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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK PETERSON

GAME On

WITH A MAMMOTH FAN BASE AND AN EXPANDING TOURNAMENT CIRCUIT, MAJOR LEAGUE GAMING WANTS TO BE THE NEXT BIG SPECTATOR SPORT. (STEP 1: FIGURE OUT HOW TO LET PEOPLE SPECTATE.)


CHRIS PUCKETT HAS DECISIONS TO MAKE. THE 22-year-old commentator is sitting at a desk in an elevated booth at MLG's season-opening tournament, in Seacacus, N.J. In front of him is the contest's main stage, where two teams of four play Halo 3. Above the teams are three giant screens, displaying the action to 5,000-plus fans at the Meadowlands Expo Center. The outer two screens are quartered, showing the viewpoints of the eight players. The middle screen is Puckett's domain. It shows the POV of one player, whichever one Puckett decides is the most interesting at any given moment. This is the action that people at home will see during the league's live webcast on mlgpro.com, and it's the basis for what MLG hopes will become a spectator-sports revolution.

When MLG decided to start broadcasting tournaments in 2004, the chief hurdle was coming up with a sensible way to show first-person play. "When filming traditional sports, you follow the ball, or the play, and get the best shot of the action," says Will Jones, MLG's webcast director. "All we have to work with is the point of view of the gamers." In short, MLG had to invent a way to capture the mayhem through one POV instead of eight and show a game that has no tangible field.

Partitioning the screen wouldn't fly, because the action would be too small for a computer monitor. The league needed an unobtrusive way to allow the laptop set to track the chaos. Salvation finally arrived about a year ago with the implementation of the VT[5], a robust digital video production system. With the new giant video mixing board, Puckett is able to choose the best feed and send it to viewers. "I look for players who are in position, on a tear or have a power weapon," he says. With context provided by

on-screen graphics and a commentary team made up largely of young gamers, MLG created a show that even the most clueless of n00bs could sort out.

The stream of the Meadowlands contest lured more than 180,000 unique visitors—an 82% jump from last year—and the league expects 500,000 viewers when Gears of War 2 and World of Warcraft tournaments are webcast during five remaining Pro Circuit stops. The success has compelled sponsors to flock to MLG, which league officials report was profitable in 2008. As a result, the league has added mid-event segments, such as the Old Spice Postgame Report, and between-tournament programming, such as the Dr Pepper-branded *Ultimate Gaming House*. The money is nice, but MLG co-founder Sundance DiGiovanni is even more hyped to be able to say "mission accomplished" and mean it. "We're doing what a lot of people told us couldn't be done," he says. "We're producing live sports programming out of competitive video gaming."

And lots of people are tuning in to watch. 



1. The POV of a player in a typical Halo 3 game. At the prom that is an MLG event, the view gets all prettied up with inset video of the gamer's face and a graphic bearing his gamer ID tag.

2. Believe the Hype faces (figuratively speaking) eventual tourney champs Triggers Down on the main stage. Behind them, the split screen and broadcast screen allow the live audience to follow the fray.

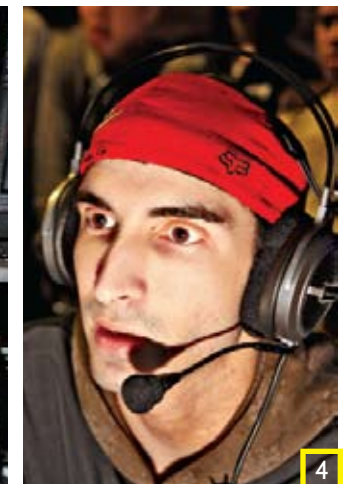
3. Faruq Tauheed (left), Puckett (center) and Scott Lussier dissect the carnage. "I'm like James Brown on *Inside the NFL*," says Tauheed. "I set up the experts, then they do their thing." Puckett's hand is primed by the keypad to quickly switch views.

4. Justin "SK" Mann, of Triggers Down, looking ready for takeoff. During frequent "Listen In" sessions, Puckett & Co. are shushed so viewers can hear teammates chatter via headset.

5. On the floor, DiGiovanni (left) and Jones helm the VT[5]. The unit juggles more than 20 feeds, including eight gaming consoles, eight cameras focused on the players and four roving lenses.

6. Lussier and Tauheed check out early-afternoon action from the booth they'll use during the live broadcast.

7. What's a league without its stars? Seeking its own LeBron, MLG tasked analysts and personalities with breaking down tourney happenings. Some top gamers are invited to chime in with game commentary in the booth; others are interviewed post-firefight by sideline reporters such as Julie Alexandria, a vet of SNY and Versus.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK PETERSON/REDUX. COURTESY MAJOR LEAGUE GAMING (LEFT)