By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff 09.30.15

When computer games were first introduced, they were not played online and games involved at most a few friends. Then, the Internet connected players from around the world. Players mostly still remained alone in their bedrooms and basements, however. In recent years video gaming has taken the next step: At its highest level, it is now a professional sport, with matches played in front of cheering crowds.

On a sunny Saturday afternoon in Silver Spring, Maryland, it was easy to see just how far gaming has come. The dark, cavernous Fillmore theater was packed. A sold-out crowd was screaming for a group of elite e-athletes competing in the Red Bull Battle Grounds championship games.

In the balconies, "gamescasters" breathlessly narrated and analyzed the plays. Tens of thousands of fans watched the action via a live video stream.

Onstage, the players appeared unfazed by the commotion around them. They sat in front of computer screens and tapped away at keyboards as they tried to kill their rivals in the military sci-fi game StarCraft.

**Best Players Become Famous**

The video game industry has exploded in recent years. Streaming sites such as Twitch and YouTube have made the best players famous. Multiplayer video-gaming competitions are heavily attended and offer big rewards for the winner.

The Red Bull championship in Silver Spring attracted fans from around the country.

"These are like the Olympian athletes of players," said Kyle Storey, 28, who traveled from Dover, New Hampshire. He and his best friend, Edward Juarez, came to see if defending champion Choi Ji Sung, known as "Bomber," would be able to recapture the title.

Onstage, the players tried out a new version of StarCraft, which turns the one-on-one player game into a duel of partners.

**Fans Enjoy Onstage Drama**

The first match was particularly dramatic. Defending champion Bomber and his partner, Mun Seong Won, or "MMA," went up against veterans Chris "Huk" Loranger and "M.C.," whose real name is Jang Min Chul. M.C. came out of retirement just for the tournament.

As the players filed onto the stage the audience began cheering and waving fan posters.

The crowd was 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 computer games. Players have to be aware of many factors while trying to kill enemies and defend bases. For example, three different races can be played at once and various tasks, such as mining minerals and building worker bases, have to be carried out.

StarCraft is "like chess but much faster and much more interesting to watch," Yu said.

**Players Prepare Like Athletes**

Before beginning their matches the players went through their personal warm-up routines. Bomber, in a red-and-white letterman's jacket and a baseball cap, adjusted the height of his chair. MMA fiddled with the distance between his keyboard and his mouse and lifted the monitor to match his line of sight. Huk replaced his chair and put a neck pillow down for extra cushioning. M.C. rolled his head to stretch his neck and shrugged his shoulders up and down to get loose.

Like other athletes, some of the players are careful about what they eat before a match. For breakfast, Huk and M.C. filled up on chicken sandwiches to prepare for a full eight hours of matches.

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

The competitions pay enough for a comfortable life. M.C., who lives in Korea, makes about $100,000, while Huk brings in about $180,000.

**Some Gamers Become "Gamescasters"**

Huk plans to move into "gamescasting" when his gaming career is over. Other famous gamers have found second careers with popular YouTube channels where they comment on other players and interact with fans.

"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 26-year-old 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. A fast-talking native of the United Kingdom, Bain now has more than 2 million subscribers to his YouTube channel.

Bain was one of four "gamescasters" at Saturday's Red Bull tournament. He believes the shift to holding competitions in stadiums and halls has been a very positive change.

"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 was among the excited fans who watched Saturday's competition. She came from New Jersey together with the members of her former Rutgers University StarCraft club. Yuen graduated three years ago but still counts the club members as her closest friends, along with many StarCraft enthusiasts she has met online. She has followed Huk since college and on Saturday was rooting for him. 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. won.