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Game face: All night long

Caffeine and junk food keep computer gamers wired as they go head to head.

By Joe Eaton

At 3:22 a.m., Viper and Sampson glared into their computer monitors like long-haul truckers staring through windshields.

Since noon, Viper, a 19-year-old whose real name is Trente Robertson, had pounded four bottles of the energy drink Bawls and two more of a drink called No Fear.

Sampson, a 15-year-old named Chad Marlowe, had downed about the same amount.

Fingers on the keyboard arrows, the two piloted Formula 1 race cars around a loopy track.

“Oh my God!” Sampson yelled. “I found the biggest jump in the world.”

They weren’t going to sleep anytime soon.

Viper and Sampson were among 40 people who had come to a defunct restaurant connected to the Days Inn on Plantation Road for a 37-hour gaming party.

Set up by the Star City LAN club, the LAN party was a local version of gaming events held across the country and overseas.

At LAN parties, gamers bring computers, set them up on a common network and play against each other, often in hours-long tournaments.

The party last weekend began at 7 a.m. Saturday and ended at 8 p.m. Sunday.

Gary Lemon, a 28-year-old the gamers call Admiral, has hosted LAN parties in Roanoke six times a year since 2003.

At the first Roanoke LAN parties, gamers met in the pool room of an apartment complex. Electricity proved problematic. Computers blew breakers, stopping the games in the middle of the action.

The restaurant had no such problems. It was spacious, well-wired and cheap.

Lemon charges $20 for the event, which includes lunch both days. For this event, he grilled hamburgers and hot dogs.

Money left over goes toward prizes and snacks for the next event.

Gamers began arriving at the restaurant Friday night, hours before the LAN party was set to begin. They carried in their computers, power strips, sleeping bags and coolers.

Viper and his dad, Gregg Robertson, were two of the first to arrive. They drove seven hours from Ocean City, Md.

At 48, the elder Robertson was the oldest gamer at the event.

Computer gaming has a bad reputation with many parents, Robertson said. But he sees it as a chance to bond with his son.

When the two play tennis or basketball in real life, the elder Robertson said he can’t keep up.

“Games,” he said, “are the great equalizer.”

This summer, the Robertson family attended LAN parties with hundreds of people in
Washington, D.C., Virginia Beach and Atlanta.

Gamers came to the Roanoke party to play games, but also to check out computer gear.

Dustin Withers, a 25-year-old printing press operator who goes by Haste, brought one of the wildest computers, a $4,000 machine cooled by fluorescent liquid that ran through a radiator sitting on top.

The cases of most of the machines were removed or made out of Plexiglas.

“It’s like how hot rodders take the hoods off their cars so you can see everything,” said Scott Queen, a 33-year-old network administrator who goes by Chicken King.

If the party last weekend is any indication, LAN parties are uniquely male affairs. Girlfriends of some of the men made appearances, but they did not stay long.

There are plenty of female gamers, but the people who attend LAN parties are extremists, Admiral said.

“Women don’t really get into it,” added Chris Fejes, a 19-year-old Virginia Western Community College student who once went by Cheesy Puff, but now goes by Moscow. “We wish there were more women.”

By 1 a.m. Saturday, the area smelled like a dirty football jersey. Half-empty boxes of pizza, Twinkies and cookies surrounded the computers.

It was dark, except for the glow of monitors and the red, green, blue and yellow lights of computer fans.

Most people were playing Joint Operations, a game that pits a team of soldiers against a team of terrorists in a battle to capture the flag.

They yelled directions at each other that mimicked the sound from an Army commercial.

“We’ve got an A.P.C.,” Admiral said, warning his team of an approaching armored personnel carrier.

“Where is it?” someone yelled.

The truck went up in smoke.

Two hours later, many players were asleep in corners or on rows of chairs pushed together. Some rented hotel rooms.

For the older players, the parties are less of an endurance test.

Chicken King said he planned to sleep three or four hours at most. “The time goes too fast,” he said.

Several of the teenagers and a few of the older players kept on going, hoping to make it through the night.

At 3:30 a.m., Sampson and Viper started playing the racing game TrackMania, which neither of them takes seriously.

Both gamers are into Counter-Strike, a military game they say requires strategy. Each belongs to Internet-based teams that battle other teams online. Viper said he plays the game at least six hours a day.

“It’s not really fun anymore,” he said. “It’s competition.”

Viper said LAN parties are more fun than playing at home. “Normally you sit in your room and scream at people through your microphone,” he said. “Here you can punch them.”

At 4:57 a.m., Sampson stood up from his monitor. He was going to bed.

Ten minutes later, he trudged back to the machine and sat down next to Viper. The energy drinks were working.

So the two kept at it, playing through the night.

By 7 a.m. an orange blur had risen above the mountains.

Viper and Sampson had no idea. The teenagers were racing cars. There were 13 hours to go.