

All Hal-ing the VIDEO-GAME KING

The immensely popular "Halo" video game and its sequel have spurred a huge following from gamers with a desire to handle some big weapons

BY PARKER HOWELL
SENIOR NEWS REPORTER

Having an "insatiable desire to melee people" whom you approach from behind. Consistently "scanning the ground for grenades and weapons." Demanding that people "refer to you as Master Chief" and threatening to have them "punished for insubordination if they refuse."

These are just a few of the humorous signs that a person may be addicted to one of the popular "Halo" titles for the Microsoft Xbox, according to www.haloaddict.com. While for many gamers playing 2001's "Halo: Combat Evolved" and 2004's "Halo 2" are simply a virtual shotgun-wielding, flag-capturing pastime, for others the action game has replaced school, work and other priorities.

"Halo 2" unleashed

Released Nov. 9 by publisher Microsoft Game Studios and developer Bungie Studios, "Halo 2" launched amid unparalleled fanfare. Eager would-be Master Chiefs reserved about 1.5 million copies before the midnight launch, which gamers celebrated at game shops across the nation.

Freshman William Zurn, who works at the GameStop video game store at Valley River Center and is an avid "Halo 2" player, said about 400 people attended his store's launch party.

"It was crazy," he said. "With the wide publicity this game had generated, the fact that it was finally here was such a big deal."

Microsoft sold about 6.3 million copies during the holidays, bringing in \$300 million, according to a Jan. 28 Los Angeles Times article. That's about one-third of the aid President Bush has pledged to victims of the Asian tsunami. Microsoft even credits the game for helping its struggling home entertainment division turn a profit, according to the article.

Online dueling

The original "Halo" allows up to four players per Xbox to engage in a variety of animated bloodsport, including "Slayer," "Capture the Flag" and customizable game types, or to network Xboxes together for group play. But for "Halo 2," Bungie included an online system that allows up to 16 players to blast each other simultaneously.

Users who shell out about \$50 and who have a high-speed Internet connection can subscribe to Xbox Live to play friends or strangers over the Internet. Players receive ranks from one to 50 based on their game playing experience, and anyone can check a detailed report of a player's history online at www.bungie.net/Stats.

A random check of "Halo 2" statistics at about 2:10 p.m. on Feb. 22 showed approximately 433,956 unique players were online in the last 24 hours, with 900,104 matches created and 90,138 unique players online at the time.

As of press time, BLAcKjA ruled "Rumble Pit" games, which pit every player for himself or herself, with 174 wins out 268 games

played. At about 10 minutes a game, that means the player has spent about 45 hours playing "Rumble Pit" games since the game was released in November.

University Halo fans have even created two Facebook groups, "Halo Is a Drug & I Love it," which lists about 81 members at the University, and "Halo 2 — The Remix," which lists about 16 members.

Zurn, who goes by VigilantTomcat online, has played about 331 games. Junior Ricky Almeida, a "Halo 2" fan who uses the nickname DjRicardo, has played about 269 games.

What addiction?

Zurn said he started playing Halo when a friend introduced him to it. He said he liked the "free" way people can fight in the game, as well as its story.

"I tried it out, and I thought it was awesome," he said. "The whole game-play itself blew me away."

Zurn, who favors the energy sword or the sniper rifle, said he used to play every day for close to "five to six hours at least." Although he took a break from playing, Zurn said he recently found it easy to resume.

"It's like muscle memory how everything works," he said. "It's just crazy."

Zurn said he and his roommate each have an Xbox and a TV and have an advantage when they play on the same team online because each has a screen to himself.

He said he and his roommate would sometimes skip class or play until 3 or 4 a.m.

"If we lost a few, we wouldn't go to sleep until we won," he said.

Zurn said one day he played from noon until 5 a.m. the following morning.

"I was so bored that day, but it was fun," he said.

Zurn said he has also skipped work in the past to play.

Almeida, who said he also plays other Xbox games, said he mostly plays online in random games about three days a week for about an hour or longer. He said "Halo 2" typically comes after his other priorities.

"Usually, when I do play, my productive stuff is out of the way," he said. "It's my free time."

But Almeida, who prefers the shotgun, added that some people get more involved with the game.

"You can tell there's a lot of hard-core players online, though," he said. "You can hear them barking orders."

Freshman Brian Bergersen, who prefers a pistol and sub-machinegun combination, said he got an Xbox the first week they were released and got the original "Halo" right away. He said when he got "Halo 2," he didn't play online right away, but now plays online "all the time." Bergersen said he plays about 10 hours a week, but the game is just a hobby that doesn't really interfere with his other priorities.

"More often than not, it is something to take priority over stuff I should be doing," he said.

Zurn said "Halo 2" with Xbox Live is a



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completely different experience from the game itself." He said there is "always" a multiplayer game to join online.

"Halo 2" players on Xbox Live can use a headset to verbally communicate to taunt enemies or strategize with teammates.

"When you play multiplayer, the communication part is such a big part of being able to win," he said.

Bergersen added that using the headset allows him to talk with friends at other schools.

Zurn added that the ability to duel-wield weapons and the improved graphics make "Halo 2" a good game.

Bergersen said many people focus on the killing in "Halo 2," but he said that shouldn't be the emphasis of the game.

"Competition to see who's the best. That's what the most important aspect of it is to me," he said.

A serious side

While a "Halo 2" addiction may sound far-fetched, young people can become addicted to video games, according to an Oct. 5 article in The Washington Post.

David Walsh of the Minneapolis-based National Institute on Media and the Family said what video game manufacturers call "the God effect" can make games addicting by making players feel like they're the center of the universe, according to the article.

"This is an exciting form of technology that kids really, really like," Walsh said, according to the article. "As a psychologist, I understand why it's so engaging. It's Psych 101 — stimulus and response."

University psychology assistant professor Jeffrey Measelle confirmed that video games do have the potential to be addicting.

Measelle said many modern video games adjust to players' skill levels, providing vari-

able rewards to the brain in an incremental way similar to those provided by gambling and watching TV.

He added that behavioral psychology can help explain video game addiction because games can become a "quasi-social" activity in which gamers control "all the terms of social discourse." For people who lack social interaction, games can be "fairly gratifying," he said.

He said people face the biggest risk from video games in early childhood. Adults face problems when games replace other activities in life, he said.

There are resources available for gamers concerned about their habits. On-Line Gamers Anonymous, www.olganon.org, offers a 12-step program and other services to people who are struggling with online game addictions.

"We are a community of gamers, their families, friends, and volunteers, who all know the powerful and destructive addiction of on-line gaming," according to the group's Web site. "This addiction can be devastating to the real-world lives of gamers and all of those individuals close to them. Through the encouragement of open discussion, support and referrals, we strive to help the victims of on-line game addiction."

Yet Measelle added that games can have positive effects in the form of "cognitive training." He said a study has shown people who play a fixed amount of games over a week have demonstrated enhanced performance on attention tasks. He said games can also aid eye and coordination issues.

Internet rumors continue to swirl about the release of Halo 3 after some gamers were left unsatisfied by "Halo 2"'s abrupt ending. Some people speculate it will be released with the anticipated "next generation" of Xbox or to rival the release of Sony's next PlayStation, Zurn said.

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