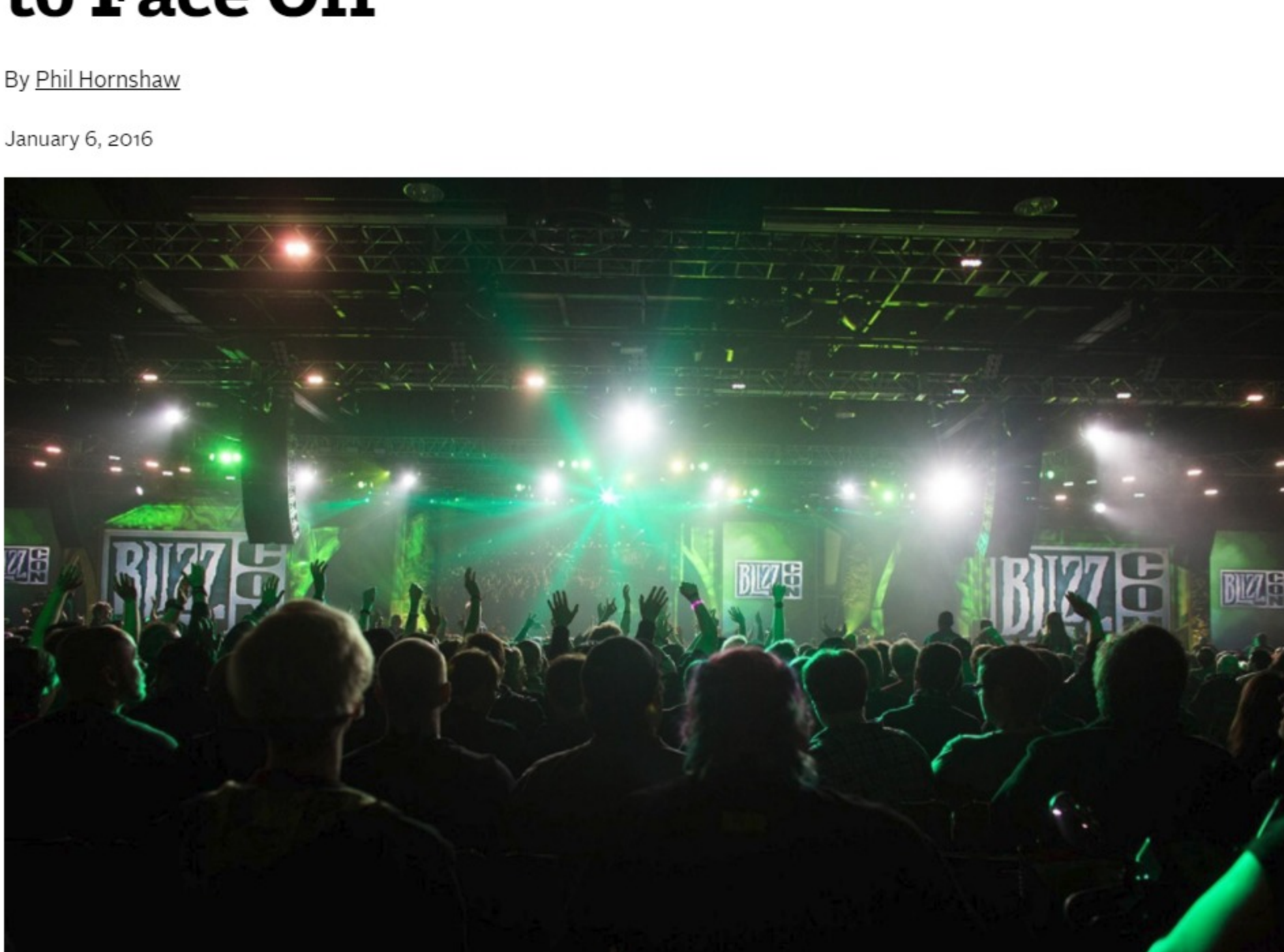


The Sh*t Four 'StarCraft' Legends Talk When They Leave Retirement to Face Off

By Phil Hornshaw
January 6, 2016



Courtesy Blizzard

Whether it's a knockout finish at an EVO fighting game championship, a crushing play in League of Legends, or a dorm-wide Super Smash Bros. tourney, eSports are taking the world by storm. Playboy's eSports Highlights celebrate and chronicle their rise.



Sitting at a table in a mostly blank white room in the Anaheim Convention Center, four professional gamers are talking shit about each other in Korean.

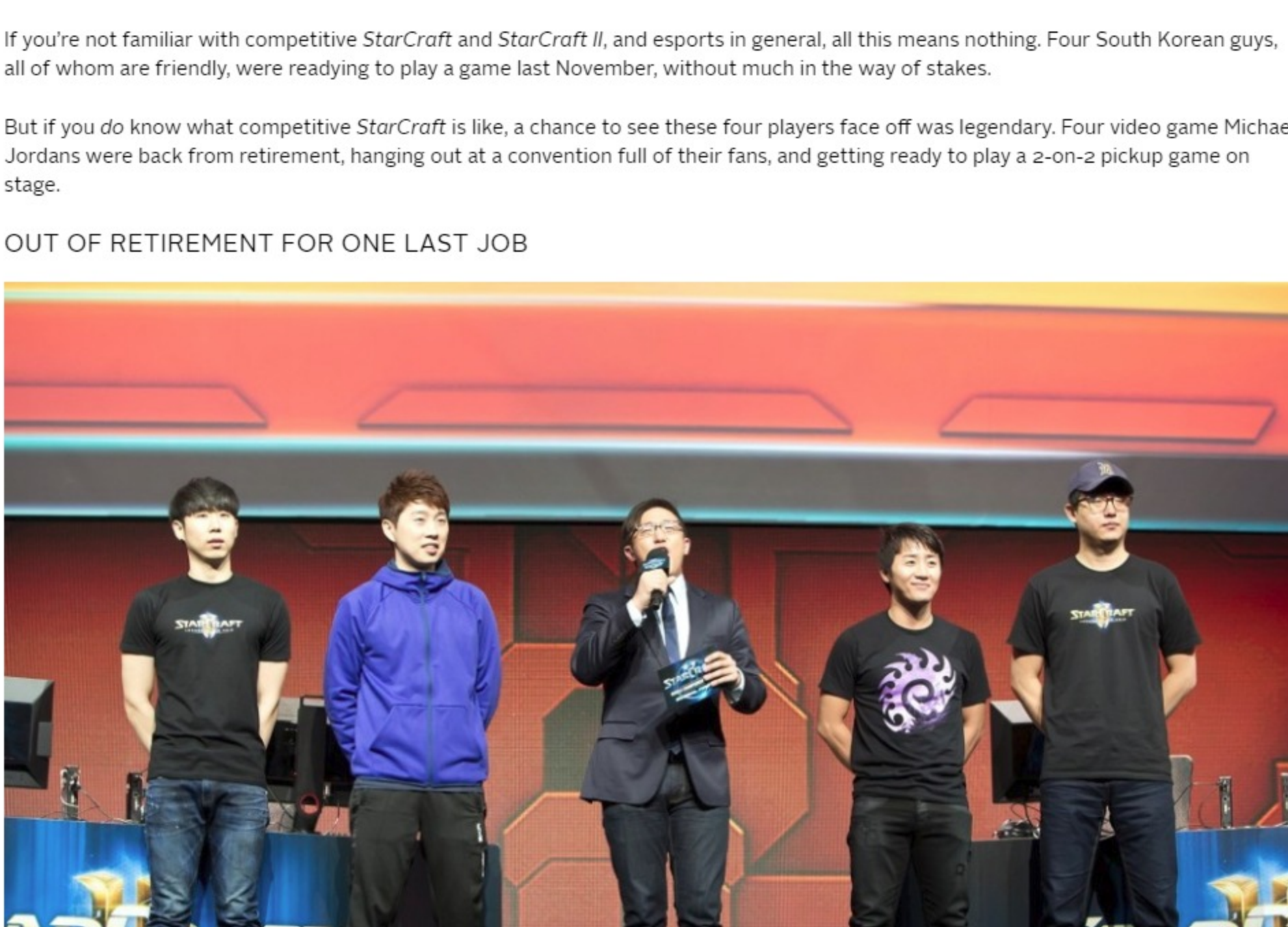
I'm nodding along and smiling at whatever clearly funny joke was just told, waiting for the Korean public relations rep acting as translator to bring me up to speed. He's doing a hell of a job for someone who clearly has little experience as an interpreter and has to grapple with a five-way conversation. The gist of it, however, is that teammates BoxeR and MVP think YellowO will be a liability for his teammate, NesTea, in their upcoming match. Basically, they're calling the game a 3-on-1 instead of a 2-on-2.

It's lighthearted ribbing among four of the best StarCraft players the world has ever seen. All four have retired from professional competition, but they're back and ready to play at Blizzard's annual BlizzCon convention in Anaheim, California. The four are pairing off into teams to do battle on the convention's big stage as part of a best-of-three exhibition match for fans.

If you're not familiar with competitive StarCraft and StarCraft II, and esports in general, all this means nothing. Four South Korean guys, all of whom are friendly, were readying to play a game last November, without much in the way of stakes.

But if you do know what competitive StarCraft is like, a chance to see these four players face off was legendary. Four video game Michael Jordans were back from retirement, hanging out at a convention full of their fans, and getting ready to play a 2-on-2 pickup game on stage.

OUT OF RETIREMENT FOR ONE LAST JOB



Left to right: MVP, BoxeR, the ESL's William Cho, YellowO, NesTea

In the more nascent days of esports—professional competitive gaming—there was StarCraft. The Blizzard game is a member of the “real-time strategy” genre, in which players look down on a battlefield from above, commanding entire armies rather than controlling individual soldiers or vehicles. There are three different “races” in the game, each of which plays a little differently. The Terrans are humans with ships and motorcycles and bunkers; the Zerg, a speedy and gross biological race—largely inspired by the movie *Aliens*—that assimilates other species into its hive mind; and the alien Protoss, who lean on their technological advancements and really like energy swords.

NesTea and YellowO are some of the best zerg players ever to clutch a mouse; MVP and BoxeR, some of the top terrans. Let's meet them:

1. Lim Jae Duk, known by the handle **NesTea**, is considered possibly the best zerg StarCraft player on the planet. He has an award named after him: the “NesTea Award,” which goes to anyone who manages to place into the Global Starcraft II League “Code S” tournament 10 times in a row. It's named after him because he was the first person to ever do it. He also won the GSL three times.

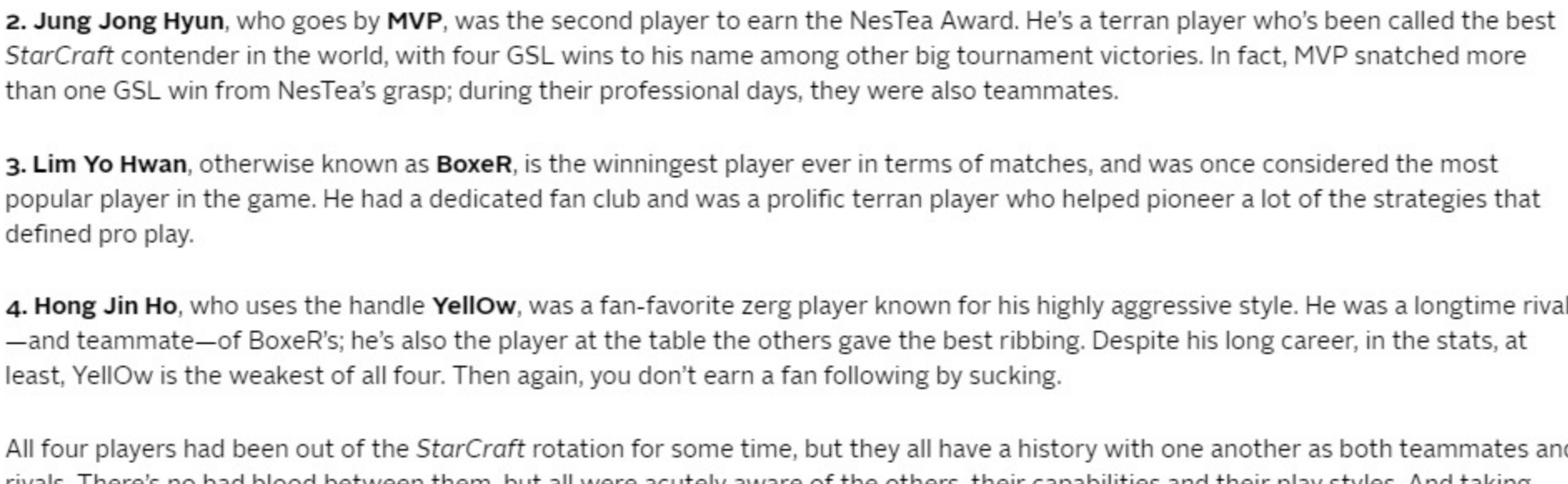
2. Jung Jong Hyun, who goes by **MVP**, was the second player to earn the NesTea Award. He's a terran player who's been called the best StarCraft contender in the world, with four GSL wins to his name among other big tournament victories. In fact, MVP finished more than one GSL win from NesTea's grasp; during their professional days, they were also teammates.

3. Lim Yo Hwan, otherwise known as **BoxeR**, is the winningest player ever in terms of matches, and was once considered the most popular player in the game. He had a dedicated fan club and was a prolific terran player who helped pioneer a lot of the strategies that defined pro play.

4. Hong Jin Ho, who uses the handle **YellowO**, was a fan-favorite zerg player known for his highly aggressive style. He was a longtime rival—and teammate—of BoxeR's; he's also the player at the table the others gave the best ribbing. Despite his long career, in the stats, at least, YellowO is the weakest of all four. Then again, you don't earn a fan following by sucking.

All four players had been out of the StarCraft rotation for some time, but they all have a history with one another as both teammates and rivals. There's no bad blood between them, but all were acutely aware of the others' their capabilities and their play styles. And taking one another on in front of the BlizzCon crowd, both in person and streaming on the internet, meant there were at least bragging rights to win and images to uphold.

TWO-HEADED GIANTS



In StarCraft, players send worker units to gather resources, then spend those resources to build special buildings in their bases that can summon army units. You build a barracks to create marines, a starport to produce spaceships, and so on. Then you send those armies out to destroy your opponent's base, while they try to do the same to yours. In a battle against another player, the complexity of StarCraft becomes incredibly apparent. You're constantly trying to keep track of everything going on: how fast your new army units are being produced, how soon until new buildings will be constructed, how many resources you're collecting, how much each new unit will cost, and more.

Playing against another person, you not only have to keep in mind all the intricacies of the game to keep your army going, but also have to execute on tactics, playing offense and defense and reading the moves of the other player in order to win.

If seeing players face off against each other in a video game like *Call of Duty* can be thrilling, pro StarCraft is like watching two people engage in a knife fight while simultaneously building an IKEA living room set without the instructions.

The four South Korean players gathered at BlizzCon 2015 weren't just good. They weren't just pros. They were some of the best knife-fighting Swedish furniture-builders the world has ever seen. And they were going to play a game in which they couldn't help but get in each other's ways.

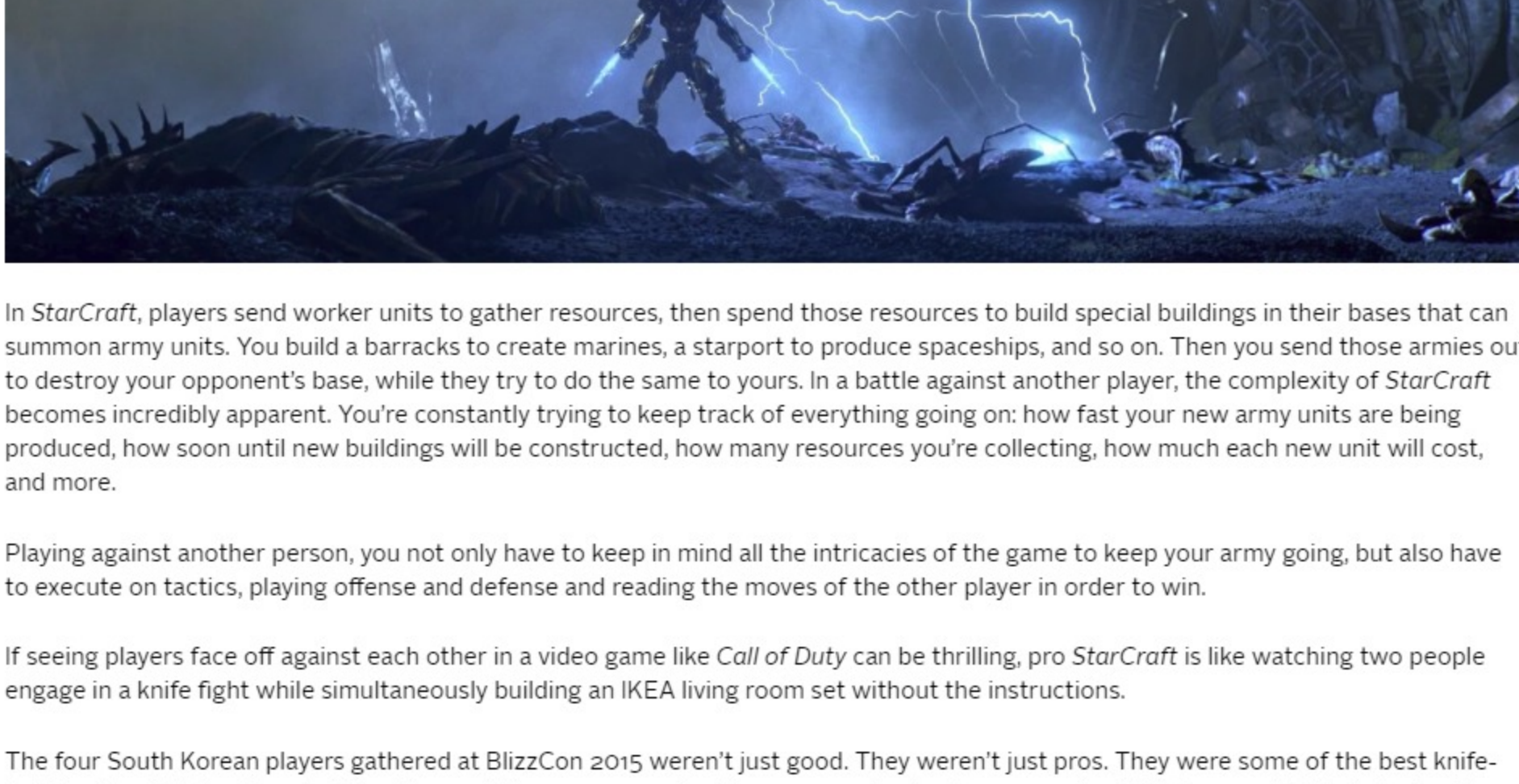
There was a slight caveat to the best of three exhibition match Blizzard set up for the four returning legendary players. They'd be splitting into two teams, which isn't unusual in StarCraft games—it has always supported play in which several players can team up, combining their bases and their armies like countries becoming allies.

Things were different in this matchup. These teams wouldn't be individuals working together, each with their own base and armies. Instead, they'd be playing in StarCraft II: *Legacy of the Void*'s new “Archon” mode, in which two people control the same army. While players could “share control” of their armies in matches in previous versions of StarCraft, it's not something that happens in competitive play.

The matchup is a bit like if Rocky went up against Ivan Drago, except one of Rocky's arms was controlled by Apollo Creed, and one of Drago's was actually owned by Mr. T.

That meant four legendary players, who were practiced in handling everything on their own, had to cede control to one another. In a game like StarCraft, where every move matters and every second can count, that's a potentially weird transition for people who have carefully honed their competitive play for years. Add to that the fact the competition was to take place in the newly released *Legacy of the Void* expansion, which added with it lots of granular changes to how the previous version of StarCraft II plays, as well as new units for players to match against one another. There was a lot for which to mentally prepare: this was the first time pro gamers would compete in the mode.

Everyone had been getting ready—but none of the players taking part in the match had actually practiced together, YellowO said. They'd have to work hard to stay coordinated.



BoxeR, for one, said he'd been prepping for the match more than anybody else. He also might have been the player who most needed the practice. BoxeR left competitive StarCraft thanks to a shoulder injury, and then went on to play another game professionally, poker. Though BoxeR has said the games are similar in the kinds of mental agility and strategy they require, it's hard to call the pace of poker anything but leisurely by comparison.

BoxeR's preparation wasn't just in practicing to get the feel of StarCraft back, according to MVP; his teammate in the match—he also had been developing strategies and “build orders,” or the sequences in which players construct different buildings to get access to different army units and abilities. BoxeR smiled as he said he wouldn't share any of his strategies with his opponents, as we talked ahead of the match. From the way the two were talking, all that prep is necessary because MVP and BoxeR expected real trouble, from NesTea in particular—the best player among them, according to the group.

“They're worried about the team combination,” our interpreter explained, translating for MVP and BoxeR. NesTea's play style—a focus on the big picture portion of the game, building bases and keeping lots of resources at his disposal—could become a great complement for YellowO, who plays fast, aggressive, army-focused games. NesTea's resource focus could go a long way toward helping YellowO field his army and keep constant pressure on the other team.

That's the natural flow of how Archon mode works: you play to your strengths. MVP said the match would come down to each player executing his particular role, and relying on his teammate to do his job. A screw up on one side would bring down the whole team, but at least splitting the job between two people meant each might have less to think about.

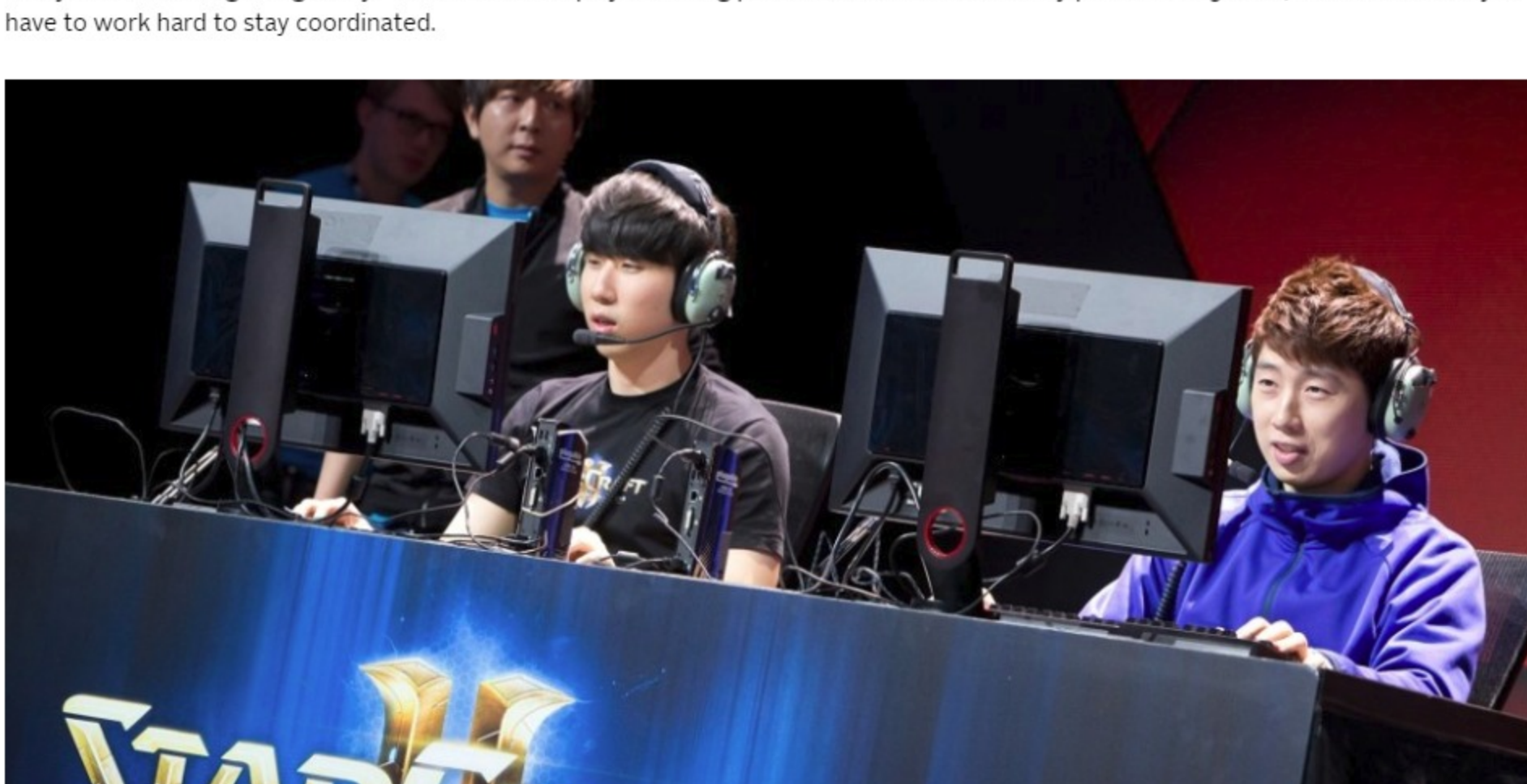
On the other side of the table from MVP and BoxeR, there was NesTea. He hadn't offered much in the discussion; his answers to any questions were prompted by our PR rep-slave-interpreter. He was subdued, maybe even disinterested, when the question of what he was worried about from MVP and BoxeR care around.

“He isn't worried about anything,” our interpreter said. In fact, that could have been the problem. He never gets nervous about matches, NesTea said, and the lack of tension might work against him. Or maybe he's just a guy who knows how big a contender he is.

MVP and BoxeR certainly did. They took the opportunity instead to playfully needle YellowO. “If YellowO does nothing,” BoxeR said, “NesTea can win.”

To his credit, YellowO took their criticism in stride. “It's all an illusion,” he remarked dismissively, referring to the wisecracks from his opponents. “It's just a war of nerves right now.”

THE BIG STAGE



It takes almost 12 hours to fly from South Korea to California. There was no prize money on the line for the Archon mode exhibition game that would take place in a few hours. It wasn't a ranked game of any kind, and wouldn't help any of these players make their triumphant return to competitive play.

MVP explained it best: He was just hoping to put on a good show for StarCraft fans, and he was excited to finally be at BlizzCon—it was the first time for some of these guys, despite their being hailed as some of the game's premier players.

Every year BlizzCon hosts the StarCraft II World Championships (among other esports championship rounds), while featuring panels and events focused on Blizzard's small stable of games. It's the epicenter of a game MVP and his colleagues have found so enthralling and so exciting that they made it their careers—one that's so popular around the world, and particularly in Korea, that it's known colloquially as the country's national sport. Competing as teammates and trying their skills at a new version of the game was mostly just a chance to put on a good show for fans, YellowO said.

A few hours after our conversation, the four legendary StarCraft players took to the BlizzCon stage to do battle. In the quick interviews preceding the match YellowO had a chance to give as good as he got. If he were competing in the year's World Championship Series, he said, he'd definitely take home its \$100,000 prize.

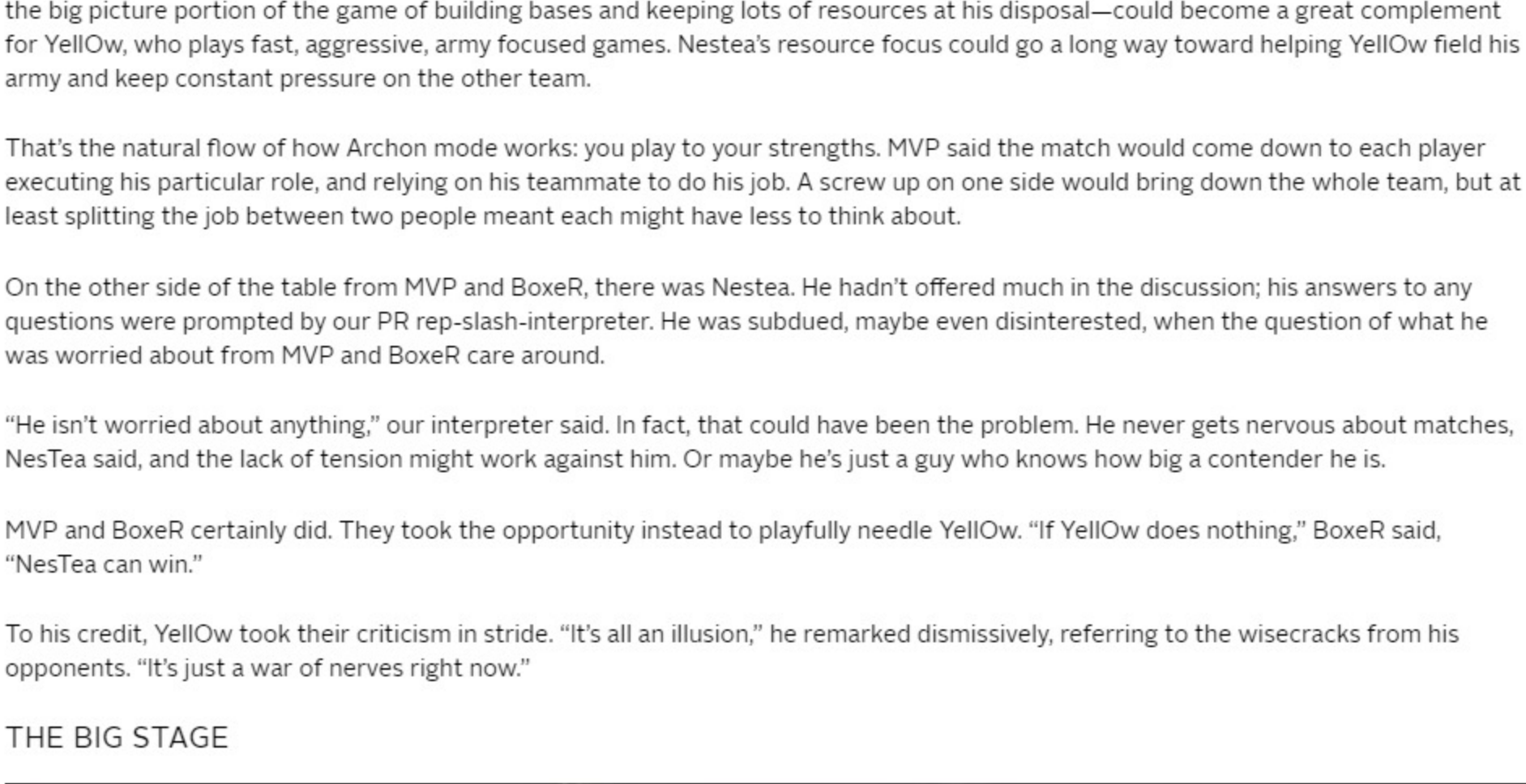
In the end, though, MVP and BoxeR won the best-of-three competition in two games. Sometimes, shit talkers know what they're talking about. The pair had been right about their chances against NesTea and YellowO, although all four stepped to the front of the stage for post-game questions with smiles on their faces. Bragging rights were won and egos might have been slightly bruised, but all four players said they were thrilled for a chance to play in front of fans at BlizzCon.

“To be honest, I've been having a bit of a rough time kind of transferring over my life's chapters, but hearing this crowd here in Anaheim, California, I think I'm going to take all the good energy back when I fly back to Korea,” BoxeR said on stage, interpreted by the Electronic Sports League's (ESL) William Cho, the event's host.

BoxeR isn't the only person on the stage who hinted that it might be fun to find his way back into StarCraft. For four Michael Jordans of esports, a full-on comeback would be fitting additions to their careers.

Phil Hornshaw is a freelance writer and the co-author of So You Created a Wormhole: The Time Traveler's Guide to Time Travel and the Space Hero's Guide to Glory. He was hoping the latter would help him get Han Solo hair, but so far he's been unsuccessful. He lives with his wife and annoying cats in Los Angeles.

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