

## Playing a ruthless game

February 3 2009, By Stanley A. Miller II, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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Plenty of young gamers dream about playing videogames for a living, but Robert Bishop has a plan: It's all a matter of suckering in enough victims to make it happen.

OK, maybe that's a bit harsh, but the 19-year-old from Milwaukee hopes to make the professional gaming circuit by beating the best teams he can find. But to defeat those teams, he needs to assemble them first, and that's where the Wisconsin Halo League comes in.

The "Halo" in this league refers to "Halo 3," a popular sci-fi-themed first-person shooter for Microsoft's Xbox 360. Millions of copies of the game have sold worldwide, and it's a mainstay of national professional gaming organizations like Major League Gaming.

The Wisconsin Halo League - with competitions currently in Milwaukee - hopes to be a source for regular tournaments, Bishop says, where players can improve their skills, have some fun and get a chance at winning a sponsorship package to a national competition.

Standing in the dank cold of the Pwnage Lounge, a computer and video gaming center, Bishop explains his scheme and how it can get some talented team - with any luck, his own - a shot at a professional gaming career.

"We're looking for casual gamers - people who love games but don't know they can make money playing them," says Bishop, his breath almost visible in the frigid air. "I'd like to see new faces, honestly."

Ideally, the league needs at least eight consistent four-player teams. Last month at its most recent tournament, five teams showed up, and three others signed up for future competitions, he said.

A league membership costs \$15 and \$5 weekly dues, which will help fund one team's trip to a Major League Gaming event, Bishop says, where the winnings are more substantial and professional contracts are up for grabs.

The first event of the 2009 Major League Gaming season begins April 3 at the Meadowlands Expo Center in Secaucus, N.J.

"There are so many 'Halo' players," Bishop says. "I'm trying to get as many together as I can for a chance to realize their dreams. We are trying to get the word out on how big competitive gaming is in Wisconsin."

It's all very grass-roots, entrepreneurial and enterprising. It also assumes that casual players are going to cough up potentially \$275 a year to get stomped by players like Bishop and his ilk, who practice their craft about six hours a day every day. They've studied every map and memorized when and where every weapon, power-up and vehicle in the game materializes.

You're also facing squads that practice together a lot. Bishop, along with teammates Nick "Paint" Hartung, Nico "Sycosis" Gonzalez and Nate "BAMFaroni" Matson, approach the game like a full-time job.

And of course, you are playing on their turf - a wood-paneled clubhouse with a few posters on the walls, where the patrons pay to play. The only light in the place today glowed from a nearby television and some computer screens in the next room. It's quiet and still and a bit musty, although the smell of a takeout pizza wafts back from the front desk. A

receptionist's window opens into a small waiting room, suggesting this place used to be a doctor's or dentist's office.

Now it's home to a videogame "Fight Club."

Even the name of the place pays tribute to the act of beating someone down badly: "Pwnage" is the noun form of the slang term "pwn," which is derived from the word "own," implying the humiliation of a rival. Pwn is often used in the gaming culture to taunt an opponent who has lost.

"I got dominated early on, but now I am one of the best around here," said Bishop, a part-time student and assistant manager at the lounge. "It's dedication."

It could all come off as just adolescent bluster if Bishop, also known as "Revolver," hadn't already faced off against teams in a professional setting. His last foray was at an MLG event last year in Orlando, where his team at the time came tantalizingly close to making the final 32 teams vying for professional contracts.

If the Wisconsin Halo League pans out - and if his new team is good enough to drub the local competition - Bishop could find himself at the "big show" again.

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Citation: Playing a ruthless game (2009, February 3) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-02-ruthless-game.html>

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