CAMP LIBERTY, Iraq -- "Die, die, die!" shouted Pfc. Joe Girardin, rising suddenly to his feet, grimacing. He launched a grenade, triumphantly throwing a fist into the air. "Boom!"

This was the war scene in a small trailer at this U.S. military camp near Baghdad in the wee hours of the morning last weekend, amid empty Pringles tubes, Pepsi cans, cigarette boxes and the swirling tunes of Jimi Hendrix and Metallica. The 29-inch color screen burst with machine-gun fire and rocket blasts, but the only real victims were pride and lost time.

Outside the trailer, in the chilly desert darkness, the real war continued. Soldiers prepared for missions and patrols in armored Humvees, shouldered their M-16s and braced for the possibility of a car bomb or an enemy assault. Mortar rounds and explosions sent hollow thuds echoing for miles.

The trailer was an escape for the young soldiers. Girardin, 19, of Long Island, N.Y., was glued to his Army-issued television and the video game images pulsing across it. He was stalking Spec. Criss Sanders, 21, of Miami, who seemed to always get the better of him -- and all other challengers this night. Sanders grabbed a sniper rifle and hid. Within moments, Girardin's character was lying in a pool of blood, Sanders's foil standing over him, continuing to pump bullets into the dead body. Girardin punched his bed furiously as a wry smile spread across Sanders's face.

"Don't take it so hard," Sanders said softly from beneath his low-slung floppy camo hat, already concentrating on his next assault. "I'll show you how to use the sniper rifle."

Like the teenagers and college students across America who sit on couches late on weekend nights and into the next morning, these soldiers spend their free hours on the outskirts of the Iraqi capital killing one another in Xbox and PlayStation2 games such as Halo and Mortal Kombat. Between guard duty and patrols and shifts at the dining facility, they gather to crash fast cars, play volleyball with buxom women and mimic warfare.

It's a virtual reality that at least temporarily hides the real war outside.

"I don't like to leave the room, if possible," Girardin said, only partially in jest. He spends his days in a large tent as an administrator with the headquarters company of the 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division. "You forget where you are when you're in this room. Then you step outside and the reality hits you. You're in the desert. You're in Iraq. I try not to leave."

The smells of incense and cheap cigarettes floated into the darkness as the only door to the trailer section swung open. Inside, it's not unlike many college dorm rooms or fraternity house bedrooms. The walls are
papered with images of scantily clad women, a collection of magazine pinups that include dozens of celebrities and supermodels from the pages of For Him Magazine and Maxim. Because pornography is banned on these deployments, it's all PG-13.

Two beds, two stand-alone closets, two folding camp chairs and a makeshift coffee table are about all the room can handle, but four or more people regularly cram inside to complete the gaming rituals. A tiny Christmas tree adorned with golden ornaments is dwarfed by the television set, which rests atop a white mini-fridge.

Unprecedented communications abilities make it possible for this room to feel very much as if it were in the United States. There's a computer waiting to get hooked to the Internet. Satellite television beams into many of the soldiers' quarters, Amazon.com offers two-week delivery for any video game or DVD movie a soldier desires, and anyone can buy an Iraqna cell phone to call home. Local vendors also sell knockoff DVDs for $5 apiece and video games for $15, encouraging vast video libraries and trading among soldiers.

On this base near Baghdad International Airport, there's a PX that carries numerous movies, games and game systems; the mess hall is a cacophony of films, sports and news shown on enormous flat-screen televisions during meals. The recreation center includes a movie room, a pool table, a Ping-Pong table and a lounge with leather couches.

Internet cafes and workstations offer the soldiers contact with home, and some get the chance to speak with their families via video-teleconferencing sessions set up by the military.

"It's a reality of the modern world, and our Army is a reflection of our society," said Col. Mark A. Milley, who commands the brigade and stays in daily contact with his family via the Internet. Milley doesn't play video games, preferring physical training and reading, but says he understands that young soldiers are simply doing what they would do at home to relax. "It reduces stress and it gives them a break from the day-to-day grind."

Individual barracks rooms are in trailers that cover the base in long, straight lines, their porch lights a guide to night-flying helicopters. Enlisted soldiers live in pairs and do what they can to make their quarters feel like home.

Pfc. David Usry, 25, of Tampa, is Girardin's roommate, a stocky cook with a nearly shaved head and the oldest member of this social club. Sitting on his bed, just a few hours before having to go back on duty, Usry smiles after mutilating a foe in the game Mortal Kombat. "I play every chance I get," he says, the clock passing 1:30 a.m. "I should be asleep now. Oh well."

Sitting next to him is Spec. Robert McKinney, 23, of Brooklyn, N.Y., whose eyes go wide when he shoots at an enemy in Halo. "Don't beg, don't beg," McKinney chimes in. "Everyone gets to die."

"We sort of zone out and know we can sit here and kill each other, and no one gets hurt," McKinney says later. "Everyone comes out alive."

The soldiers taunt, jeer, high-five and let out profanity-laced tirades when their abilities are overmatched or their move to the controller's "shoot" button is just a moment too slow. At one break, Spec. Brian Schroeder, 25, of The Colony, Tex., strummed Radiohead's "High and Dry" on an acoustic guitar before fading into a jam with Girardin, playing an electric. McKinney and Sanders join in on air drums, laughing.

Some nights, the soldiers play against one another from their separate rooms, having wired together a network. Some have satellite television in their trailers, while others have Internet connections. Tonight, they're all together.
It's not all gaming, all the time. They flip through American magazines and offer exclamations about how beautiful Jessica Simpson is or how they'd love to be holding a cold brew. The soldiers reminisce about home, the parties they're missing. The windows and floors occasionally rattle from helicopters overhead, and a loud boom signals some sort of explosion nearby.

Girardin joined the military right out of high school to straighten out his life, worried that he could become consumed by drugs or lack of ambition. The tall and lanky teenager sat forward and put down his controller, dropping a playful singsong tone in favor of a much older voice.

"I've been able to do so many things," Girardin says. "Within a year of joining, I've been to Germany, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, and I'll be traveling Europe for two weeks in March. I've thrown a grenade. I've shot a gun. I'm a veteran of a war, and that's cool. I'm proud of that."

The soldiers bemoan basic training and talk about how hard their drill sergeants were on them. Girardin complains about the work he had to do: "Basic training was the worst experience of my life. At least in Iraq, I can go back to my room and play video games and drink soda and eat candy."

Sanders, who exudes much more wisdom and experience than his 21 years might indicate, says the Army helped him focus. "Think about it -- when you came to the military, how many push-ups could you do?" Sanders asks Girardin, needling him.

"Not even 10," Girardin replies. When Sanders asks him how many he can do now, Girardin guesses: "I don't know, like 60."

Usry picks up a controller to get ready for another four-way game of Halo, another hour closer to his pre-dawn shift. He yawns and fiddles with a pack of Royale Club menthol cigarettes, which cost 50 cents a pack.

"It's 2:30 again," McKinney says, shrugging his shoulders.

"I'm a night owl," Sanders replies, hitting the start button one more time.