

E-sports come "out of the basement" and into high-stakes competition

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.30.15

Word Count **969**



Choi Seong Hun (left), who goes by the gaming name "PoLt" and Choi Ji Sung, known as "Bomber," both of South Korea, are separated by a divider as they compete against each other in the finals of the Red Bull Battle Grounds "StarCraft II" video game tournament in Atlanta, Georgia, July 13, 2014. Photo: AP Photo/ David Goldman

On a sunny Saturday afternoon in Silver Spring, Maryland, the dark, cavernous Fillmore theater is roaring with life. A sold-out crowd from around the nation is screaming for the elite e-athletes and boisterously thumping inflated cheer sticks.

In the balconies, "gamescasters" are breathlessly narrating and analyzing the plays as tens of thousands of fans watch the action via a live video stream.

Onstage, the players are stone-faced and appear unfazed by the commotion around them. They are sitting in front of computer screens and tapping away at keyboards as they try to kill their rivals in the military sci-fi strategy game StarCraft.

The gaming industry has exploded in recent years, with streaming sites such as Twitch and YouTube making celebrities out of the best players. The total gaming market is expected to grow to more than \$74 billion this year.

Events Borrow From Pro Sports

One piece of that market, e-sport multiplayer video-gaming competitions, is expected to bring in \$612 million this year for games such as Dota 2 and League of Legends. Such games borrow heavily from the slick productions of professional football and basketball and offer big rewards for the winner. Two years ago, the State Department recognized the genre as a sport and began to offer athletic visas to competitors.

In events such as the Red Bull Battle Grounds championship in Silver Spring, real-life competitions bring the online world together with the real. Fans flock to arenas and concert halls to cheer on the world's most elite gamers.

"These are like the Olympian athletes of players," said Kyle Storey, 28, who traveled from Dover, New Hampshire, with his best friend and fellow gaming enthusiast, Edward Juarez. They came to see if defending champion Choi Ji Sung, known as "Bomber," could recapture the title before he heads to military duty in South Korea.

A handful of teams are competing for the championship purse of \$30,000, and the finals have added suspense. The players will try out a beta version of StarCraft that turns the one-on-one player game into a duel of partners.

Fans Cheer Dramatic Matches

The first match carries high drama. Defending champion Bomber and his partner, Mun Seong Won, or "MMA," will go up against veterans Chris "Huk" Loranger and "M.C.," whose real name is Jang Min Chul. M.C. came out of retirement for the tournament and is hoping he has not lost his skills.

The players enter the stage to howls from the audience and raised fan posters pumping in the air.

The crowd is mostly males, of all ages. Reston, Virginia, resident Sounil Yu, 44, brought his two teenage sons, who play StarCraft with their father. They say StarCraft is one of the most challenging strategy games. Players have to be aware of a multitude of factors — such as three different races that can be played at once and various tasks, such as mining minerals and building worker bases — while trying to kill enemies and defend bases.

"StarCraft requires tremendous strategy. It's like chess but much faster and much more interesting to watch," Yu said.

Gamers Warm Up Like Athletes

The players are beginning their warm-up routine. Bomber, in a red-and-white letterman's jacket and a baseball cap, adjusts the height of his chair. MMA fiddles with the distance between his keyboard and his mouse and lifts the monitor to match his line of sight. Huk replaces his rolling swivel chair with a stationary folding chair and puts a neck pillow down for extra cushioning. M.C. rolls his head to stretch his neck and shrugs his shoulders up and down to get loose.

Like professional athletes, some of the players are religious about their pre-game preparations. For breakfast, Huk and M.C. fueled up at a Chick-fil-A restaurant, preparing for a full eight hours of matches.

"Meat makes victory," M.C. said in an interview.

The competitions that make careers out of game-playing pay enough for a comfortable life. M.C., who lives in Seoul, made around \$100,000 a year from global e-sports competitions and sponsorships. Huk brings in about \$180,000 from competitions and sponsors, such as Monster beverages and HyperX.

Players Move On To "Gamescasting"

Huk plans to move into "gamescasting," like other famous gamers who have found second careers with popular YouTube channels where they interact with fans and analyze other players.

"It's the same as when a football player retires and then they start showing up with suits and analyze the game on TV," said Huk. A Canadian, Huk got his start in South Korea, the global center of e-sports.

Former gamer John Bain, known as TotalBiscuit, made just such a shift into gamecasting and now has more than 2 million subscribers to his YouTube channel.

At the Red Bull tournament, Bain, a fast-talking native of the U.K., is one of four gamescasters. The tournament is medium-sized compared with the International Dota 2 games, which drew 12,000 fans to the Key Arena in Seattle in August to see competitors take home a total of \$18 million in winnings. The Red Bull tournament will hand out a total of \$30,000 in prize money.

"It's not that gamers are antisocial, but they hadn't traditionally shared their interests with those around them locally," Bain said. "Now, the Internet has taken games out of the basement and allowed enthusiasts to connect."

Jessica Yuen came from New Jersey with her former Rutgers University StarCraft club. She graduated three years ago but still counts the club members as her closest friends, along with many StarCraft enthusiasts she has met online.

Yuen has followed Huk since college and is rooting for the 26-year-old Canadian gamer. Over the years, her interest in Huk and other players has gone beyond their skills.

"He's just a nice guy — he cares about his fans," Yuen said.

After seven hours of matches, Huk and M.C. win.

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Fans Cheer Dramatic Matches." Which of the following is the main reason that the article mentions the audience's behavior as the players enter the stage?
- (A) to show that there were many distractions
 - (B) to show how excited the audience was about the games
 - (C) to show that the crowds were nearly out of control
 - (D) to show that the crowd favored one contestant
- 2 Read the section "Gamers Warm Up Like Athletes." Which of the following BEST explains why M.C. says he eats Chick-fil-A?
- (A) He knows that Chick-fil-A employs many gamer fans, and he talks to them before matches.
 - (B) He believes that eating Chick-fil-A before a match will make him more successful.
 - (C) He is sponsored by Chick-fil-A, and receives money from the company to eat there.
 - (D) He feels very calm at Chick-fil-A, and goes there to calm his nerves before a match.
- 3 Read the section "Players Move On To Gamecasting." Which of the following is the BEST definition of "counts" as it is used in the following sentence?

She graduated three years ago but still counts the club members as her closest friends, along with many StarCraft enthusiasts she has met online.

- (A) believes
- (B) interprets
- (C) disregards
- (D) considers

4 Read the sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4].

On a sunny Saturday afternoon in Silver Spring, Maryland, the dark, cavernous Fillmore theater is roaring with life.

Which word from the sentence BEST shows that the Fillmore is a large venue?

- (A) dark
- (B) cavernous
- (C) theater
- (D) roaring

Answer Key

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