

Gamers awarded \$25,000 top prize in a business plan competition

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The next time a young person is criticized for playing video games late into the night, consider this. Three avid gamers in McCook walked off with the \$25,000 first prize Friday in an inaugural competition designed to foster a start-up business in the southwest Nebraska city.

One of the clinchers for Cody Dame, Tanner Lytle and Ciprian Galarneau, in their presentation to eight judges, was a video showing Dame's grandparents having a ball playing interactive bowling on Nintendo Wii.

"They got the message across: This business isn't just about grade-school and junior-high kids playing games," said Ben Harris, one of the judges and the founder of the contest, sponsored by a family foundation.

"These were three young men who just blew us away," said Rex Nelson, another contest judge and executive director of the McCook Economic Development Corp. "They were impeccably well-organized and did a lot of serious market research."

The trio, ages 21 to 24, plan to open Game On, a retail and online gaming store, by September while retaining their current jobs.

Dame works in advertising for the McCook Gazette and manages its Web site. He also runs a weekend videographer-DJ business. Lytle repairs computers full-time for a McCook firm. Galarneau is an inspector for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"Hopefully we can use our expertise in playing the games and talking to people that we know to put games out there that people want to play and want to buy," Galarneau said in a telephone interview.

The three gamers beat out six other entries in the business plan competition sponsored by the Hormel Family Foundation.

The goal of the contest, which also offered \$10,000 worth of support services and a minority ownership investment by the foundation, was to create a new business in the McCook area, which has lost population in recent years.

Harris, a former Lincoln businessman who works in New York City, said the contest attracted entries from as far away as Malibu, Calif.

He said the Game On trio presented a unique business model that could grow beyond a main-street store, possibly becoming a regional or national franchise.

"This is one of the fastest-growing industries in the nation," Harris, a son of former Lincoln Mayor Bill Harris, said of video gaming.

Lytle said Game On will let customers try out games before buying them and let them trade old computer games for credits toward new ones.

The store will provide Web-based video reviews of new games to give people a better idea of what the company is offering. The store also will sell card and board games.

Lytle said the three entrepreneurs are longtime friends who regularly set up online or video game tournaments in homes and garages. But the spaces weren't always large enough, and local gamers often had to travel as far as Omaha to find good tournaments, he said.

Lytle has studied computer animation, Dame produces videos and Galarneau is a co-founder of the McCook High School computer club.

Their market research, Lytle said, showed that the average gamer is 33 years old and that women older than 18 make up a bigger market share than boys younger than 17.

"We really showed the judges what this could be, and it's got mass appeal," Lytle said.

The trio celebrated Friday night, gamer style — frying burgers and playing Mario Party 8.