

THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF TOMORROW'S SUPERSTAR:
THE CYBERATHLETE

Morbid Seduction, You're Needed in the Counter-Strike Arena Immediately

BY JOSH DEAN

ILLUSTRATION BY SANJAY KOTHARI

THE MAN KNOWN AS FATALITY kills without regret, and for that he is celebrated. Or so his agent tells me. Fatality, in the naturally lit world, is Johnathan Wendel, a nineteen-year-old with a straw-colored buzz cut and a boyish face your mom would love to tape to the fridge. He played number one on his high school tennis team, won a national title in Pee-Wee Football, golfs in the seventies, and probably has excellent penmanship, but what John does best is play Quake III — and that's why no one here calls him John. In the kill-or-be-killed world of the world's preeminent shoot-'em-up video game, he kills more than anyone else. Thus, he is Fatality.

In the last month of the first year of the new millennium, Fatality settles down at a terminal. Around him, guys in baggy pants and logo T-shirts, many with bleached hair and wallet chains — they're more

cyber skate rats than geeks — whisper that the star seems to be in cruise mode. "I told Viper to just run," one says of his opponent. "It's his only chance." Onscreen, Fatality blasts away with what they call the rail gun, and Viper's character splatters into a chunky red wash.

Fatality and Viper are two of the hundreds of scrappy combatants who have descended upon the windowless, forty-thousand-square-foot Marsalis Exhibit Hall in the basement of the downtown Dallas Hyatt Regency by plane and train and automobile from twenty-seven countries and forty-seven states to chase a big pile of cash and, more importantly, the right to be called a professional "cyberathlete." With only the barest of fanfare and virtually no media attention, a subculture has splayed its feathers and attracted the greatest collection of video-game talent ever assembled to a patch of dry Texas turf within rifle range of Dealey Plaza, the Book Depository, and, yes, the grassy knoll. They have all come here to compete in Babbage's Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL) Event, the largest-ever tournament of its kind. They have come here to win computer gaming's first Super Bowl.

I've wandered into this chaotic intersection of virtual reality and actual reality a blank slate, and Fatality's agent, Kollin Alexander, plans to be my chalk. The icebox-shaped twenty-three-year-old Dallas salesman has certainly partitioned his acreage on the digital frontier: By representing Fatality, he has made himself the first agent in the short, preposterous rise of professional video-game playing. As we watch Fatality warm up, controlling his onscreen character with the slightest twitches of his wrist, Kollin tells me that enjoying the computer game Quake requires a basic knowledge of the rules, and that once I get it, I will want to cheer for its stars. Victory in Quake is achieved by scoring more "frags," or kills, than your opponent in a timed fifteen-minute "deathmatch." Easy enough. Computer games, however, do not naturally lend themselves to spectating. Fatality, though currently fragging the shit out of his foe, is essentially just a guy in headphones sitting at a computer half a room away from another guy in headphones sitting at a computer. They might as well be sending each other e-mail.

Some fans stand behind him, studying his actions, but by far the easiest way to watch the game is to head across the room to the two big screens that abut a glowing red CPL logo surrounded by black folding chairs. Someday, if things go according to plan, you'll need a good scalper to land one of these seats.

THIS IS the most successful business I've run in my life," says Angel Muñoz, CPL founder, president, and visionary, a man who made millions investing in computer technology and was recently named one of Texas's twenty-five most influential technology figures. The charming, fast-talking Puerto Rican will spend the full seventy-two hours of this event swaddled head to toe in the black, red-logoed apparel of the CPL, and he fancies himself a bit like Pete Rozelle, a man who took a complicated, ultraviolent game — pro football — and made it the obsession of millions of beer-swilling men, who now eat, drink, and breathe the sport. Angel believes this can happen to gaming.

Before you get to laughing, consider that this thing is really happening. The CPL is a living, breathing, multimillion-dollar entity earning profits from its shiny HQ on the fifty-fourth (and top) floor of the Chase Tower. It's Dallas's choicest office, an open-air two-story penthouse with glass ceilings, acres of polished pine, and flashy fixtures handpicked by its previous tenant. Angel uses this space to make

a point, to demonstrate that he (quite literally) means business.

He rocks back in his Aeron chair and explains that his next big move is the Dallas Cyber Dome, a gaming arena that, he says, will be built soon. Angel has no doubt that five or ten or fifteen years from now a wisecrass anchor in a bad suit will be yelling, "Boo-yah!" at Quake highlights on *SportsCenter* and the CPL will have a network of arenas around the globe, hundreds of athletes under contract, and — the holy grail of successful sports — a TV contract. "How

big can it be?" he asks. "At least as big as auto racing."

Why, if über-redneck Richard Petty can land a Wheaties box just for driving a car, can hypercaffeinated young Americans not make a living doing what many of them are already doing — obsessively — for free: play video games? Hundreds of companies earn millions selling products to these very people, so the sponsorship money is obviously there. Combine money with



The man with the plan: Angel Muñoz, CPL founder, president, and visionary.

vision and, well, suddenly you're onto something.

There is no doubt that the assembled masses in Dallas believe they can sell this, provided you're the type of open mind who considers bowling, golf, pool, and bass fishing — televised events all — sports. How perfect, then, that the man who would deliver it should be named Angel, because in the eyes of the thousand-plus people here who tap and click and chatter and say and do things that are hard to wrap your head around, he is some sort of a godsend. This Angel was ready to retire, but as many rounds of golf as he played, he couldn't get the idea out of his head. *Why not? Why the hell can't computer gaming be a professional sport?*

Because, I'm thinking, no one will care, that's why. Because the idea of watching a guy stare at a computer screen, toggling a mouse or jiggling a joystick and chasing a cartoon controlled by another guy in God-knows-where, is ridiculous. Because if you don't have spectators — and, considering the rather uninteresting visual possibilities, spectators are unlikely — you don't have a sport.

BUT THAT jaded perspective, I quickly learn, is so last-century. Here, in the dark recesses of a major chain hotel, where a large software company is at this very moment using a shirtless stripper to hand out T-shirts to a feverish mob, subculture is already shaking culture's hand. The gaming community at its highest levels is an ungainly mass of like-minded (mostly male) people — high school and college students, dot-commers, bored office workers — who can afford to lose hours parked in dark rooms connected to the Net. At least twenty thousand of these Texas square feet are devoted to the BYOC (Bring Your Own Computer) pit, row upon row of regular guys who have traveled long distances to plug into a high-speed network with a "ping rate" to kill for.

The BYOC pit is gaming's great equalizer, a buzzing mosh pit of heterogeneity. Around the room there are plumber's cracks, cowboy hats, do-rags, teenagers in tight jeans, guys on vacation from banks, as many Santa caps as black trench coats (two), and the occasional surprise, like forty-seven-year-old Barry Collins, who came here to

Senior editor JOSH DEAN can kick your ass at Ms. Pac-Man.

Dallas both to play and to show off his computer case, a black Pentium tower with a neon mural of a wolf howling at the moon. And a cigarette lighter. I hear Spanish, French, and what is either Swedish, Danish, or Norwegian. (Who can tell?) There are stadium cushions, Beanie Babies, and rows of empty blue glass bottles of Bawls Guarana, a high-caffeine, guarana-infused pick-me-up that is the official drink of the CPL.

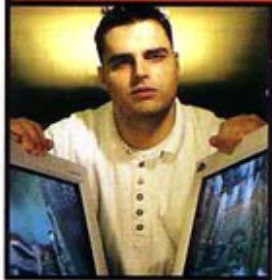
Here, where for three days there is no such thing as sleep, and the inhabitants subsist on Little Debbies, the outside world is an afterthought. Only the arrival of pizzas signals the passing of time, the Papa John's guys in red jackets providing a liaison to civilization from this Vegas-under-the-Hyatt where there are no clocks and the room temperature is a constant seventy-something. In this world, you are not you, you are your avatar, the onscreen you who packs ludicrous weapons like the lightning gun and kills without remorse. You are not at all fazed when Big Brother clicks on the PA and disturbs the white noise of seven hundred whirring microprocessors to make announcements like "We need Dr. Phenom, Deathknight, and Enigma at the Verizon booth" and, a favorite of mine, "Morbid Seduction is needed in the Counter-Strike arena immediately."

NEXT TO FATALITY and the question of whether I, as the CPL's version of a UN weapons inspector, am any good at Quake (next time I will bring business cards reading NO), the most popular topic of discussion is the \$25,000 winner's check, and Densmore (who prefers to be known by the one name, Madonna-style) is happy to remind me of that. This heavysset, bearded, cap-wearing Jacksonville, Florida, resident is the voice of gaming, a boisterous on-air blowhard who works hundred-hour weeks for very little reward and ends each interview by demanding that his guests exclaim, "Densmore, you suck!" It's even on the back of his T-shirt. His one-man radio station, All Game Radio, aspires to be the voice of the CPL.

It is at his table that I first sense the power of Fatality's legend, which stems not just from the fact that his \$150,000 season has made him Angel Muñoz's first legitimate cyberathlete. Densmore talks about his sharper reflexes, faster reaction times, and better hand-eye coordination. He's seen Fatality whup capable opponents playing with one hand. He once saw at least twenty-five consecutive players face off against the superstar in Minneapolis, needing only one frag to win a T-shirt reading I BEAT FATALITY. "They gave away one shirt," he says. "Fatality should never have gotten on the plane," he adds in regard to this weekend's competition. "They should just send him the check."

Robert Krakoff, general manager of Razer, the peripherals company that makes the Boomslang gaming mouse used by Fatality, has certainly bought into this legend. His company pays Fatality a salary and flies him to places like Singapore to plug in his Boomslang. He believes that his signing of Fatality last year, in the CPL's infancy, was a steal. "It's like if you were Nike and you signed Michael Jordan out of high school," he says. But there's still one problem. Fatality, for all his skill, is almost too all-American. He's the kind of kid who played for Gene Hackman in *Hoosiers*, shooting jumpers outside a barn as the Indiana sun dipped below the hay

HERE, WHERE FOR THREE DAYS THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS SLEEP AND MEN SUBSIST ON LITTLE DEBBIES, REALITY IS AN AFTERTHOUGHT.



bales. "We need to make personalities out of the players," Krakoff says. "If Fatality walked by, you wouldn't know him."

But who else is there?

"Well, Makaveli is the WWF guy."

Makaveli (Victor Cuadra, to the government) is the number-four seed at Babbage's and the man Angel calls the CPL's Muhammad Ali. Like Fatality, his name inspires whispers and, better yet, boos and catcalls. Makaveli is this world's bad guy — a brash, good-looking trash talker with the game to back it up. He's well-coiffed and dark-complected. Handsome. In a black button-down, untucked over gray slacks, finished with polished black leather lace-ups, he is factory-ready to explode the gamer-as-geek stereotype and tell the world that your children — even the normal ones — can put those hours of screen time to use. This very evening, he'll say as much on CNN. His is the face Angel needs.



CPL superstars Victor "Makaveli" Cuadra (top) and Johnathan "Fatality" Wendel.

Fatality, on the other hand, cuts a thinner swath. He lives at home. His stepmom manages his growing finances. He's spent only \$5,000 of his winnings (on a trip to the World Series), his good-luck charm is a stuffed tiger, and he likes to take a half-hour alone in his room before matches, sometimes practicing but more likely listening to Bon Jovi's "It's My Life," which gets him pumped up.

Because of problems with the custom-designed software that runs the brackets for the tournament, the event hardly purrs along. CPL commissioner and tournament director Mike Wardwell, a baby-faced twenty-four-year-old who moonlights as a software developer, has the unpleasant job of telling competitors to hurry up and wait. (Typical reaction: "What a prick. He's just pissed because he can't get the LAN working right!") Although the top seeds should have been fragging wannabes as early as Friday afternoon, it's not until 4:15 P.M. Saturday that the big guns actually sit down to play.

FATALITY HAS DRAWN a large crowd, which, relative to even the smallest crowd at any sport that isn't pro lawn darts, barely fits the definition. When Fatality plays, he doesn't change expressions: His pursed bottom lip bites the top one, his right hand twitching ever so slightly to direct the mouse a few inches here and there while his left taps the keyboard to work his triggers. Onscreen, Quake III moves at light-speed. Players and fans around me laugh and exhale, ooh and ahh, questioning moves and shouting when he does something good.

Across the room, Makaveli is talking trash. "That's six frags in a row," he says. "AIIII day!" he snarls to no one in particular. Not surprisingly, his match against a relative unknown from Sweden named Prozac has drawn a crowd (including a lone female, who can't take her eyes off of him) to the area behind his computer set off by Gateway boxes. Only here, as if briefed by an envoy for Angel's master plan, the crowd has a decidedly different take: Makaveli is their villain. They taunt him, and he tosses snark back over [Continued on page 139]

house, hucking rocks at one another. Sometimes late in the day, the widow gets on the phone and calls Khalil's cell phone because she's forgotten.

The people who get sucked through are changed, too. Mikhail Nourjits, who is wiser and more understanding about what's happened than he has any right to be, says the tape gave birth to a sec-

"MORBID SEDUCTION, YOU'RE NEEDED . . ."

[Continued from page 106] his shoulder between frags. Someone yells, "Laugh every time he dies!"

And there are plenty of chances to laugh — only no one does, because right now they can't believe the dark knight is losing. It's a close match, and the big screens have both tuned it in.

"That boy's on fire!" a fan says of the goateed Swede across the room, whose eyes have narrowed to slits under his black knit cap.

"Mak's gotta stop this!"

But Mak can't. Despite five straight frags that cut the lead, it's 18–14 with two minutes to go. Quickly, it's 19 and then 20 to 14 and someone yells, "Whoa! Oh, fucking yes!" Makaveli rips off his headphones with a minute left, walks to his opponent, offers a quick handshake, and then hits me with the excuses. "I couldn't hear the rails. If I can hear, that shit doesn't happen." But this being double elimination, he'll have another shot. "I'm gonna go back to my room and regroup."

Ladies and gentlemen, the mighty have fallen. The sixty-first seed just roughed up a favorite. And suddenly, Makaveli versus Fatality — the match I want to see, the match Densmore wants to see, the match Angel especially wants to see — seems unlikely.

When word trickles round that Makaveli has lost, Kollin offers his theory. "That's what cockiness and overconfidence gets you."

There's plenty of time for the news to settle in. Already an hour behind at six o'clock, we

ond Vadim. Just as there is the Beit El you can drive to and the Beit El in the Bible, the rifles Vadim and Yossi brought and the rifles that the Israelis would fight to get back. In a way, everyone with a relationship to the video is similarly split from himself. The second Vadim, of whom there are nine frames of evidence, is the man the nation mourned, whom

learn that technical difficulties have again hamstrung the competition. I wouldn't suggest investing in this system software.

Soon enough, afternoon segues into night, the action heats up again, and I've got to admit that even though I have no idea what's going on, I'm transfixed. It's loud and fast and gory, and if people watch street luge, why the hell not this? As the matches get closer and the draw thins, the crowds build and cheer every frag. The gorier the frags, the better. When CZM takes down Aim in sudden-death OT, there's a roar and a standing ovation. I'm also starting to talk like them, inquiring about Wombat, empathizing with Blue, and being utterly dumbstruck when I hear that, upset of upsets, the mighty Fatality has fallen. And then I realize that it bothers me. I was so sure of him that I hadn't even bothered to watch.

BY KEEPING the draws running until three o'clock in the morning (which isn't hard when the Bawls guy has 120 cases on ice), Commissioner Mike and his merry band of organizers have caught up, and the formerly frazzled commish even finds a few minutes for some Quake.

In the end, a tall Californian in cargo pants, Zero4, edges Lakeman, a ball-cap-wearing Swede, 6–4 in the third of three gripping deathmatches to take the top prize. Fatality, clearly not at his best, fades late Saturday night, places a disappointing seventh, and adds \$4,000 to his growing pot of gold. Ever the ambassador, he sticks around until the end, watching the final from a row of chairs

a hundred thousand people showed up to commemorate at the military funeral, who shut down the borders and ordered the attack. Mikhail said goodbye to the Vadim he grew up with the day of his funeral, when, against the military's advice, he viewed his body. That's the one he cries over. The other one, he says, is still out there somewhere. 49

alongside his acolytes. Makaveli, who has won only a single match here, does not place and quickly vanishes, no doubt back home to California to stroke his ego back to full strength. In a perfect world, Fatality would have nipped Makaveli on a well-timed rail as time expired, but maybe what's happened here is good for the CPL. It proves that though Fatality may be the best — and considering that he already wrapped up CPL player-of-the-year honors at CPL Europe in Cologne, that's clearly the case — there is parity at the top, and the Europeans are a force to be reckoned with.

Geoff, a Canadian from the clan Team Abuse, lays it on me: "Fatality's loss was huge. Because now everybody knows he can be beaten." Kollin, of course, spins it all down to size. "All I know is, John made it a helluva lot longer than Victor." Angel, despite a tournament in which one sponsor embarrassed him by bringing the stripper, the system software failed miserably, and neither of his anointed stars contended, couldn't be happier. Watching his emcee hand out oversized checks to the winners, his grin is so large that his cheeks are in danger of knocking his glasses off-kilter. This event's troubles, he says, were no different than a Cowboys game spoiled by rain and mud. People get wet, but they still go. And anyway, in a month he'll be on a plane to Rio to christen the new Latin American branch of the CPL, before moving on to baptize CPL Australia, all the while tweaking his new line of CPL outerwear, which, it should be pointed out, will probably soon be for sale in a Cyber Dome near you. 50

WHERE TO BUY

SO CLASSIC PAGE 121 Sweater and trousers: Polo by Ralph Lauren, available at Polo Ralph Lauren nationwide or visit polo.com. **PAGE 122** Sweater: Brooks Brothers, available at Brooks Brothers nationwide. Shirt: Hathaway, visit hathaway.com. **PAGE 123** Sweater and trousers: Nautica, available at Burdines nationwide or visit nautica.com. **PAGE 124** Sweater and shirt: Tommy Hilfiger, call 800-666-9227. **PAGE 125** Sport jacket (part of suit), shirt, and trousers: Ermenegildo Zegna, available at Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue stores nationwide or visit zegna.com. Vest: Brooks Brothers, available at Brooks Brothers nationwide.

RESOURCES PAGE 126 Suit: Claiborne, available at Lord & Taylor nationwide. Polo shirt: Polo by Ralph Lauren, visit polo.com. Suit: Kenneth Cole New York, visit kennethcole.com. Shirt and vest: Brooks Brothers, available at Brooks Brothers nationwide. Suit: Nautica, available at Nautica nationwide or visit nautica.com. Shirt: Van Heusen, available at Lord & Taylor and Dillard's stores nationwide. Tie: Ralph Lauren Purple Label, available at Polo Ralph Lauren nationwide. **PAGE 127** Jacket: Boss Hugo Boss, visit hugoboss.com. Polo shirt: Izod, available at major department stores nationwide. Trousers: Tommy Hilfiger, available at select Macy's and Bloomingdale's stores nation-

wide or call 800-666-9227. Jacket: Land's End, call 800-356-4444 or visit landsend.com. Polo shirt: Izod, available at major department stores nationwide. Trousers: DKNY, available at Bloomingdale's nationwide. Polo shirt: Tommy Hilfiger, call 800-666-9227. Trousers: Dockers, visit dockers.com. Sweater: Banana Republic, available at select Banana Republic stores nationwide. T-shirt: Calvin Klein, available at Macy's and Bloomingdale's stores nationwide. Trousers: Sandy Dalal, available at Barneys, New York and Beverly Hills. Shoes: Cole Haan, available at Cole Haan nationwide or visit colehaan.com. Shoes: Brooks Brothers, available at Brooks Brothers nationwide. Penny loafers: Coach, available at Coach nationwide; call 800-262-2411 or visit coach.com. **EASILY SUEDE PAGE 128** Lace-up shoes: John Varvatos, available at John Varvatos, New York. Lace-up shoes: Hush Puppies, visit hushpuppies.com. Lace-up shoes: Cole Haan, available at Cole Haan nationwide; call 800-201-8001 or visit colehaan.com. Boots: Polo by Ralph Lauren, available at Polo Ralph Lauren nationwide or visit polo.com. **PAGE 129** Lace-up shoes: Clarks, call 800-211-5461 or visit clarks.com. Velcro shoes: Rockport, available at Rockport nationwide or visit rockport.com. Loafers: Banana Republic, available at select Banana Republic stores nationwide; call 888-277-8953 or visit bananarepublic.com. Loafers: Tod's, available at Tod's nationwide or call 800-457-8637.

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