M$ Battles Halo 2 Holes

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Microsoft is once again locked in a battle of wills with hackers determined to find and exploit security holes in the company's software. But this time the buggy code isn't endangering users' PCs -- just their otherworldly alien fortresses.

The vulnerabilities are in Microsoft's enormously popular Xbox game Halo 2. Last month, the company's Bungie Studios games division pushed out a 2-MB software patch for the sci-fi shooter in response to months of complaints from Xbox Live gamers about "glitchers" who'd learned to exploit programming errors in the game to their advantage in competitive play. The phenomenon launched cheaters to high positions in the Halo 2 global leader board, where players are ranked like chess masters according to their online wins and losses.

The most severe of the holes was a meta-bug triggered when black hats interfered with their cable modem links, buying them up to eight seconds of invisible movement while the game server struggled to reconnect -- just the ticket to sneak into the enemy's fort and steal their colors in a hotly contested capture-the-flag game. Other glitches were errors in the game's physics engine that gave practiced players Neo-like mastery of the Halo 2 multiverse: the power to fly through the air, grab objects through solid walls or create a tactically useful double of their avatar.

"You have a huge number of people intentionally trying to find stuff to essentially break, or mess around with, the game," said Halo expert Jeremy Hunt. "Trying to make a game work with that kind of crowd is pretty tough."

The bugs have been a chink in the armor of the otherwise bulletproof Halo franchise. The original Halo was the flagship title for the Xbox, and Halo 2, released last November, sold 6.4 million copies in its first three months on the market. The game's vigorous online component helped boost Xbox Live's user base to 1.4 million players in January. A Halo movie is now reportedly in the works, and rumors abound that a next-generation Halo update is planned as a launch title for the upcoming Xbox 360 console.

Microsoft responded to the glitches quickly and characteristically: In mid-January, the company launched a ruthless wave of anti-hacking enforcement that's seen, by Microsoft's count, thousands of players banned from online play for

allegedly exploiting the vulnerabilities. Some gamers are complaining in message forums that they were targeted unjustly, but they have no recourse under Xbox Live's terms-of-service agreement, which lets the company exile anyone for any reason.

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