

P.J. Clarke's®
RESTAURANT

Warm up at **PJ Clarke's** this season with a bottle of wine and one of our fantastic prime steaks. Bring your friends and celebrate in style in one of our private rooms. Don't forget to include **PJ Clarke's** in your holiday plans this year! Pilsner Urquell Draft \$5.00

CITIZEN
bar

River North's Hottest Spot Featuring An Award Winning Menu Of Eclectic Italian Style Bar Menu And Late-Night Djs. Now! Thursday's \$4 Pilsner Urquell's And \$4 **Citizen** Burgers



POP GAMES

You wanna bet?

Chicagoans' Web site lets video gamers go head-to-head—for cash

By Jerry Soverinsky
FOR REDEYE

Take an industry that's on target to amass \$25 billion in annual revenue. Add two ambitious twentymethings itching for more excitement than selling mortgages and trading futures at the Chicago Board of Trade. Throw in thousands of dollars in seed money. And you've got all the ingredients for what its owners hope will be the next biggest online venture, one that in its inaugural month has signed up a couple thousand users.

Jason Gray and Mike Patak moved to Chicago in 2002, recent Iowa State grads equipped with the standard postcollege tools: a decent grasp of general business and liberal arts concepts (Mike majored in econ, Jason in business and marketing) and an excellent command of video games.

While each moved into traditional careers, both longed for something greater. Recognizing the popularity of online poker sites, they envisioned that the same competitive passions must lie inside video gamers.

It's a simple concept: Think you're pretty good at Madden NFL? Don't waste your time playing your roommate for the title of "best in apartment." Lay down \$2 (or more) against an online opponent any day of the week, at a time of your choosing. And then see for yourself just how good you are, perhaps winning some cash in the process.

Two years and \$260,000 later, Gray and Patak debuted GorillaGamer (gorillagamer.com) on Oct. 23, promoting their site as one that allows "head2head" financial challenges of the most popular video games.

Taking advantage of the online capabilities of Xbox, PlayStation and the like, their site provides a virtual community where gamers can meet and challenge one another 24/7 for up to \$500 per game.

Registration is free, and while challengers have the option of playing without charge, only about 5 percent choose that route. The remaining 95 percent of users lay down bets ranging from the \$2 minimum to the \$500 limit. Patak says the average bet is "around 20 bucks," and his company nets 10 percent of the money exchanged.

In about one month of operations, they've already accumulated 2,000 registered users, mostly on word-of-mouth marketing. Players must be at least 14 years old, though to place cash challenges they must be at least 18. They monitor ages the same as other online commerce sites: through meticulously worded legal jargon that users must either accept or reject before pro-



Mike Patak (left) and Jason Gray launched gorillagamer.com in October. "Whether we're the next YouTube billionaires or a couple of guys with just a video gaming Web site, I guess we'll see," Gray said. [PHOTO BY RYAN FLYNN]

Get in the game

GorillaGamer offers the following games for competitive challenges:

- >> **Football:** Madden, NCAA Football
- >> **Baseball:** MVP NCAA, MLB 2K
- >> **Basketball:** NBA 2K, College Hoops 2K, NBA LIVE
- >> **Golf:** Tiger Woods Golf
- >> **Soccer:** FIFA Soccer, Winning Eleven
- >> **Hockey:** NHL 2K
- >> **Boxing:** Fight Night
- >> **First person shooter (FPS):** Halo 2, Quake, Prey, Call of Duty, Painkiller
- >> **Strategy:** Chessmaster
- >> **Tennis:** Table Tennis



ceeding through their registration process.

As their play frequency increases, users accumulate points, allowing them to progress through GorillaGamer's categorization hierarchy, which in turn allows them to place more expensive maximum challenges. There's Rookie (\$15), Pro (\$25), All-Pro (\$50) and Gorilla (\$500), each separated by 10 games of experience.

When submitting the results of a challenge, participants provide feedback of their competitor's skills (similar to an eBay rating), allowing others to gain insights into GorillaGamer's pool of challengers. "It's a community, and the end users govern the site," Gray explained.

Patak is careful to point out that his site is not gambling, but rather a skills challenge.

Gray and Patak retain specialty legal counsel that have advised that skill-based challenges—those not based on chance—avoid gaming commission scrutiny in 41 U.S. states. Their site's registration process

screens for users in the other nine states.

According to Gene O'Shea, spokesman for the Illinois Gaming Board, the matter is not so simple.

"Regulation of Internet sites has been a big issue for the states, and Illinois doesn't get involved," he said. "Many of the Web sites operate from offshore servers, so tracking them down is problematic."

He said that state attorney general offices and the Department of Justice still are trying to set a course for regulation of sites where money is exchanged, whether for chance or skill-based competitions.

As for the ultimate success of **gorillagamer.com**, it's still far too early to predict.

"Whether we're the next YouTube billionaires or a couple of guys with just a video gaming Web site, I guess we'll see," Gray said.

Added Patak, "Either way, we're taking a shot at a dream." [JERRY SOVERINSKY IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR.]