

"With StarCraft, from a player's perspective, the only way you improve is by working really hard and looking deep at yourself"



CV

Sean Plott started playing *StarCraft's* first expansion in 1999 at the age of 13, and began qualifying for the World Cyber Games in 2004, winning the Pan-American Championship in 2007. His YouTube webshow, Day[9]TV, currently has over 300,000 subscribers and covers more games than simply *StarCraft*, but in-depth analysis of that game remains his core line.

Sean Plott, AKA Day[9], is one of the most prominent figures in eSports. Having been a professional *StarCraft: Brood Wars* player, he then became a commentator, following after his brother, Nicolas 'Tasteless' Plott. Sean established his own five-day-a-week web show, Day9TV, in 2009. He has a warm, energetic style that's also remarkably comprehensible, opening a window into the incredible complexities of one of eSports' mainstays. Through this he's helped to spur a new kind of appreciation for games, one that's as much about watching them as playing.

Was Day[9]TV's tagline, "Be a better gamer", there from the very beginning?

It wasn't, but I've always been interested in the whole idea of improvement, study and really careful analysis. Honestly, one of my most favourite things is taking a really complicated concept and explaining it in an understandable fashion. A lot was born out [of] my interest in math. My college was adamant that students be good presenters. We would have to explain really complicated mathematical ideas in exactly five minutes, otherwise we'd be cut off. It was an interesting exercise in throwing out the unnecessary fat. The daily show I began was about that. It's so easy, especially with a game like *StarCraft*, to fall into the trap of those common phrases and throw them around, like, 'I wanted to make sure I had a smooth transition ready.' That doesn't really mean anything.

At what experience level do you pitch the shows?

What ends up growing are the strategies. As players get smarter and do more sophisticated things, you naturally have new topics to talk about. I do my best to avoid saying buzz phrases and as a result it should be a comfortable entry point if you hop in, but I use language and concepts you have to be familiar with *StarCraft* to understand. It's a balance to not say too much that's bland, obvious and flat, like, 'Well, he's making workers and building workers is good,' because everyone should understand that. But I'll still want to have enough in there so the longtime viewer has new stuff. I [might say], 'He hasn't missed a single worker - excellent job,' that hints players should always be building workers but doesn't throw more experienced players.

How much has changed in terms of player culture since you started casting?

Around 2010, when I started doing more tournament casting, [I noticed] an interesting shift: much of the *StarCraft 1* community was players; now there are a lot more straight fans and spectators who might not log into *StarCraft* for months. You end up with this interesting discussion, like in a sports bar: 'What a horrible play; you'd think a professional player would do better...' That language transitions naturally to the *StarCraft* scene. What's stayed consistent is if you want to go play American football, you need two full teams, armour and a field. With *StarCraft*, you can see something cool and try it a minute later. There's such a small barrier to watching expert play and enacting the fantasy.

What caused that explosion in fan culture?

It was streaming, the rise of places like Twitch.tv. In 2008 and before, streaming was hard and expensive. For a live event, most of the budget went to broadband. Now streaming is really cheap and easy. It's easy for tournaments to pop up, and there are tons of players streaming themselves playing, so it's easy to get on the Internet and find a way to watch. With *StarCraft*, people like cool strategies and thinking about them, and with streaming you can get a deep appreciation for players. After two-and-a-half years, you have a ton of people saying they don't really play but they watch every day.

Do you need to be a great player to be a great caster?

I think you need to study a lot. An amazing football coach doesn't need to be an amazing player. It's the same in *StarCraft*; some is knowledge and some is execution. A lot of casters are behind on execution, but I'm a strong believer in studying the game, and also to be able to look at the game and still be able to draw conclusions about what the action implies. Just knowledge isn't enough. It's a terrible spot to be in, watching a game and not being sure what's going down.

How have you stayed interested in StarCraft for so long?

It's always changing. It's like 24: you know Jack Bauer is going to beat the shit out of some terrorist and be in a lot of intense situations, but you don't know how. You're familiar with the characters, and that familiarity makes it really fun.

With *StarCraft*, coming from a player's perspective like mine, the only way you improve is by working really hard and looking deep at yourself. At a high level, there's no resource you can go to. If there's an obvious strategy, people have figured it out already, or if there's a subtle one, everyone else copies it. So you dig deep into strategy, and you start to understand the huge, hidden well of possibilities. Even if I'm watching a strategy I've seen 50 times before, I'll see new stuff. It feels new all the time.

You talk a lot about the idea of personal improvement in eSports, but traditional sports spectators are there purely for entertainment. Does that mean there's a fundamental difference?

I think eSports has a 'you can do it too' thing. There's a thinner barrier between player and spectator that's unique. The more accessible a physical sport is, the more there is that yearning for improvement. But in any game, there's a sense that the more you know, the more there is to enjoy. Something as simple as a batting average in baseball - it gives meaning and understanding. In one show, I showed examples of a strategy played by StarTale's Bomber, who made three bases and started upgrades really early so he could do a big attack at 14 minutes. If he did it at 13, it'd be too small; at 15, it'd be too late. After the show, Bomber played the strategy in all three of his games in a tournament and I got loads of tweets saying it was cool to watch because they could see exactly what was happening. Knowing makes watching a hell of a lot more exciting.

You and other leading casters have become a big part of StarCraft's success. Has that changed your relationship with the game?

I'm sometimes torn. The mindset I had hammered into me from playing *StarCraft 1* was that you shouldn't complain about what you don't have any control over. It's easy to say the Marine is too strong or whatever, and it doesn't help you win - in fact, it's detrimental to winning. I learned to instead work out how to optimise my play. I take the same approach to the content I produce. If I don't have the right features built into *StarCraft*, what's the best way to include them? But then there are times like when the [*Heart Of The Swarm*] beta

client messes with my encoder for some reason. Maybe I can go to Blizzard and ask them to fix it, but I don't feel I have a specific right to claim anything over Blizzard. Certainly, I maintain the right to own the content I have made - there's an EULA that permits it. It's an interesting new media relationship, but I'm very satisfied with the way it works.

Can eSports break outside gamer culture in the west like it has in South Korea?

Oh yeah. In probably eight to 15 years, we'll be there. It's just a cultural barrier. People who grew up playing games are now having kids. When I have a child and he asks to have friends over, I'll suggest having a LAN party. That's just going to happen over time. How did you learn the rules of football? No one ever opened a manual and read the rules - they're cultural; on TV, at school, with friends. As this generation has kids, become teachers, establish eSports clubs - it's a matter of time.

Will StarCraft reach that kind of popularity?

I think *StarCraft* has already made huge strides in that department. The visuals have such clarity that you can identify the red and blue armies; Protoss looks distinct to Terran. I've been able to bring people in quickly: 'The blue guy is trying to get more money but the red guy isn't letting him,' and boom, they start. With firstperson shooter games, it's hard to know what the right camera angle is, so probably fighting games are the clearest game type. There's no special camera angle; there's a life bar, people are punching each other. But if you think about observing versus playing, they don't have to have anything to do with each other. Think about the camera angle at a football match. It's nothing at all what it's like to play. With every game, there's a big question over the best way to observe it. Would *StarCraft* be better to watch if the view was backed up 50 per cent so you can see more? I don't know. And it's that cultural thing again. A light switch isn't actually intuitive, it doesn't appear in nature, but over time we've developed a grammar for the switch. In chess, you place pieces on the squares, not the intersections, and that's an accepted grammar. I get the feeling that as eSports get more popular and accepted, people will get a better sense of the grammar of games. ■

Sean Plott identifies the readability of *StarCraft's* sides and units as one of the reasons it has achieved such success as an eSports mainstay