

The Elements of a Good LAN Party

You know the worst part about gibbing someone with a rocket launcher when you're playing *Quake III* online?

You can't see the look on the other person's face.

Oh sure, you've racked up your score, but you're still alone in your room. There's the explosion onscreen, and the little line that says "Frobozz is nuked." But look away from the screen and ignore your surround-sound speakers, and you will hear no cheers of congratulations for taking down the best player on the server. You won't see the grin on your opponent's face as he or she vows a bloody revenge.

And when you finally disconnect, there you are at the computer. Alone.

Maybe you can go to the kitchen and eat cold pizza by yourself.

But you can change that! What if I told you that you could have a bunch of people in your house, laughing and screaming whenever you pulled off some insane multiperson kill? What if people cheered whenever you pulled victory out of the jaws of defeat, and sat behind you to give you play advice when you'd lost for the eighth time in a row and didn't know why you were losing? What if when you went to the kitchen, two players were debating the best tactics to use in *Warcraft III*, and asked you what you thought?

You can have all that. You can turn that solitary, lonely experience into a raucously fun time.

There are a lot of good technical reasons to hold LAN parties, not the least of which is insanely low ping times that can't be matched. But the *real* fun of LAN parties is that they are social events where like-minded gamers get together to have a good time in that scary world called *real life*. In a LAN party, all the computers are in the same house, so all of your opponents are within walking distance. And when you're tired of blowing people to shreds, you can go share a Mountain Dew and compare video cards with someone else who really cares about vertex shading.

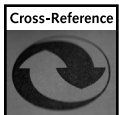
The accent's on the *party*, not the LAN.

chapter 1

in this chapter

- ☒ Basics of LAN parties
- ☒ Common misconceptions
- ☒ What you need to hold a LAN party

2 LAN Party: Hosting the Ultimate Frag Fest



If you are new enough to online computer gaming that you don't know what a *ping time* is, you will need to read Chapter 7, "The Least You Need to Know about Networking" (which explains networks and ping time).

LAN Party Basics and Some Common Misconceptions

A LAN is a small network in which all of the computers are connected directly to each other. Because your computer doesn't have to send information to a central server that's miles away, the response times are *amazing*. You will be playing with practically no lag. Say goodbye to the days of missing someone you had dead in your sights just because the server couldn't keep up with you!

You can play pretty much any game at a LAN party that you could online (except for massively multiplayer online role-playing games such as *EverQuest* and *Star Wars: Galaxies*, but even with these you can log on and play if the party has an Internet connection). That's a big list: *Counterstrike*, *Warcraft III*, *Battlefield 1942*, every flavor of *Quake*, every flavor of *Unreal Tournament*, *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, *Medal of Honor*, *Command and Conquer*, every flavor of *Diablo*, the yet-to-be-released-as-I-write-this *Doom III* and *Half-Life 2*, and pretty much every other game with online support.

However, many misconceptions floating around make people loathe to hold LAN parties. But none of them should stop you from holding one. The most common untruths are shown in the following sidebar.

Let's examine each one of these misconceptions in detail.

Not knowing enough about computers to hold a LAN party

Thinking that you need to be a computer whiz to hold a LAN party is nonsense! Networking companies have been working overtime to make networking PCs as painless as possible. Setting up many LAN parties involves little more than running cables from your computer to a broadband router and booting up.

Common Misconceptions about LAN Parties

- I don't know enough about computers to hold a LAN party.
- If I know how to set up a LAN, I know how to hold a LAN party.
- LAN parties attract dangerous, Columbine-style antisocial people.
- I'll be embarrassed at a LAN party 'cause I don't know how to play the games well.

Chapter 1 — The Elements of a Good LAN Party 3

It's true that a LAN party involves *some* technical know-how; otherwise, I wouldn't have had to write a book on it. But I have written this book so that it contains the *absolute minimum* amount of information that you need to know in order to hold a LAN party. I figure that if you know how to set up a LAN, you're going to skip the technical stuff anyway — and if you don't know, then why swamp you with needless details?

A LAN party at its core is pretty much plugging wires. You plug one end into your network card and the other into a hub or switch. If you can plug things in, you can run a LAN party.

Knowing how to set up a LAN is the same as knowing how to hold a LAN party

Knowing how to set up a LAN is not quite the same thing as knowing how to hold a LAN party. There are all sorts of other details involved, from setting ground rules to making sure you don't blow the power when everyone boots up. LAN parties involve people, and in the course of this book I have interviewed no less than 10 experienced LAN hosts in order to distill their collective wisdom.

The technical stuff is the glue that holds everyone together, but it's not the party in and of itself. When someone is crammed into a corner that you thought was big enough to hold him, is going deaf because the player next to him likes to play loudly and you didn't tell people to bring headphones, and is starving because nobody wants to go in on a pizza — well, suffice it to say that your knowledge of routing protocols is *not* going to ensure a good time.

LAN parties attract dangerous, Columbine-style antisocial people

You'd be surprised how often this misconception comes up, even among die-hard gamers.

The shadow of the Internet troll and incoherent AOL l33tsp34k3rz looms large over many potential LAN parties. People think, "Hey, if I invite these people into my house (or my game), I'll be stuck with a bunch of fat, smelly guys who can't make eye contact and may be dangerous. *I'm fine, but I don't know about the other Counterstrike players.*"

But the interesting thing is this: In the course of interviewing people for this book, the one thing that I heard over and over again was, "Tell everyone how wonderful these get-togethers are. Tell them how LAN parties bring people together, inspire friendships, and make entire social circles come alive." Almost every person I talked to wanted the world to know that LAN parties are just good, clean fun between good friends.

Some gamers are shy, sure — but LAN parties bring out the best in people. You meet new people who share your interests. Most of them are normal people, just like you and me.

Alas, people frequently confuse the violence simulated in the game with what happens in real life. Capping someone in *UT* does not equate with having an urge to kill real people. The skillsets are two entirely different things; clicking a mouse and keeping a three-pound gun steady through a 30-pound recoil have nothing in common.

4 LAN Party: Hosting the Ultimate Frag Fest

Most people who play computer games are friendly, wonderful people just like you. Keep that in mind.



FIGURE 1-1: Is this man dangerous?

I'd be embarrassed at a LAN party because I don't play the games well

You cannot possibly be worse at playing than I am. I am a *terrible* player.

And yet I have a good time.

Most LAN party participants understand. There is trash-talking, of course, and there are some places where people go for blood. But most LAN parties have a few top-tier players who dominate, a few who are pathetic, and the majority somewhere in the middle.

You can expect to take some good-natured ribbing, but that's par for the course. And if you really want to improve your skills, what better way is there than to have the best player at the party watching over your shoulder and giving you suggestions?

Chapter 1 — The Elements of a Good LAN Party 5

What You Need to Hold a LAN Party

Like I said, LAN parties are pretty easy to throw together (well, at least the smaller ones are). But you need to possess certain things to throw one. Following are the most important elements:

- Friends
- Networking hardware
- A place to play with enough tables
- Prep time
- Technical know-how
- Time and effort

Let's check out each of these.

Friends

Having friends to play with is critical. Holding a one-person LAN party is distinctly unsatisfying.

My editor tells me that I must have more than a one-paragraph entry here, so let me elaborate. Usually, if you're looking to hold a LAN party, it's for one of three reasons:

- You haven't held (or attended) a LAN party, but you know enough gamers in town that you decide it's a good idea to play together, as opposed to logging onto online servers via the Internet. Usually, it's an incremental thing, glommed together from various sources — you know one local guy who plays *CounterStrike*, and he knows two local guys, and one of them wants to bring a friend.
- You usually don't know all of these people well when you agree to hold the LAN party. Sometimes it's *scary* having strangers to your house. ("What if they don't like me?" "What if they're creepy?")

The good news is that LAN parties are usually good bonding experiences. You get to know people at LAN parties, strange as it sounds, and you come away with a solid acquaintanceship that can easily deepen into friendship. And LAN parties are like potato chips; hardly anyone ever wants to play at just one. Chances are good that assuming you've read this book and done your prep work, you'll be asked to hold one again.

- You've attended LAN parties in the area before, but for whatever reason (the organizer moved away, you no longer work at that computer lab), the party died. This makes it a lot easier, as you have an idea of how LAN parties work, and you can just shoot off a couple of e-mails to the old gang and re-ignite the party.

In this case, this book is actually more important than you might think; yes, you may know how to hook up a small network, but LAN parties are organic and require more

6 LAN Party: Hosting the Ultimate Frag Fest

people-handling than you dreamed. If you want your LAN party to go well (and to have a longer half-life than the old LAN parties you used to attend), then you definitely want to check out the information in this book.

If you had regular LAN parties in the past but moved to an area where there are none now, first do a search on www.lanparty.com and www.bluesnews.com to make sure there are none in your area. LAN parties are a lot easier to attend than to host!

However, if nothing is available locally, you might want to use the bulletin boards on these sites (as well as any local user groups or gaming stores) to see if you can gather a group of new people to your lair to play a little face-to-face fragging.

In general, LAN parties are a good way to make new friends if you're looking for them — assuming, of course, that you're even moderately socially adept. (If you never shower and hold every conversation at a hundred decibels, you can get people over to your house, but they probably won't stay for espresso afterwards.) With very little effort, you can usually spin a LAN party into other social events, like attending the premiere of geek-themed movies or test-driving new games the day they come out. ("Dude! *Half-Life 2* is out! Wanna come over and see how it plays? These graphics are *awesome!*")

That's the beauty of LAN parties. They start with hardware, but they always end with people.

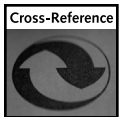
Networking hardware (and friends)

The bad news is that, yes, you will need equipment in order to network PCs together — stuff such as switches, network cables, and extension cords.



You can find out what equipment you'll need and what each of these things is in Chapter 7, "The Least You Need to Know about Networking."

The good news is that if you have friends who game, one of them is likely to have at least some of the equipment you'll need. If you have multiple friends, chances are excellent that all of them put together will have all of the equipment you need.



I'll repeat it again later in Chapter 5, "Saving Money on Your LAN Party," but memorize the LAN Party Host's Creed now.

A place to play with enough tables

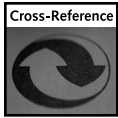
For most people, the place to hold the LAN party is going to be their house. But keep in mind that if your party becomes popular, eventually you'll have to move the party out of the house to an external location such as a cybercafe, a church, or a VA hall.

The LAN Party Host's Creed

Beg before you buy.

Chapter 1 — The Elements of a Good LAN Party 7

Also, each computer takes up about a square yard of space — and people hate playing on the floor. You'll need to make sure that you have enough sturdy tables to support all this hardware.



For the ins and outs of location, see Chapter 3, "Choosing a Site for Your Party."

Prep time

The key to a good LAN party is preparation. It might be okay for small parties of six or less to just show up and start fraggin'. But even then, there are issues you might miss, such as seating, power supply issues, and people breaking house rules that you really didn't think of as house rules. (Most rules are created because some people do things that really irritate everyone else at the party, and defend themselves by saying, "Well, nobody said anything to *me* about it!" You'd be surprised how many unofficial house rules you already have — you just don't think of them as "rules" because nobody's broken them. Yet.)

A good LAN party host spends some time thinking about things in advance. It saves valuable time later.



For more on the ground rules for planning, see Chapter 4, "The Complete Preparty Timeline." House rules are covered in Chapter 2, "Setting Your Party's Parameters."

Some technical know-how

You don't need to be Bill Gates or John Romero to know how to set up a network, but you should at least have an understanding of basic networking principles in case anything goes wrong. LAN parties won't usually come to a crashing halt if something is misconfigured, but you do need to be able to troubleshoot to help individual people out.



A baseline technical understanding can be gleaned in Chapter 7, "The Least You Need to Know about Networking." Troubleshooting methodologies are covered in Chapter 15, "Something Just Went Wrong! Fixing Party Problems."

Time and effort

LAN parties are very rewarding, but they can be exhausting, too. If you're the host, you'll still get your frag-time in — just not as much as some of the other players. On the other hand, you get to be the leader of a new community, and it's surprising how grateful people can be when you offer to host. And the feeling of satisfaction you get when your weekend-long LAN party comes to a close?

Priceless.

8 LAN Party: Hosting the Ultimate Frag Fest

Summary

LAN parties are a lot of fun, and they're really for everyone who enjoys playing online games of any sort. Yeah, you can play by yourself, but having a bunch of like-minded addicts around multiplies the entertainment.

The next chapter discusses a very important topic: What kind of party do you want to have? There are many variants on LAN parties and a lot of things to consider, and the next chapter should help you narrow down your options.