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Online Gaming

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I’m 7:13 p.m. on a breezy Saturday night, and I’m about to immerse myself in one of Iowa State’s secret societies.

Coover Hall, where this gathering takes place, is empty at the moment. Hallways that usually contain hordes of students during the week are now deserted, dimly lit, and reminiscent of a horror film. I know I’m not attending a Skull and Bones meeting, but the atmosphere is still eerie.

And then I see it. Nestled toward the back of the building is a glowing room that stands out from the rest. I follow the muffled chatter and let myself in. Almost immediately, it’s as if I’ve stepped into an entirely new world—one that’s full of college-aged men on computers. The truth is I’m at a LAN party. The men aren’t wearing robes and reciting elaborate chants; they’re wearing t-shirts and playing computer games.

Let’s backtrack. A LAN (Local Area Network) party is when a group of people establishes a network that interconnects computers in a limited area, primarily for the purpose of playing computer games. While any bro with a baseball cap can admit to playing, I guarantee that hardly any of them play like this.

The guys here are passionate to the core. Row after row of computers and laptops has a gamer in front of it with a look that’s equal parts focus and “leave me the hell alone” stoicism. Their small areas are littered with signs that they’ve been here for hours: empty pop bottles, almost-empty bags of candy, and various cans of energy drinks.

And they have been there for a while. The LAN party started at noon, and many students proudly declare to me that they’ve been here since then. Remember, it’s about 7:40 p.m. now. The LAN party is set to end at midnight, but no one is showing signs of stopping anytime soon.

It’s been years since I’ve been to a proper LAN party. Half of me is excited for what I’m experiencing, but the other half is ashamed for being out of the loop for so long. Gamer speak is like another language sometimes. Various guys will get up and talk to someone else and namedrop fictional races, buildings, and technology without batting an eyelash. They talk as if it’s as common as Europe or macaroni and cheese. When someone asks a question, they get a quick response.
At first glance, it seems as if nothing is really happening in the room. After all, most of the action is happening on a computer screen. But it becomes hypnotic after a while. It’s not unusual to see a group of people huddled behind a computer screen watching a fellow gamer play. It even sucks me in as well. The guy who I’m watching has the speed and precision of an expert assembly line worker. His mouse darts wildly across the table, clicking furiously with purpose. The computer screen moves as fast as his mouse does, never lingering at one place for too long.

He’s in the middle of a quest. And I realize that the people gathering around us aren’t here because they’re entranced by this guy’s dedication, but because they’re supporting him. The comradery of everyone here is pure. No one’s puffing out his chest trying to be the alpha male; it’s just a bunch of guys together in one place doing something that they love.

A song by the electronic music duo, Daft Punk, starts slowly oozing out of some kid’s speakers. I notice computer wallpapers displaying various quotes and images from the film, “Fight Club.” Many people are wearing t-shirts that show some symbol or inside joke from geek culture. I then start to realize that gathered here in this room was Iowa State’s secret society.

I left the LAN party later that night with a feeling of glee. I felt at home. I felt comfortable. I wanted to tell these guys’ story. A quick search on the Internet found that there was no true article about the gaming culture on campus. There had to be more to these champions of the keyboard than what people thought.

Hunter Bauer has no qualms about who he is. In addition to being an accounting major, Bauer also controls armies in space, kills zombies on a tropical island, and creates worlds out of scratch. In short, Bauer is a gamer.

“I’ve pretty much been playing video games as long as I can remember,” Bauer says.

Completely at ease and well-groomed, Bauer is not your stereotypical gamer. He doesn’t shy away from answering questions and his enthusiasm is as big as the smile that takes up most of his face. He doesn’t wear thick-rimmed glasses. He doesn’t have a nasally voice. In fact, Bauer looks like any other student you’d see walking around campus.

But Bauer isn’t like every student on campus. He’s a true gamer, spending from 12 to 20 hours a week playing his favorite games. With the rise of the Nintendo Wii and mobile games such as Angry Birds, though, everyone from your grandma to the drunks yelling on Welch consider themselves a gamer of sorts. More than any time in our history, video games have appealed to a much broader audience.

A study conducted by the Entertainment Software Association found that 72% of American households play computer or video games. There are games now for pretty much every age and every demographic. So things should be good for those who spend massive amounts of time playing video games, right?

“I think a lot of people, especially adults, see gamers in a negative light. I would say that to a gamer, being a gamer is awesome. But to the jocks and all the other people, it still definitely does carry some negative connotations in some circles. But I’m not personally ashamed of it,” says Bauer.

It really comes down to the type of games one plays. A quick glance at the top 20 selling video games shows domination from shooters, sports titles, and gimmick games such as “Just Dance” or “Wii Sports.” Compare it to the top 20 selling computer games and one will notice titles that require more than just a casual attachment.

Bauer’s game of choice is “Starcraft 2,” a sequel to the immensely popular computer game, “Starcraft.” According to www.sc2ranks.com, approximately 3,336,008 people play “Starcraft 2” online. Bauer and many other people in Iowa State’s gaming club, Game Renegades, take pride in being part of that three million, despite the reaction from their peers.

“I think we’re very misunderstood. Because when I tell people I play video games, people immediately think, ‘On Friday night, this kid is playing ‘Starcraft.’’ It’s not like that at all. I think people over-label those who say they play video games, especially people who take video games very seriously,” says Bauer.

Bauer is passionate about the topic of stereotyping gamers, especially since he’s not the shut-in, antisocial image people think of. He hangs out with people. He goes out on Friday nights, and will even go out to the bars on Saturday night. Bauer is quick to note that he isn’t all that different from anybody else who doesn’t play video games.

It’s tough out there for a “chick.” There’s a growing minority in the video game culture. Slowly but surely, females are rising up to make their voices heard in the gaming world. While many male gamers will equate finding a true female gamer with finding a unicorn, they are in fact out there. Iowa State’s gaming culture is primarily male-dominated, and that’s the way it is in the mainstream as well.