LaMar had started meeting at each others' houses after school, connecting their own and others' computers together using whatever bits and pieces of equipment they could dig up. They'd spend hours trying to troubleshoot small networks while players' computers were crashing, electrical circuits in the house were blowing, and people were yelling and laughing. His mother worried a little. He was spending too much time indoors in front of computers, and not enough time outside with friends, she told him repeatedly.

Yet even as Duarte's parents worried that his hobby was too socially isolating, his interest had shifted to more community-minded games. Solo games had grown stale. "They're just missing something," he said. "You can develop the computer's artificial intelligence and make it act human, but there isn't that same satisfaction. It's like you can be a marathon runner and

run by yourself, but it doesn't give you the thrill or excitement of being in a five-thousand-man marathon, seeing other people running with you and against you."

Ultimately the pair needed a gaming space bigger than LaMar's house. Duarte asked his father if they could use the church. It was a big space, and had removable pews where they could put in tables instead. His father, who was by that time teaching computer programming at a local alternative high school in addition to his church duties, thought it was a good idea. Every month, his father would help bring over ten or fifteen computers from his school's computer lab, and tell kids in his computer classes what was going on. Many of them were from troubled backgrounds; the games his son loved so much offered a way to help them learn the value of computers. Duarte brought his friends, and they'd spend Friday night shooting each other, taunting each other over the tops of the monitors. Sometimes they went until midnight and called it quits. Other nights the group played all night.

Just as Richard's *D&D* games had taken over his parents' house two decades before, Duarte's LAN parties soon outgrew the tiny church. The building simply couldn't hold all the people eager for a little Friday-night digital mayhem. With nowhere else to go, Duarte and LaMar stopped the big parties. They hosted gatherings every now and then in LaMar's garage, where they'd take the car out to make room for tables, computers, servers, and draped cords. It was a little like a garage-band practice—haphazard, messy, and fun—but after the church experience, they wanted more.

From the release of *Doom* onward, this LAN-party phenomenon ebbed and flowed with every generation of game and gamer. While it's true that most gamers wouldn't participate, this strand of do-it-yourself gamers would ultimately grow to encompass a sizable proportion of the most serious players, and a genuine diversity of aims. Even those who were more interested in chatting with friends than hacking together the latest hardware wanted to do so in person. It thus wasn't uncommon for LAN parties to have a cross-section of hard-core players, technophiles, and socializers, a diversity that largely existed beneath the radar of the mainstream media.

Most LANs started small, the way Duarte and LaMar's did, and stayed small. Players came to their friends' homes and strung network cables across card tables and makeshift command centers. At least in this era, they were often fragile setups—one player who drove two hours to get to one of Duarte's parties told of a gaming night where the power circuits at a friend's house shorted out every time the host's mother turned on her vacuum cleaner.

Occasionally, they grew far beyond what the initial hosts could handle. Not long after *Doom* was released, a twenty-five-year-old named Dennis Racine started hosting LAN parties in Silicon Valley. Dennis Fong, who Racine had met on the DWANGO gaming servers, was one of the early attendees. It didn't take long for the little gatherings to gain momentum, and pretty soon twenty or thirty people were showing up. They had to turn more away. Finally, Racine and a partner dubbed their event Fragfest, rented a local hotel conference room, and opened the doors to the public. By the time *Quake* was released, Racine and his partners were renting the Santa Clara Convention Center for the parties, and were attracting upward of 250 people.

QuakeCon itself grew like that. From the forty-plus people in its makeshift ballroom in 1996, that event had grown by 2002 to be one of the biggest LAN parties in the world. Hundreds of people lined up at Mesquite's convention center on the hot opening afternoon that year, most of them carrying heavy computers and monitors, while a three-story banner draped over the hotel above them trumpeted the impending arrival of id Software's next title: "*Doom 3*: The Legacy of Evil Lives On." The new crowd was leavened with more women than had attended the early QuakeCon events, but the demographic still skewed toward somewhat geeky men in their late teens or early twenties. One—a thin, pale youngster who held himself in line with the awkward dignity of a nervous adolescent—wore a T-shirt that articulated the hope of many of the attendees: "Chicks dig scrawny pale guys."

QuakeCon's original hotel ballroom setting had evolved into a dimly lit convention center hall filled with nearly 1,300 computers lined up so closely that players barely had elbow room as they sat in front of their machines. Many of the computers in the BYOC (bring your own computer) LAN area were homemade, with eerie blue or green lights illuminating

translucent panels that served as windows into the interior of the machines. A few were virtuoso displays of technical creativity: One standout tinkerer who had built the innards of a computer into a green wheelbarrow with a clear plastic plate across its top had simply wheeled his entire contraption into the hall.

The event attracted teams from as far away as Russia. Their reasoning was simple: They wanted to play the best gamers and meet the people they'd chatted with online. Not everyone could afford a room at the main hotel. Those who couldn't simply crashed on one of the hotel's lobby chairs, or under the tables in the huge convention hall. But there was good reason to stay in the hall in any case. The BYOC area never shut down, and these gamers had come to play. Moreover, the tournament was giving out a prize of $100,000, which would be split between the best teams playing id's new *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* game and the single-player competitions using *Quake III*.

At the close of the event, organizers talked of moving to a larger convention center in 2003, where they could support 1,700 people or more in the BYOC chambers. The big-money competitions were sexy, but it was this three-day free-for-all fragfest that most of the people came for.

The LAN-party phenomenon remained particularly compelling for its apparent superfluity in the age of the Internet. As soon as *Quake* came along, almost anyone with a dial-up modem could find a game on the Internet, often with friends or acquaintances. As high-speed Internet connections began spreading in the late 1990s and early 2000s, physically connecting computers to play became less and less necessary. Yet LAN gaming continued to grow. Well into the late 2000s, players routinely hopped in a car or on a plane, traveling across town or across the country for a game, lugging their PC hardware with them. Computer gaming might have been associated with sitting and staring alone at a computer screen, but it was very clear that its social component had become a critical part of player culture.

Back in Silicon Valley, Duarte and LaMar had no desire to recreate QuakeCon or even to create something on the scale of the original Fragfest. Not long after the conversation in LaMar's VW, they sat down with a few

other interested friends at the local burger joint, and their vision started to take shape.

A friend of Duarte's mother was CEO of a little San Jose company called Nuvation. He agreed to loan them the company's offices for a weekend. They cold-called dozens of companies they thought might sponsor the event. A few helped out: an energy drink company, a joystick company, a company that operated servers for game companies, as well as the people who ran a big LAN party in Modesto, a city about two hours away. With all that help, they got the equipment, the expertise, and the money they needed to hold a party for fifty people. They were ready to go. They decided to call it the Silicon Valley Frag Fest, build a Web site, and start spreading the word using other game sites.

The LAN party fell on a clear and cool Friday night, when most college kids Duarte and LaMar's age were partying somewhere other than a Silicon Valley business park. That thought didn't faze them. By the time the party kicked off, the pair had been at Nuvation's offices for hours, stringing cables and wires, testing circuit breakers, and setting up computers for people who arrived early. They had a pretty good sense of who was coming to the event: mostly locals from Silicon Valley, but a few from as far away as Sacramento and the state's agricultural centers. There would even be a celebrity visit from one of the programmers who had worked on *America's Army*, the shooter game the Army had recently commissioned and published to serve as a training and recruitment tool.

By 10:00 P.M. a few dozen young men in T-shirts (there were almost no women) were milling around the office drinking soda and coffee, occasionally sitting down to play a game on one of the computers that filled the three rooms, but more often just chatting. Few had met many of the others in person before this evening, although some of the nearly fifty attendees had arrived in small groups. Conversations generally fell into one of two categories: stories about crazy game sessions someone had played or seen, and show-and-tell with tricked-out computer hardware. One of the other organizers, an ebullient, heavyset man named Andy, was particularly proud of his machine, displaying it on a desk with one side open to the air. He'd built it in just two hours at another party like this one, he said. It didn't look much like an ordinary office computer; on its front were three separate sets of digital readouts, all connected to thermometers inside. If

any hot spots developed during play—a frequent occurrence with high-performance game machines—the readouts would tell him, and he could activate one of the various cooling fans inside.

Duarte was busy taking care of minor emergencies. Early in the evening, the host company's CEO had tripped two sets of burglar alarms in his own building, and two different security companies had to be pacified. Power issues were critical. The organizers had carefully calculated how much strain each circuit breaker could take, and had loaded each plug very close to the maximum. There wasn't much room for error, and every once in a while something unexpected happened: A computer's fan would kick in, for example, and that little extra power draw would be enough to trigger the circuit breaker, and an entire row of monitors would go instantly dark. The orange and yellow extension cords draped across the offices were suffering their own stresses. At one point in the evening, Duarte emerged with a disbelieving smile and a plug in his hand that smelled toxic; the power load had burnt the rubber around its metal prongs, and the plug was useless.

As the evening progressed and the inevitable network issues were solved, the gamers started playing in earnest. The people here came from different gaming circles: Some were playing *America's Army*, some were playing the popular *Warcraft* real-time strategy game; some played older but still popular games like *Quake III*. They were enthralled as they played; each stared into the glow of a separate monitor, constantly looking for the next kill, breaking out of hunting mode to fire off quick text messages to other people in the room (a lightning-fast movement, as the player quickly tapped a key that toggled from hunt mode to chat mode and then back again). Furious typing followed, the audible evidence of a disparaging note, usually sent to someone the player had just killed. The response was often verbal—"Asshole!"—one half of a conversation that players all understood. It took only seconds, from kill to chat to holler, before the whole room knew somebody had gotten fragged.

The night wasn't just about fragging. In the back room, a thin, intense boy was making digital maps for the rest of the group. He'd arrived early and paced his way around the office complex. The CEO had offered to give him blueprints of the building, but he'd refused. That would have been too easy. For hours he had sat at his computer, playing with the digital equivalent of Lincoln Logs, and over time a 3D model that was recognizably Nuvation's

office took shape. It was a mod he would unveil early in the morning hours, his own version of a game in which the rest of the players would be able to run around and shoot each other. He proudly showed off an early version of the map, running a character through its paces: The screen showed the perspective of someone sprinting up the building's front staircase, jumping through a window, and weaving in and out of rooms where cubicles were ordinarily set.

In the breaks between games, Duarte and LaMar took some time to talk about their own history of gaming and the process of setting up an event of this size. LaMar, known as "Killjoy" in *Quake III* circles, laughed at the prospect of telling people outside the gaming community that he was spending the weekend holed up in an office park. There was still a stigma attached to that. "I generally don't tell people that I'm here. It's not cool to let them know I'm getting together with fifty gamers," he said.

LaMar was thin, just under 5'6" tall. He was soft-spoken, with red splotches of embarrassment occasionally popping up on his neck as he spoke. When uncomfortable, he rolled his eyes a bit and tapped his foot as nervous punctuation. Yet when he started talking about the games themselves, he became animated, his motions free of the earlier tics. His stick-figure arms swung in front of him as though he wanted to lean in and touch the interviewer on the forehead, sync up and download his feelings and emotions directly, because there was no way to talk about games without sounding half-cocked and crazed. Why was he here despite the remaining stigma? Why was he spending his weekend with a bunch of increasingly smelly guys with perpetual caffeine highs?

He glanced at Duarte, who nodded, clearly agreeing with his LAN partner's instincts. This was an easy one.

"It feels like home," LaMar said.

Twenty-One *A Mod Life*

An hour north of San Jose, out in the foggy Richmond district of San Francisco, a different kind of LAN scene was unfolding. In a dark room next door to one of the city's best sushi restaurants, computer monitors were lined up on tables by the dozen. A café at the counter advertised tea with tapioca pearls, a popular drink among this neighborhood's Asian-American population. The arcade sounds of explosions and gunfire poured out the open door onto the busy street, where little groups of teenagers were standing in twos and threes. More kids sat at the computers inside, intent on the worlds unfolding on their screens.

Playing on virtually every screen in the room was a game that appeared to be vaguely military in nature. Unlike in *Quake* or *Doom*, the players were working in teams, and the action in the café made that clear—shouts and shorthand instructions occasionally broke through the gunfire as teammates barked orders at each other.

The game was called *Counter-Strike*, and maybe more than anything else in online gaming's short history, it had demonstrated the power that players themselves had come to exert over their own medium. Driven by the same instinct that had set John Carmack digging inside *Ultima* code to discover ways to recreate the game himself, players across the gaming spectrum were tearing apart games and rebuilding them to make new levels, add new characters or concepts, and sometimes—as in the case of *Counter-Strike*—create new titles with radically different gameplay.

In this case, the game developer was a Canadian student named Minh Le, who had used the freely available code of another popular game called *Half-Life*, which was based on graphics technology originally created

by Carmack for *Quake II*. The fact that Lee was still working in his parents' suburban basement didn't detract from the fact that he was one of the most successful mod makers ever, and part of a modding community that had become deeply integrated into the broader industry's basic development processes.

Indeed, at the close of 2002, *Counter-Strike* dominated gaming cafés in the United States and Europe the way *Doom* once dominated the early LAN parties. Professional gaming tournaments such as those held by the Cyberathlete Professional League, a successor to the Professional Gamers League, had adopted it. Teams from around the world had won hundreds of thousands of dollars every year playing it. In the three years since its release, *Counter-Strike* had become one of the most popular multiplayer games in the world. During peak times, ninety thousand players from around the world were trying to frag each other, making it far and away the most popular mod ever created. Each month, 1.7 million players put in a collective 2.4 billion minutes a month on the game. [30]

Mod making is as old as computer gaming. Within a few days of the unveiling of *Spacewar!* at MIT in 1961, other player-programmers had begun adding to the code, making versions with different features or multiplayer play, or even enough different features to render the result another game altogether. Don Woods' rewritten version of Willie Crowther's *Colossal Cave* was, in a way, a mod of the original game. For years, as games floated freely around the various networks, the line between players and programmers was a thin and often wholly illusory one. From Bill Budge's 1985 *Pinball Construction Set* to Accolade's 1990 *Jack Nicklaus Unlimited Golf & Course Design*, a few companies had even released their own tools for expanding the play fields that came with the original games.

Carmack's release of *Doom*'s level-editing tools and code in 1993 brought modding of commercial games to a new level, giving the developers' stamp of approval to what had in many cases been unauthorized versions or even violations of intellectual property law. Player-developers responded with a vast surge of creativity, posting new levels, new weapons, and new themes online. Players had the opportunity to create mash-ups of their

favorite movies and games. An *Alien*-themed *Doom* appeared, as did a James Bond-themed *Doom*, and finally even a *Doom* patterned after Richard's *Ultima* world.

That diversity caught the eyes of executives at the WizardWorks Group, an independent publisher. In 1995, they compiled ninety of the best games, many of them freely available online, and started selling the collection in stores. Within weeks, the mod collection rocketed up the sales charts, briefly surpassing *Doom*'s sales. [31]

Quake, with even more developer tools available, helped accelerate this movement. As more people played the games, and as more people learned the computer skills necessary to manipulate the tools and work with their own 3D modeling programs, creative communities grew fast. Companies licensed Carmack's underlying game engine—the software that controlled everything from computer artificial intelligence to the technology that shaped the 3D graphics and in-game physics—to create their own games with different art and game-play styles. Several of these, including Valve's *Half-Life* and LucasArts' *Jedi Knight II*, were very successful titles in their own right. In perhaps the strangest reuse of id's technology, a small religious game company called Wisdom Tree licensed the *Wolfenstein 3D* game engine, kept most of the levels, but changed the art to make the walls look vaguely wooden instead of stone. They called the game *Super 3D Noah's Ark* and replaced the machine guns with a slingshot that players would use to shoot food at animals.

It was the masses of people doing this kind of work for free online that really piqued industry interest, however. The more mods people created using code from other games, the more that original commercial title would sell. Seeing the positive effect that the modding community had on id's sales and the lifecycle of interest in its titles, other companies started following that company's lead. Most shooter-game companies decided to support modding in some way. Some even held conferences to help teach community members about technology specific to their games. Creating a mod soon became seen as a fast way into the computer game industry, and *Quake* mods became a standard part of résumés. Tim Willits, a *Doom* modder, was hired at id, and other companies scooped up other talented mod makers as well.

The community did run into hurdles. Game players and programmers

tended to follow their own creative instincts rather than the letter of the law. Just as John Carmack and Tom Hall had borrowed Mario for their early version of *Commander Keen*, many budding game designers integrated pop-culture icons or characters from other games into their own creations, believing that if their games weren't commercial, there were no copyright problems. The owners of the copyrighted characters or original games weren't always so sanguine. In one locally famous instance of backlash, Twentieth Century Fox's lawyers sent angry letters to a team of programmers led by a Swedish student that was creating a game blending *Quake* technology with images and ideas from the movie *Alien*. Fox owned the intellectual property rights to the games and movies associated with the *Alien* franchise, and its lawyers told the team in no uncertain terms that it had no right to use their images in its own work. The project was stopped, and the term "to be foxed" entered gaming lingo, defined as having a mod project derailed by the complaint of an intellectual property rights holder.

Many of the mods built on popular game engines found avid fans inside the online players' communities. "Partial conversions," in which a programmer would change just a few aspects of the game—such as turning *Quake* into a game of capture the flag, or simply adding a few new weapons to the game—were particularly popular. Developers and publishers sought out the best programmers and tweaks, and even released some of the mods packaged along with their own games. This was the environment that Minh Le entered as he began his ascent in the modding world.

Le grew up near Vancouver, Canada, a fairly typical suburban child. He started playing with computers early, first with a Commodore VIC-20, and moving through several other computers in the Commodore series before finding his way to PCs. He took whatever computer classes he could find in school, but was always a game player at heart. While he hadn't cut his teeth on *D&D,* he'd counted Garriott's *Ultima VII* as one of his favorite titles.

Alongside computers, art and comic books were his passions. From the time he was young he could often be found sketching with a pencil or sculpting with modeling clay. He dug through comic books and watched animated cartoons and found himself fascinated by war stories and guns.

He and his brothers would run around the local park playing war games. As he got older, he was always the first in line to see any new war movie when it came out.

His passions finally merged when Carmack and company released the tools to modify *Quake*. Le took a look at the technical specs and realized he could start tweaking the game's code himself. He first tried his hand at making a simple gun. He worked for almost three months trying to create an M16 rifle to add to the game. The results were "horrid," he said later. The hands holding the gun were a weird silver color, and the gun was pitch black, hardly the mark of an elegant mod. He hadn't figured out the art of texturing a 3D model to give it more realism. It didn't matter, though; by now he was hooked.

"The satisfaction of creating a mod, even in its simplest form, was irresistible to me," he said later. "Ever since I started modding, I've been working on them at a feverish pace. I neglected a lot of other things, like school and a proper social life."

His next attempt would be a more ambitious reworking of the *Quake* game. He started working on replacements for all the weapons, making models of real guns. He was almost through with that when he realized it didn't make any sense to be shooting fantastic monsters with real-looking guns. He decided to rework the game's characters, too, and slowly replaced the monsters with soldiers and military-themed objects. He named the whole thing *Navy SEALs* and released it online. It wasn't a multiplayer game, but it attracted an avid fan base. Others added new levels and its growth continued. Le's obsessive work on the game had taken its toll on his schoolwork, however, and he wasn't making money from downloads of his work. He decided to take a year off from game-making to get his life back on track.

As a first-year student studying computer science at Simon Fraser University near Vancouver, he began toying with a sequel to *Navy SEALs* using the *Quake II* technology. He tentatively called it *Rolling Thunder* (no relation to the 1989 Nintendo game released by Tengen), and started making 3D computer models for the game. But his school workload soon got out of hand, and he was forced to stop, donating the models to another team. He worked occasionally on that project, making additional models before ultimately setting it aside.

Late in 1998, Valve Software's *Half-Life* hit the streets. Based on the *Quake II* game engine licensed from id, it led players though an adrenaline-packed and genuinely frightening story of a scientist trapped in a research facility overrun by dangerous monsters released from another dimension by an experiment gone wrong. Like Carmack, the Valve team who had made the game had a program of actively supporting the mod communities. Le took one look at the game and realized there was real potential there for something along the lines he'd already been working on. In its natural state, the game pitted the player against squadrons of Marines trying to close his mouth before he could reveal what he'd seen. Take the monsters out, focus just on military teams, and it would be another game altogether. His game would feature a counter-terrorism squad tasked with stopping a separate team of terrorists from planting a bomb. It was a simple concept, and it would rely on players to make it fun. He decided to call it *Counter-Strike*.

Le had already done a lot of research on the subject. He knew what kinds of characters and weapons he'd have to build. He didn't have the resources to make a full single-player game with a story line and artificial intelligence controlling the terrorists, so he decided to make it strictly a multiplayer game, like *Quake* deathmatches but with the rudimentary terrorist backstory providing guidance for players. The terrorist team leader would be tasked with planting a bomb, and teammates would do what they could to facilitate that operation, usually by shooting anyone who tried to interfere. The anti–terrorism team would have to work together to stop the terrorists.

He worked on the game for seven or eight months, mostly by himself. He did have some help from other programmers who created different levels to play and tested the game, but the core group had a clear idea where they were going from the beginning: slowing down *Half-Life*'s speed of play, changing the accuracy of guns in the original game to mirror the action of real-world weapons, and adding other realistic guns, uniforms, and scenery.

The process taught Le a lot about games and the criticisms typically made by gamers, he said later. The community support helped, but players often missed subtleties and tradeoffs inherent in the development process if they hadn't participated themselves. "Before I started making games, I never really understood what exactly it takes to make a game, and all the factors that need to be considered when implementing a particular feature,"

he said. "There were countless times where the *Counter-Strike* team would be lambasted for doing things a certain way, and when I read the flames on the forums, it just irked me so much because I knew that all of those flames could have been quelled if only people understood what goes on in making a game."

Despite the message-board flames, the first release of the game in mid-1999 as a free download met with solid approval from other game players. The game was such a success, in fact, that Valve Software took notice. The company was primed to look for good mods. A pair of former Microsoft programmers, Mike Harrington and Gabe Newell, had started Valve a few years earlier. While they'd based *Half-Life*'s technology on id's *Quake II* engine, they'd used a community-built *Quake* level-editing tool to help build their own game's levels. They hired many of their own programmers from the modding community, and not long after *Half-Life*'s release, they created an annual *Half-Life* Mod Expo event that would spotlight independent programmers' work. The company offered to release *Counter-Strike* commercially, and lent Le some programming help to fix the remaining bugs. The game hit retail shelves in November 2000, although anyone could still download it for free from the *Counter-Strike* Web site. By the end of 2002, it was among the most popular multiplayer games in the world, with the company claiming on its Web site that "more gamers are playing *Counter-Strike* than the sum total of all other games combined."

As with *Doom*, *Quake*, and scores of other titles, Le and millions of people playing *Counter-Strike* saw its military theme and fast-paced, bloody action as essentially a team-building exercise. From pick-up games like those at the San Francisco Net café to the professional gaming leagues that would adopt the title, high on-screen body counts meant no more than did a football tackle (and, indeed, were far easier to recover from).

But the outside world was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with this apparently incessant focus on blood. When some came to believe that a real-world tragedy had been triggered by precisely this violence, the gaming community's cheerful disregard for politics and outside opinion was forced finally to an end.