

## The Games We Play Online and Offline: Making *Wang-tta* in Korea

Florence Chee  
*Simon Fraser University*

This article presents an ethnographic analysis of case studies derived from fieldwork that was designed to consider the different ways Korean game players establish community online and offline. I consider ways Korean youth participate in activities at Korean computer game rooms, which can be thought of as “third places.” A synthesis of the Korean concept *Wang-tta* provides extra insight into the motivations to excel at digital games and one of the strong drivers of such community membership. Korea’s gaming society has many unique elements within the interplay of culture, social structure, and infrastructure.

In his work, *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior*, Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) asserted that because of electronic media, physical location no longer matters in shaping our experiences and behaviors; nor does the physical presence of people “with” us. Although Meyrowitz concentrated primarily on television to support his analysis of electronic media, it is important to consider his work as a voice of concern over the impact of electronic media on society. Since the time of its publication, such media-centric concerns over the welfare of society have diverted much analysis to a debatably more “dangerous” and “addictive” genre of electronic media: the online videogame. My argument is that such media-centric analyses largely obscure the bigger picture of how a society responds to electronic media. Cultural artifacts such as television or videogames have different ascribed meanings depending on the cultural context. In this article, I use my case study of Korean online game communities to show how consideration of the physical location of a technology does indeed matter, and how media use differs from one culture to another.

This article reports on ethnographic fieldwork analyzing the intricate relation between the sociocultural factors at work in Korean game communities and the context in which games have become integrated into everyday life in South Korea. The nation is a world leader in broadband penetration rates, with 11.19 million broadband Internet subscribers (KGDI, 2004). Korea also boasts over 25 million resident online game players (KGDI, 2004), comprising about 54% of the population (Jamieson, 2005). The reasons for this phenomenon are the cause of much speculation at the industrial, academic, and governmental levels, especially from the \$13 billion (per year) global videogames industry (Jamieson, 2005). Gamers in Korea have repeatedly made world headlines, with articles citing widespread videogame addictions, how real life social activities apparently suffer due to addictions to game parlors known as “PC [personal computer] bangs” (pronounced “bahngs” and, literally translated, meaning “PC rooms”), and even cases of online game-related deaths. Are these extreme stories of death and virtual mayhem (Gluck, 2002; Ho, 2005; Kim, 2005) the only possible accounts of Korean gaming phenomena by which the rest of the world should base their perceptions? As the media frames the problem of “online addiction,” the phenomenon exists and is getting worse by the second. However, if we are to believe in the dominant diagnosis–treatment models and strategies that treat such allegedly addicted players, why then have they been largely unsuccessful in obtaining favorable results? What is the real issue at hand, if the stories of a minority of destructive gamers manage to eclipse those of the majority of gamers who are able to lead full and productive lives? To answer this question, I suggest that an in-depth look at culture, social structure, and broadband infrastructure might cast Korea’s reputation for excessive online gaming in a different light and yield alternative explanations. To this effect, the objective of my ethnographic research is to dig deep, beyond existing statistics and assumptions, into Korean life to provide more cultural context and possible reasons why gaming communities are particularly compelling in Korea. Following that, one may make educated guesses as to why they are not as compelling in other parts of the world.

In *The Real World of Technology*, Ursula Franklin (1999) emphasized that technologies are developed and used within a particular social, economic, and political context. My work continues to emphasize the importance of assessing the culture in which media is created and the context in which it is used. I wish to add to the current knowledge of the interplay between technology and the development of human relationships as expressed in digital games, which are becoming increasingly recognized as a growing pastime and mode of social expression. Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), in his influential book on play theory, *The Ambiguity of Play*, asserted that the rhetorics of a larger culture will have its own socializing influence, and the norms and hierarchies of the gaming society and general society will interpenetrate the game with its own particular social arrangements. He wrote, “Playing games for the sake of games is always playing games for the sake of games in a particular social

context with its own particular social arrangements. There is no lasting social play without play culture.” (p. 120). In other words, to assess the longevity and sustainability of social play, it is important to look at the specific context and historical circumstances of the culture in which that play is situated.

Contrary to general media portrayal and popular belief, I argue that a relatively elevated level of gaming in Korea is not due to the game itself. The assertion that a game is particularly addictive does not address the evidence I found in the fieldwork, which points to many reasons that have little or nothing to do with the game or its genre. I found that a whole host of factors external to the game itself, such as the PC bang in which it is played, have an active role in the promotion and popular play of “old” games such as *StarCraft*—a game that came out in 1997 and has lost (or never had) in North America the renowned popularity that it still enjoys in Korea.<sup>1</sup> Korea’s unique history, limited geographical area, and governmental support have encouraged the development of a sophisticated broadband infrastructure. The availability of broadband access in Korea has facilitated the proliferation of PC bangs. Due to their large numbers, PC bangs are highly competitive and cheaper than any other activity. Youth, with their limited incomes, often choose the PC bang as a place to commune, fulfilling the role of a “third place” (Oldenburg, 1997), as I later explain.

After painting a comprehensive picture of the cultural milieu in which gaming exists in Korea, I provide a synthesis of the Korean social issue of *Wang-tta*, which includes the act of singling out one person in a group to bully and ostracize. The issue is not commonly known or written about outside of Korea. I look at how the concept of *Wang-tta* was contrasted with admiration for people who can game excessively (and as a result, game well). I then posit the creation of *Wang-tta* as one of the motivations to excel at digital games and as a strong driver of such community membership.

As the results of this case study on Korea indicate, there is no one single cause of excessive online gaming; nor are the reasons for it a universal, cross-cultural, physical “condition” diagnosable in biomedical terms. I report and use some of the findings of this ethnography in Korea to argue that elevated participation in a gaming environment has just as much, if not more, to do with the cultural and geographical life context than the actual game itself.

## METHODOLOGY AND RATIONALE

In this section, I discuss the methodology and resulting strategies I used to obtain the data used in this study. The field research for this study was conducted during a

---

<sup>1</sup>In Chee (2005), I discussed how other factors such as television broadcasts of professional game tournaments and industry sponsorship also play a role in the continuation of enthusiasm for a particular game.

4-month period in the fall of 2004, in Seoul, South Korea. Short-term observation was also conducted in regional centers, such as Chuncheon, Sokcho, and Cheongju.

The personal narratives of online game players in Korea were of particular interest to me. I wished to observe and analyze patterns of behavior and common histories to find out what was so compelling about these games—communities that players would supposedly conform to media stereotypes and forsake almost everything else in their lives to participate.

For this study, as described in *The Ethnographer's Method* by A. Stewart (1998), I used the “multiple modes of data collection” (p. 28) principle to compare between field data derived via different methods, which included:

- *Participant observation* for the duration of 4 months: This experience was comprised of informal information gathering from individuals and groups, and general self-immersion in cultural contexts and technological experience. The participant observation was further intensified by the home stay (which I describe next) that provided much of the cultural, linguistic, and lifestyle immersion that informs this study.

- A total of 21 *formal in-depth interviews* with gamers: These were individuals who were defined by others or self-identified as “addicted to games” in the present or past.

- Seventeen *formal online interviews*: These were conducted with gamers, some of whom also worked in the Korean gaming industry.

- Two *focus groups*: One was with 8 participants and the other was with 7 participants with mixed ages and proficiency with Internet use.

Instead of relying on just one method, I chose to rely on a number of ways to gather data. The pilot nature of this study gave me the freedom to be holistic in methodology and to choose to drill down into the themes that proved more interesting for present and future studies. For example, I could check out various assertions made by my interviewees against what I observed them or others doing during my direct observations over an extended time period. My focus group data assisted in giving me a framework with which to articulate the cacophony of information I was obtaining via the other methods. Using this strategy, I could identify the overlapping trends from the greater body of data.

I briefly summarize what allowed me to do this study, the events leading up to conducting the research and methods, and my rationale while conducting the fieldwork. One year before the fieldwork began in Korea, I prepared to conduct the ethnography by learning to read and speak Korean. Being from Vancouver, Canada, this endeavor was facilitated by my exposure to a rich multicultural environment and specifically, the large number of residents originally from Korea with whom I could continue to practice. Although it is true that the greater bulk

of my learning about Korean language and culture began when my plane landed in Korea (the point of going there), it was quite valuable to have gone with the existing foundation I had built while in Vancouver. Because my research was about daily life at the grassroots, I felt that it was very important to be prepared to speak Korean and blend in as much as possible. This decision ultimately impacted my study in a positive manner, as my visually Korean appearance and use of the vernacular did indeed alleviate a great portion of the stress associated with “blending in,” giving me more access to everyday things. With the length of my stay, most of the people with whom I had contact acclimatized to my presence and were able to forget that I was Canadian most of the time or, in the case of more superficial encounters, did not even realize that I was. This mutual acclimatization was one of the benefits of conducting ethnography over an extended period of time.

While in Korea, I conducted participant observation within the public and private social contexts of home, school, and everything else involved in daily life. My observations ranged from the perplexing to the mundane. Gaming culture is everywhere in Korea, every day, and my observations included everything from those recorded in and around numerous PC game rooms, to what I saw looking over the shoulder of someone playing mobile phone games on Seoul’s expansive subway system.

Adding to my cultural immersion, I had the privilege of doing a home stay with a multigenerational Korean family in the heart of Seoul, as well as short-term stays in other types of Korean homes outside of Seoul, ranging from the early 20th century homes to the more common dense urban high-rise buildings. By sharing these living spaces, and fully participating in the culture (almost always blending in as a resident), I was privy to many things said and unsaid. Many of my experiences inside and outside of my family context provided much subtext for the behaviors I observed during this research. Each day, whenever possible, I would make thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) in my field notes of what I encountered. This reflexivity was important to the study as a whole, as was a hyper-awareness of my conceptual baggage (who I was, what my assumptions were, and what I was encountering). As a woman in my mid-20s living in an urban high-rise three-generation home, I had to deal with the implications of being a member of the youngest generation in the household. With Confucian ideology as an overarching determinate of Korean everyday life, the emphasis on my placement in terms of seniority (or lack thereof) influenced the way I was viewed not only within the home to family members, but more to my chagrin, the general public. This situation enabled me to experience firsthand what it was like to navigate everyday life as a Korean youth, analyze it, reflect on it, and write about it.

I was interested in the specific stories of people navigating through their lives and their specific encounters. Being rather new to town, I had to rely on the occur-

rence of organized accidents to meet people.<sup>2</sup> The nature of this research enabled me to conduct interviews by using what is commonly known as the “snowball sampling” technique or “accidental–convenience sampling” (Richards, 1998, p. 37). The interviews took place in numerous locations and, coupled with participant observation, personal narratives provided insights into the lives of game players and their motivations for engaging in communities associated with game playing. In addition to the informal interviews that took place during my stay in Korea, I conducted formal in-depth interviews in both Korean and English with players who participated in game communities and subject matter experts in the field. Thus, the methods by and large reflect the way things are generally done in Korea—through a myriad of social networks and snowball samples. I was able to analyze friendship networks within the gamer communities and evaluate general lifestyles.

Furthermore, I conducted focus groups in which I gave participants examples of news articles about Internet addiction in South Korea and asked them to comment on the veracity of the situation as they perceived it. The varying perspectives in these focus groups were checked against the interview–participant observation data to compare the many perspectives on Internet use in Korea while gaining information about how Koreans perceive their own relations to games, the Internet, technologies, one another, and the international community at large. I found these data to be quite interesting because I was able to get the perspectives of people who had a greater variance in age and professional status, and who did not necessarily affiliate themselves with any game community.

Finally, the amount I immersed myself in Korean culture and lifestyle played a significant part in generating the research insights in this study. This immersion allowed me to more fully understand some key aspects of Korean homes. During my stay, it became apparent to me why certain behaviors encouraged or discouraged the use of certain technologies. I could understand the context in which technology and resulting gaming habits so popular among contemporary Korean youth existed, because I was living it. This participation in culture and lived experiences helped me to see the interplay of relationships both online and offline.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF PC BANGS AS “THIRD PLACES” IN KOREA

According to Oldenburg (1997), *third places* are those that are neither work nor home, but are places of psychological comfort and support. These places often contain people of like mind and like interests. In Korea, such third places become

---

<sup>2</sup>Almost everything in Korea is done by introduction. How I exactly managed to get these introductions to do this type of research and gain rapport with my informants is an interesting story worthy of its own article, but beyond the scope of this one.

especially important because entertaining one's friends is rarely done in the home. At a third place, such as a PC bang, one can choose from online games, e-mail, online chat, Web surfing, visiting matchmaking sites, people watching, eating, smoking, being with big groups of friends, or just being with one's significant other in a friendlier setting. A PC bang also has been known to be a cheap place for shelter in the middle of the night, or within the broader context of an unkind job market, a place for the unemployed to spend the day. Given these social dynamics, the PC bang is the site of numerous significant social interactions. In my discussion of the importance of the PC bang in the lives of Korean youth, I would argue that the online games are more of a "fourth place," situated within the third places of PC bangs. The games are often not the prime motivator for people to go to a PC bang. Using what Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004) asserted in their work on the online community as an "imaginary" social construct, I would say that these people in the PC bang are in that process of creating a community online, but they are also partaking in physical community.

The PC bang is ubiquitous in Korean everyday life. From the city street, one often sees neon signs stating the fact that the building has a PC game room or two, but they rarely exist on the first floor in which there are typically other businesses such as service shops. To find a PC bang, one must often venture up or down tiny, dingy, often dodgy looking stairs and pass through a tinted glass door. These rooms, often thick with cigarette smoke, vary in size, anywhere from 5 to 50 or more computer stations, each with its own comfortable executive chair. If the PC bang is big enough, it may have a special "couple zone" in which the stations are two computers in front of a "couple chair" (a loveseat or expanded chair without a separating armrest) made for two people to get physically closer. There may be a snack bar, varying in size with foodstuffs available. Standard items available tend to be quick snacks such as vitamin drinks, water, soft drinks, bags of chips, cookies, and instant noodle soup bowls (*ramyun*). On entry, one can get a plastic card from the clerk at the front counter. The card will have a number on it that, when entered into the greeting interface of the computer, will activate the billing time for that computer station. The rate is often about \$1.00 (U.S.) per hour, with some places offering discounts at nonpeak times.<sup>3</sup> This rate is much more affordable to young people on a limited income than that of other, more expensive "bangs," such as "noraebangs" (karaoke room), "DVD bangs" (movie watching room), or board game bangs. On leaving, the clerk punches in the number of the card, and the tab is paid. PC bangs are typically very popular as places to go because of their cheap rates and are popular as startup businesses. Every neighborhood in Seoul averages about one

---

<sup>3</sup>It is interesting to note that the rate for PC bangs was substantially more expensive (about \$10.00 U.S.) in the late 1990s. As availability and competition in PC bangs has increased, prices have decreased.

PC bang per block. They are generally open 24 hr a day, 7 days a week, and ones with newer computers are often completely full at all hours.

According to K. Stewart (2004), “The PC bang and bang culture in Korea ... [provides] children with media use opportunities outside of their home, away from parental rules and regulations and among groups of friends, which does not often happen within the Korean homes” (p. 62). My own observations and interviews concur with this assertion. For many young Koreans, their participation in online games represents one facet of a whole community and way of life. The activities surrounding this media ecology determine how its members navigate within their vital orientations and make choices in how they take nourishment, spend money, earn money, and even partake in courtship rituals. In this section, I talk about the experiences of some young Koreans and how the PC bang fits into their life contexts.

It is easy to see how one might be alarmed by Korean youths spending their hours at PC bangs. Rather than dismiss the participants as “game addicts,” however, I discuss a few examples from the formal interviews that illustrate various motives for spending a lot of time at PC game rooms that were not about the games themselves at all.

One 27-year-old university student I interviewed spent as much time outside his home as possible. After classes, he would typically go to dinner with his friends; go to a PC bang in the area; and, while there, play a combination of *Lineage*, *StarCraft*, and *Kart Rider* for about 4 hr. By the time he arrived home it would typically be midnight, at which point he would log onto his computer in his room and play for another few hours. Having access to these technologies in his own room, one might think it strange that he would pay money to play the same games. When I asked why he would play at a PC bang as opposed to home, he answered that he could smoke at PC bangs, whereas at home he could not (his parents did not like it)<sup>4</sup>: “The biggest reason why I go to PC bang is [it’s] more comfortable than home. I play games at home at midnight because my parents are sleeping.” Two major reasons he cited were his lack of “comfort”<sup>5</sup> in his own home and deliberate avoidance of encounters with his parents. To him, the PC bang was a way to escape the various constraints of his domestic environment.

Another man in the same age group actually talked about his lack of desire to play online games, but that he did so to be with his friends:

---

<sup>4</sup>Although things are changing slowly to reflect Western models of behavior, it is still quite common for young Koreans to live with their parents until they are married. In fact, it is often expected. Thus, many coping strategies, such as those talked about by informants, are rather typical attitudes of youth living with their parents.

<sup>5</sup>Comfort as he sees it is most likely his ability to smoke elsewhere and escape the constraints of intergenerational friction he feels living with his parents as a 27-year-old man.

S: If I have time, [I go] to play with my friends after drinking. Three times or more per week.

F: And how long do you spend there?

S: 1 to 3 hours.

F: What do you play?

S: *StarCraft*.

F: How did you learn *StarCraft*? At PC bangs or at home?

S: Just PC bangs. I want to play *StarCraft* really well, but the game is difficult for me. I want to play simple games like baseball and bowling games.

The casual player discussed here reflects the sentiments of other interviewees who were either “recovering game addicts” or who “do not play.” However, even those who insisted they did not play for their own amusement reported gaming least 5 hr per week with the premise of being with others and maintaining bonds with their peer groups. In addressing play as linked with social rhetoric, Sutton-Smith (1997) wrote, “It has been shown that sometimes players play primarily to be with others” (p. 105). This seems to be reflected particularly accurately in Korean play sociality.

Another social motive I encountered was using the game atmosphere in the PC bang to engage in courtship practices. A 24-year-old university student told me she had been playing the massively multiplayer online role playing game *Ragnarok and Kart Rider* for about 1 year, and thought she was “addicted.” During the interview the informant stated that she and her boyfriend had been dating 1½ years. After the first 6 months of their relationship, she started playing computer games with him at PC bangs.<sup>6</sup> When I asked about her motives for playing, our conversation went as follows:

S: This time was winter, so it was very cold outside. We could spend less money in the PC room because it was cheap compared to using other facilities.

F: Just to spend time together in a warm place?

S: Yes. We can spend time together in a warm place. I am a student, and I don’t have a lot of money. So, that’s a good way to spend time with my boyfriend.

---

<sup>6</sup>Although the fact that online game play is still male dominated in this context is intriguing, the gender implications of gaming are beyond the scope of this particular article. The common stereotype, which was reflected by the girls with whom I spoke, seems to indicate that women or girls tend to like “simple” games such as *Kart Rider* or *Tetris*.

Although she said that the games she played were fun and the time she spent at PC bangs ranged from 15 to 20 hr per week, throughout the interview it was clear that her motives for going to the PC bang were not so much about the games themselves, but rather what the venue offered for nurturing her relationship with her boyfriend.

Finding the courtship and PC bang link interesting, I later interviewed a couple in their early 20s who played *Lineage* together almost 40 hr per week. Although they were helping each other cut down their *Lineage* play online, it was their mutual passion for the game that initially had allowed them to meet offline at a *Lineage* meet. He saw her, and it was “love at first sight.” She, however, did not notice him and ignored his advances. After the meeting, they would encounter one another online in *Lineage*, in which he would then try to protect her from harm against enemy attacks. After a while, this impressed her enough so that she consented to having a date with him. Their relationship slowly evolved, and as of the time of the writing of this article, they are very happy, very much in love, and still going to PC bangs together.

Although Oldenburg (1997) wrote about third places for and within a U.S. context, similar parallels can be drawn for the importance of these third places in Korea. It is important to see the particular importance of PC bangs in Korean everyday life. It is significant that these places function neither as work nor home, and are places of psychological (and in this case even physical) comfort and support. It also is significant that wide use of the PC bang is due primarily to the availability and cheap price of access at \$1.00 per hour. For these reasons, the PC bang has become the locus of so many varied community- nurturing activities among young Koreans.

### THE “WANG-TTA,” MAKING “WANG-TTA,” AND “WANG-TTA” OF EVERYONE

A fascinating concept, *Wang-tta*, emerged in my interviews with Korean gamers. Put simply, in this context the term describes isolating and bullying the worst game player in one’s peer group. It is a difficult term to translate into English, and very little English literature that attempts to do so exists. One can be said to either “make *Wang-tta*” or be the object of *Wang-tta*. The term is paradigmatically similar to (and some have said modeled after) the Japanese term for bullying, *Ijime*. In reference to *Ijime* situations, Dogakinai (1999) stated that in collectivist societies such as Japan, similarity is a source of comfort, whereas difference is disparaged and subject to much abuse from others.

I first came across the term in one of the formal interviews (shown next) when my informant was trying to address his motivations for playing games. My ignorance of this concept was almost amusing in retrospect:

S: Do you know *Wang-tta*?

F: Is he a pro gamer?

S: No, [it's a] social problem word. *Wang-tta* ... if one person can't play the game ... Think about it this way: Every class[room] has a little or poor ... all people hate him. If one class has 40 people, 39 people playing a game together, but 1 person can't play the game. 39 people then hate him, and he wants to play together with them but he couldn't because he can't play that well. So, after time goes, this gap is increased. So everyone hates him. Everyone hates him.

At first, I was uncertain as to whether *Wang-tta* was being used as a noun to describe the individual “loser” (as it commonly tends to be used in English) or as a verb or adverb to describe the bullying situation. I asked for clarification, and obtained a hypothesis from an insightful informant. His supposition was that a primary motivator to play games in Korea was to achieve social acceptance among peers. In my interview with him, he also hinted at the PC bang serving as an arena of talent exhibition. That is, one might practice playing at home to “perform” at the PC bang where his or her talents in a game would then be scrutinized and “peer-reviewed.” Sitting across a table from me, he drew a diagram of many people in a circle, and lines representing negativity between those people and one isolated person away from the main circle. I asked for clarification:

F: So this one is the *Wang-tta*. The outlier is the *Wang-tta*.

S: The *whole situation* is *Wang-tta* <circling the whole diagram>. People say he is *Wang-tta* <pointing to the isolated person in the diagram>. If someone can't play the game ... that situation makes this <diagram> situation sometimes. So everyone doesn't want to be *Wang-tta*. *That is why many people play games in Korea*. Everyone likes a person who can play the game very well. That's why every day students practice games at home.

Thankfully, I was at an early point in my study in which I could ask more informants about the concept of *Wang-tta*. The concept was intriguing enough to follow up on for subsequent interviews. As I had built flexibility into my interview protocol, I was able to quickly adapt this and other new findings as I went along.

Refusal to partake in game play could subject one to isolation and ridicule. The fear of being made a “*Wang-tta*” could indeed cause many young people take every opportunity to practice the games of their peer groups to become more skilled and less subject to such ridicule. A person who possesses a social deficit, articulated by others as *Wang-tta*, could develop in many situations in which there is immense social pressure to be good at games. Johan Huizinga's (1955) discussion of the way

spoilsports are treated is comparable to the creation of *Wang-tta*: “The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a ‘spoil-sport’ ... Therefore he must be cast out for he threatens the existence of the play-community” (p. 11). Caillois (1961) concurred with Huizinga in that, “the game is ruined by the nihilist who denounces the rules as absurd and conventional, who refuses to play because the game is meaningless” (p. 7). In threatening the sanctity of the play community, one might subject oneself to being singled out as *Wang-tta*.

Here is another person’s concept of *Wang-tta*:

F: Can you tell me what your definition of *Wang-tta* is?

S: *Wang-tta* is [a] bad thing. Everyone doesn’t like a *Wang-tta*. They have a different mind, different behavior. So when one guy doesn’t like another guy... *Wang-tta* is some group, and one guy is made the weirdo.

It is important to note that in the concept of *Wang-tta* there is fusion between collectivism and individualism, in that one’s talent might not be the only consideration for prevention of ostracization.

### The *Wang-tta* Effect

In my quest for the elusive *Wang-tta*, I came across what I call the *Wang-tta effect*, which describes what I see as a retreat of one player from the given community due to a circumstance beyond the would-be player’s control. Such circumstances often include a once-frequent game player being removed from one’s peer group for an extended period of time, for example, while serving in the army for 2 years or going abroad to learn English for 1 year or more. Once such a player returns back to the home community, game play time has typically dropped significantly. Implicit in informant’s statements such as, “it’s no longer fun” or “my priorities changed,” I see the *Wang-tta* effect occurring due to the informant’s unwillingness to subject themselves to *Wang-tta* from their peer group. The examples I discuss next show how culture (in this case *Wang-tta*), social structure, and infrastructure interact to influence player motives and habits.

For example, in one interview, I spoke to a 25-year-old man in his final year of university. At first, he claimed that he no longer played online games, but as the interview went on, this proved to not be the case.

F: How long have you been gaming?

S: Seven years, maybe. Since I was 20. I stopped for maybe 2½ years, because I was addicted to *Starcraft*. For 4 years, I played *StarCraft* a lot. After I quit the army, I recognized that I was really bad at playing *StarCraft*. Because after that everyone played *StarCraft* really well, but not me. So before I

went to the army I was kind of a regular player, but after I quit from the army, *I was the lower class player*. So I just quit because I wasn't very good at *StarCraft*.

I knew from my observation that this individual spent time at PC bangs, had social gatherings centering with game tournaments, and other such activities. This left me wondering, so I asked for clarification.

F: So when you go to a PC bang, is it only for friends?

S: Yes, mostly. I go to PC room with my friends to play games with my friends. But if I go just by myself it's not fun. I'm not good at games, but if I go to a PC bang with my friends, we can make a team and play with other teams. So it's kind of socialization. So I like that. Not playing by myself. Before we went to the army, we played *StarCraft* all the time together. When I was in the army, I was dying to go online. I wanted to play *StarCraft*, but I couldn't. They didn't allow it. After I quit from the army, of course I played *StarCraft*, but it wasn't very much fun compared to before the army. I was defeated by people.

F: Ok, now I don't know very much about army service here. When people are doing military service, they don't do school or anything else?

S: We stayed at the army base 2 years and 2 months. We could only go out 45 days. That is the only vacation we have. Four or five times. Ten days. Ten days per vacation. During the army service, we cannot go out. Even though we go outside, we cannot do things like drink alcohol, or play games.

Clearly, there are issues in the social structure unique in many ways to Korean life. Among young Korean men, military service functions as both training and, more significantly in a social manner, a rite of passage that signals a clear demarcation between one's relatively carefree youth and responsible, career-oriented adulthood. The typical severing of social networks during this time of military service also has much to do with ambivalent feelings of how one will be received back into the social network of origin.

Yet another example of the *Wang-tta* effect can be seen in the story of an extremely hardcore game player (he has repeatedly engaged in 36-hr-long tournaments) who was cut off from most of his peer group as well as Korea's broadband infrastructure when he went to England to study English.

F: How much time do you spend per week playing games?

- S: Nowadays 6 to 7 hours per week because this is my last semester [at university]. So, I'm really busy. I have to study harder than [ever] before for getting a job. The biggest reason [for cutting back on gaming] is studying because it's my last semester.
- F: At the time you spent 36 hours playing, when did you start cutting down?
- S: During my stay in England. That was a big reason. Their Internet speed is much slower. Very slow. I couldn't play a game [online] for nearly 1 year. So that's why. After that, I lost my temper. I lost interest in playing games.
- F: Because you were doing other things?
- S: Yeah I couldn't play games... Still, my friends played games, so [after I got back] I restarted with them.

When I asked what he ended up doing in England instead of playing online games, with a chuckle he responded, "Drinking. Smoking."

The concept of the *Wang-tta* effect illustrates the often implicit concern over a lack of ability to participate in online game activities in peer groups after an absence. It also seemed important to be able to participate well after investing a lot of practice time.<sup>7</sup> In my encounters with Korean gamers, in interviews and focus groups, the ability to do something "extremely well," in the areas of school or games, is very much taken seriously and admired.

## CONCLUSION: UNDERSTANDING KOREAN EXPERIENCES

Throughout this article, I suggest that an in-depth look at culture, social structure, and infrastructure might cast Korea's reputation for excessive online gaming in a different light. By engaging in this first-hand, multimethod, ethnographic study, I hoped to provide more cultural context and possible explanations for why gaming and its associated activities seem so immersive and compelling in Korea. In addition to that, one may make educated guesses as to why they are not as compelling in other parts of the world. The original fieldwork concerning the PC bang as a third place, merged with theories of play, add perspective to game research by highlighting the concept of online sociability as it is created in the interactions between players, online and offline.

---

<sup>7</sup>I identified the *Wang-tta* effect with young Korean men, but at this time am uncertain of an equivalent with women in gaming. There are definitely gender differences in the way women as opposed to men are esteemed in their peer groups. My data indicate that women's skill in gaming was not perceived as important.

Moreover the Korean social phenomenon of *Wang-tta*, which includes the act of singling out one person in a group to bully and treat as an outcast provides additional insight into one of the motivations to excel at digital games and one of the strong drivers of such community membership. As the results of this case study on Korea indicate, the factors for excessive online gaming are most likely not cross-cultural (i.e., diagnosable as addiction in biomedical terms) and just as likely, if not more, to do with the offline “game” of one’s life context. In this case study, the offline *place* of Korea, as well as a “sense of place” for Korean youth was integral in understanding the many complexities inherent in the way Korean online game culture has come to be in its current state of being.

## REFERENCES

- Caillois, R. (1961). *Man, play, and games*. New York: Free Press.
- Dogakina, A. (1999). *Ijime: A social illness of Japan*. Retrieved January 09, 2005, from <http://www.lclark.edu/~krauss/advwrf99/causeeffect/akikocause.html>
- Feenberg, A., & Bakardjieva, M. (2004). Virtual community: No “killer implication.” *New Media & Society*, 6(1), 37–43.
- Franklin, U. (1999). *The real world of technology*. Toronto, Canada: Anansi.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gluck, C. (2002). *South Korea’s gaming addicts*. Retrieved June 30, 2003, from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/2499957.stm>
- Ho, A. (2005, March 18). Broadband: Virtually a den of iniquity? *The Straits Times*, p. 27.
- Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo ludens: A study of the play element in culture*. Boston: Beacon.
- Jamieson, J. (2005, May 22). Video gaming holds Korea in its grip. *The Province*, p. A41.
- KGDI. (2004). Comparison of the characteristics of gamers in Korea and Japan. *Journal of Game Industry and Culture*, 5, 18.
- Kim, T. (2005). *Internet addiction haunts Korea*. Retrieved January 21, 2005, from [http://search.hankooki.com/times/times\\_view.php?terms=Internet+haunts+Korea+code%3A+kt&path=hankooki3%2Ftimes%2Fpage%2F200501%2Fkt2005012117464953460.htm&kw=Internet%20haunts%20Korea](http://search.hankooki.com/times/times_view.php?terms=Internet+haunts+Korea+code%3A+kt&path=hankooki3%2Ftimes%2Fpage%2F200501%2Fkt2005012117464953460.htm&kw=Internet%20haunts%20Korea)
- Meyrowitz, J. (1985). *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Oldenburg, R. (1997). *The great good place*. New York: Marlowe and Company.
- Richards, W. (1998). *The Zen of empirical research*. Creskill, NJ: Hampton.
- Stewart, A. (1998). *The ethnographer’s method* (Vol. 46). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stewart, K. (2004). *Informatization of a nation: A case study of South Korea’s computer gaming and PC-Bang culture*. Unpublished MA, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada.
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.