

# Ottawa Citizen

## Beer, nachos and Starcraft II; Fans of hugely popular video game gather at 'Barcraft' to cheer on competitors

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Illustrations: / Enthusiasts pack the Clocktower Pub on Bank Street to watch a broadcast of a weekend Starcraft II tournament. Others had to be turned away at the door.; / Brianna Chouinard organized Ottawa's first 'Barcraft' event. She says there will be more.;

Close to 100 fans are packed into an Ottawa bar, sporting T-shirts decorated with team emblems and arguing over their favourite players. Clutching beers and snacking on nachos, they cheer, groan and applaud as the action unfolds on the bar's TVs.

But the flat-screens aren't broadcasting a hockey or soccer game; instead, they display digital tanks and aliens, computer-generated armies controlled by professional video gamers. The event is Ottawa's first "Barcraft," and it's part of a growing movement to put video games on the same level as other spectator sports.

"Barcraft is the natural progression of e-sports, as we call it," explained Brianna Chouinard, organizer of Sunday afternoon's event in Ottawa.

Barcraft combines a bar with Starcraft II, a strategic video game in which players battle with futuristic armies. "It mostly involves opposing players developing their base, building up their armies and then going head-to-head, trying to outwit their opponent," Chouinard said.

Released last summer, the computer game has sold millions of copies worldwide and has an active competitive scene.

Starcraft's top players are sponsored, train full-time and compete at tournaments for thousands of dollars in prize money.

The game is most popular in South Korea, home to some of the best Starcraft players in the world.

"Their top e-sports athletes there are comparable to our movie stars here," Chouinard said.

Koreans also dominated last weekend's tournament in Raleigh, North Carolina, which was part of Major League Gaming's pro-circuit. Canadian Chris Loranger was the highest non-Korean player in the standings, placing seventh overall.

But the lack of home-country contenders didn't diminish the turnout in Ottawa to watch the live broadcast of the tournament at the Clocktower Pub on Bank Street. "I was very shocked," said bartender Anthea Zucchiatti, who said she'd never seen an event like it before.

"It feels very much like a sporting event," she added. "The commentary is very much like watching a game."

Colour commentators provide a blow-by-blow account of each match, explaining the strategies and analysing the game as it progresses.

"Even if you're not sure what the players are doing, the 'casters' will tell you, and it brings in such a wider audience than Starcraft would have had otherwise," Chouinard said.

Zucchiatti said they were hoping for around 80 attendees, but ended up having to turn people away after almost 140 people showed up throughout the day.

"I was surprised," Zucchiatti said. "This definitely boosts sales, huge."

The Barcraft movement began earlier this summer, growing rapidly as Starcraft fans watch games and co-ordinate events online. Last weekend, Barcrafts were held in cities across Canada and the U.S., including New York, San Diego and Austin, Texas.

"It's awesome," said attendee Jean-Sebastian Blais, "just the atmosphere of being able to enjoy this with other like-minded people."

Based on the response, Chouinard said she hopes to have future Barcrafts in Ottawa.

"We have all these people watching Starcraft on their own and it's only natural for these people to want to get together," she said.

"Even if you don't think Starcraft is a sport, it doesn't matter, it has the spectators. There's all these people who want to watch."