



JOHNATHAN "FATAL1TY" WENDEL: THE WORLD'S BEST GAMER

by Bart Cop/featurenet.co.za

"THIS YEAR ALONE I will have made half a million dollars with gaming." Johnathan Wendel looks like any person you would encounter in a shopping mall or on the street, but he kills people for a living, and at 24 he's got it made for life.

Without a doubt, he has committed the largest number of murders since Stalin, but even then he still has a clean record. Some time ago, he was mentioned in the same breath as Bill Gates by Time as "Masters of the Game". He has his own reality show on MTV and appears on CNN just about every other minute. He has travelled the entire world, spends only 50 days at home a year and is a millionaire at 24. All of this thanks to playing computer games. Johnathan Wendel, aka Fatal1ty, from Kansas is arguably one of the best and most famous gamers in the world. In the area of first-person shooters, to be exact, such as Quake, Unreal Tournament

and Painkiller, he has been untouchable for many years. He is the first star in a new sports discipline: electronic sports or e-sports. "I hope gaming will be acknowledged as an Olympic sports discipline", he says when we meet him on invitation by his sponsor, Creative, in the German city of Leipzig. "Who knows maybe I will become an Olympic champion?"

What was your first contact with video games?

Johnathan Wendel: "At the age of five or so. But the first time I really played a game on my computer, was at the age of 13. Already then, first-person shooters where my thing: Wolfenstein 3D, Quake and the first two Doom episodes. I think I was about 16 when I read somewhere that a gamer had won a Ferrari by winning a tournament. That was the first time I realised money could be made through gaming, even if that was an exception to the

rule as most of the tournament prizes were limited to computer parts and games. When I was 19, real money could be won. That was music to my ears."

Were you already fanatically playing games by then?

Johnathan Wendel: "During the day, I went to school. After school I worked washing dishes, and at night I played computer games with my friends. It was a hobby, something I only did for fun. However, I had the feeling I was pretty good at it. I didn't have any idea how good I really was, and whether I would stand a chance against the top gamers at large tournaments. But I decided to give it a try. Then I had a discussion with my father, who obviously would have preferred me to go to college and didn't like the idea of me as a passionate gamer. I said: 'Look, I don't know if I really stand a chance, but please let me give it a try. If I don't return with a serious amount of money, I won't bother you again with this gaming stuff and I will look for a steady job.' He allowed me to go to Texas, where I passed the qualification round and won \$500. At the end of the day, I came third and took home \$4,000 (chuckles). I will never forget the moment I threw that cheque on the table at home and shouted: 'Look what I won with those stupid computer games!' He couldn't believe his eyes and the only thing he said was: 'What the hell has happened to this world.' (Laughs)"

I suppose he has changed his mind by now?

Johnathan Wendel: "I recently bought him a brand new Cadillac. I think that's pretty okay."

Gamers are often seen as unsociable, geeky nerds who seldom go outside. But you look pretty normal. Was that any different before?

Johnathan Wendel: (Defensive) "No, I have had a wide area of interests and I do a lot more than only playing computer games. I was school captain of the tennis team and I played American football and ice hockey. I also had a girlfriend for three years."

(Continues unruffled) "As a teenager, I was very close to making a career of pool billiard. At 13, I already played high-level tournaments. I beat old men who had been playing pool all of their lives, and got the chance to play the Junior Nationals (youth games on a national level). However, my mother didn't allow me to go. The year before, my parents divorced and during 'her' weekends she wanted me to stay with her. Because I was doing so well at all those sports, I knew my eye-hand coordination was very good. I knew I had to make profit out of that one way or another. I did so by becoming a professional gamer, but I could have been a top billiard or tennis player as well."

Real physical sports must be a welcome distraction from e-sports, which demand more mental effort and concentration.

Johnathan Wendel: "Indeed. That's why I regularly do other sports. Once in a while I play a game of tennis, I go jogging and I recently participated in a beach volleyball tournament. Moreover, I went snowboarding and surfing on the same day in California. Really cool."

Do you have to train as hard as other top sportsmen?

Johnathan Wendel: "Yes, because I want it myself. I go jogging every day, I go to the fitness club and if I have the chance, I play basketball with my friends. It clears my head - the most important weapon apart from my hands."

Talking about your hands, three years ago British pro-gamer, Alex Nikitin, took out insurance for his fingers worth €600,000. How much are your fingers worth?

Johnathan Wendel: "No idea, they are not insured. But to go back to your previous question, training makes me more alert and faster, and those are two skills that can be decisive in a shooter game. That proves that gaming is a sports discipline like all the others and why professional gamers are not called cyber athletes for nothing. For every action in a so-called normal sport, I can give you the equivalent in gaming. A smash at the net in tennis? In shooter games such as Unreal Tournament 2003, you regularly have to shoot opponents that are hidden behind a hill or fence. You do that by jumping high and aiming during your jump. The same idea, isn't it? I always say, gaming is sports and chess together. You have to think, but also stay physically and mentally alert. If you just shoot around in a shooter game, you won't get far. If you do the same in tennis, you won't either."

Top sportsmen have to look at what they eat, but you could easily get fat and even then shoot everybody from behind your screen?

Johnathan Wendel: "No, because I need a balanced lifestyle to stay fit. I do look at what I eat, even if that sounds strange. Some people forget I had to train hard to get where I am now. And I still have to do that, because competition is getting better all the time."

Can anyone who trains a lot become a top gamer, or is talent involved as well?

Johnathan Wendel: "The exercise makes the art. That counts for all sports and skills. But talent is involved for sure, just like stamina and devotion. Tiger Woods is the best golf player in the world, because he is involved day and night - the same for Michael Jordan. I want to be like that. The Michael Jordan of e-sports."

How many hours a day do you train?

Johnathan Wendel: "Two to six hours a day, but when I prepare for a specific tournament, that can become eight to ten hours. Once I am training, I never stop. I once trained 36 hours with a number of sparring partners, because the first was already exhausted after twenty hours or so (laughs). I always have the same sparring partners. Sometimes they travel with me, but I have some very good gamers in different countries who train with me when I am around for a promotion tour or tournament."

Being number one in the world, you are challenged everywhere you go. Everybody wants to beat you. That's obvious, because your

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sponsors pay between \$2,500 and \$125,000 to whomever can beat you. Do you feel any pressure?

Johnathan Wendel: "That's a two-sided sword. On the one hand it keeps me fit. I constantly have to be alert, can never let loose or I go down. I love that, because I am even better when the pressure is high. On the other hand I don't like to be challenged everywhere, certainly not when I just visit to promote one of my sponsors or products. There are always jerks that use such occasions to beat me when I am not focused. But I am onto that very fast, you know. Then I refuse to play against them. If they want to beat me, they should challenge me at an official tournament. Then I will be happy to kick their ass." (Laughs)

What if someone puts up money to challenge you, just like in boxing?

Johnathan Wendel: "Normally I would never do that, but I have been persuaded to do so. But I always stress the fact that the loser has to pay, even if I win. Then they refuse instantly." (Laugh)

Tennis and soccer players end their careers around 35. Gaming is a relatively new sport. Do you have any idea how long a top gamer can take it?

Johnathan Wendel: "Much shorter, as most gamers focus on one specific game. I think you may say the normal career of a top gamer ends between 18 and 23."

So you are already old at 24?

Johnathan Wendel: "In that sense indeed, but I don't feel like a veteran. There comes a moment in your life when you start a family and you can't keep on playing games and tournaments. Like any other adult, you have to make sure the bills are paid at the end of the month, you know. The career of a top gamer ends when he can't be a child anymore."

Those bills are no problem for you, because you are already a millionaire. How much have you earned with gaming up to now?

Johnathan Wendel: "About \$400,000, but at the end of the year I will have passed half a million. Without sponsorships."

Next to that, you have built a business empire with your nick. You can buy Fatal1ty mouse pads and main boards. What else?

Johnathan Wendel: "Mice, processors, cooling systems, sound cards, everything that has to do with gaming and I can add to with my experience. Only good products. I will not put my name on 'lollies', if you know what I mean. It all started a year or two ago with linking my name to mouse pads. I was tired of depending on a number of sponsors, so I created my own company. I did everything myself: distribution, promotion. After five months I had already made \$50,000, which I put back into the gaming industry by sponsoring some gamers. I paid their travel costs so they could participate in big tournaments in the States and abroad, gave them good material and some money so they could focus only on gaming. In the meantime, we supported different gamers and I already have one top gamer as a fulltime employee. But the idea is to help hundreds of gamers from all levels by means of the Fatal1ty brand."

How difficult is it to manage your own business and stay the best gamer in the world?

Johnathan Wendel: "I realised very quickly that it was impossible to combine the two if I wanted to stay on top of my game. Luckily, I met the people from Auravision who took the business side from me, so I can fully concentrate on gaming again."

For us, being involved in a gaming magazine means we often have to play games as our job and are not always able to play for fun. Do you find you get tired of playing 'serious' games?

Johnathan Wendel: "No, not at all. Even if I am a professional, gaming is still huge fun for me. I can always play other games to have some fun. I regularly play games for the pure enjoyment thereof such as Counter-Strike, Battlefield 1942 and WarCraft III."

You are the first real famous gamer. MTV gave you a reality show some time ago and in Time Magazine you are mentioned in the same breath as Bill Gates. Does that mean you are accepted by the American jet set? Are you invited to decadent parties? Do you have famous friends?

Johnathan Wendel: "I start to, yes. I have met a lot of interesting people recently. Sinbad is a good friend of mine and last month I met actress Darcy Donovan - you may know her from the movie Showtime with Robert de Niro. I have such a good relationship with her, we are thinking of working together. Elijah Wood is a friend of mine (Frodo from The Lord of The Rings) and I have met a number of other celebs."

Do they know you as a top gamer or do you have to explain who you are?

Johnathan Wendel: "Some of them do know me, yes. Most of them have read or heard about me."

Do you have a lot of numbers of celebs on your mobile phone?

Johnathan Wendel: "One or two, that's all."

Apparently you are only a real celeb when you have done it with Paris Hilton. Or so we have been told.

Wendel: "I haven't. Not yet. That is my next challenge."
(Laughs) **NAG**

