

**ONLINE GAMES AS A MEDIUM OF CULTURAL  
COMMUNICATION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF  
SOCIO-TECHNICAL TRANSFORMATION**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

“Online games as a medium of cultural communication: An ethnographic study of socio-technical transformation.”

This dissertation explores the place and meaning of online games in everyday life. In South Korea, online games are a prominent part of popular culture and this medium has come under public criticism for various societal ills, such as Internet addiction and a hopeless dependence upon online games. Humanistic accounts of Information-Communication Technology (ICT) usage are still a minority body of research. All too often, studies of engagement with technology reduce questions to their basic variables and social aspects are omitted in the name of science.

Exactly how has it come to pass that online games have come to occupy such a prominent place in the media ecology in South Korea and yet not been replicated in other national contexts? The first chapter discusses addiction as it pertains to online games and suggest some scholarly support for the viewpoint that the rhetoric surrounding a biomedical interpretation of online game addiction may not be the most appropriate way to address problems that have been typically laid at the feet of online gaming (or any other new form of media). The second chapter transitions into discussing my rationale for approaching South Korea as a fieldsite, the ethnographic methodology employed, and how this

examination of online games is a particularly illustrative case of the profound role played by culture, social structure, infrastructure, and policy in audience reception. The third chapter on the rise of Korean gaming delves into the foundational aspects of Korean social history and culture that I assert set the stage for the present new media scene in South Korea. The fourth chapter explores what games mean in the lives of Korean youth according to the ethnographic data I have been collecting during research stays in 2004, 2008/2009, and 2010, having analyzed the emergent practices involved in online game activity. The last chapter examines the Korean games industry and the role it has to play in the upward mobility of young Koreans. Overall, this dissertation examines the contextual factors of South Korea, in which a medium of communication can begin to be understood within the porous boundaries of its national circumstances and sociotechnical transformation.

**Keywords:** Games; Ethnography; Korea; Addiction; Sociotechnical; Media; Anthropology; Communication; Culture; Social Structure; Infrastructure; Policy;

# DEDICATION

To Tom

Your dedication has made this one possible

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## GLOSSARY

PC bang	Internet cafés, pronounced “bahngs”
Chaebol	refers to a South Korean form of business conglomerate. In Hangul: 재벌 = 財閥 = "money clique"
Progamers (eSports or Electronic Sports)	The playing of video games for payment through public exhibition of competition and other aspects typically associated with celebrity popular culture.
Micropayments	A means of transferring very small amounts of money in situations where collecting such small amounts of money with the usual payment systems is impractical, or very expensive, in terms of the amount of money being collected.
IP-Pricing	A payment structure in which the game publisher charges a price according to the number of fixed IP addresses used by each affiliated PC bang.
Communication <sup>1</sup>	The activation, actuation, and articulation of relation. Human communication is ontogenetic, ontophanic, ontomorphic and ontotropic, creating, revealing, structuring and changing human realities.
Medium	Any act (gesture or event), practice, phenomenon, or thing affording certain transformative/generative conductivity of attention and/or consciousness and relation. Each medium makes certain resources available to users, usually with a trade-off.

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<sup>1</sup> This, and the remaining definitions in this table are from <http://www.sfu.ca/~roman/page167/page167.html>

# 1: INTRODUCTION

*I want to stay as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can't see from the center. - Kurt Vonnegut, Player Piano (1952)*

This dissertation is a discussion of a few meaningful moments in time that occurred during a journey or “quest” towards understanding online games and their place in people’s lives. Those who play MMORPGs (Massively-Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) may know that in order to complete a large and epic quest, one conducts a “raid” that involves many players. Sometimes things go as intended, sometimes there are small surprises from which the team may recover, and other times there are complete failures where the team “wipes.” Upon completion of a quest, many are compelled to write a “raid guide,” which documents the intricate process for the benefit of others who may be attempting a similar quest, or for those who may be curious about the method of approach and what knowledge could be gained from encountering various spells and monsters. Accordingly, this work could be read as a type of ‘raid guide,’ recounting a specific course of events that were particular to my fulfilment of the quest. That is, my approach, what worked, what did not, and what I learned. As most of the pleasure derived from constructing a raid guide comes from the sharing of a wide range of experiences and emotions that contribute to the

increased knowledge in one's community, I have constructed this dissertation with such an objective in mind.

## 1.1 Do you accept this quest?

While studying Sony Online Entertainment's popular massively-multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) EverQuest some years ago (F. Chee and R. Smith, 2003), I had the privilege of interviewing someone for whom the game served as what Canadian Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan (M. McLuhan, 1994) called a therapeutic "counter-irritant" for the trials and travails of everyday life. While the game had been thoroughly criticized in the media for allegedly being the instigator of serious social ailments, causing suicides and truancy, this interviewee made a particularly striking statement: "EverQuest saved my life." All the while, with various politicians, lawyers, psychiatrists, and members of the public calling for the labelling of this and other online games as a 'harmful/addictive substance,' the discourse seemed to favour regulation more befitting that of pharmaceutical narcotics. In contrast to the view of "problematic use" associated with gameplay,<sup>2</sup> the narrative my informant was providing seemed to point at how he used the online game therapeutically to get more sleep and lead a less destructive life. He would play *instead of* using the serotonin-inducing medications his doctor prescribed.

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<sup>2</sup> Nardi (2010 p. 123) expands upon Seay and Kraut's (2007) framework of "problematic use" to include social aspects of gaming in the broader arguments concerning the term addiction and its constructs. Especially helpful is how she discusses addiction as a "cultural term in the game community as well as a clinical term used by psychiatrists and psychologists" (2010 p. 125). The work in this dissertation is informed by the tensions highlighted by these constructs of addiction discourse.

This dissertation attempts to illustrate, from a humanistic and social science perspective, potential reasons for why online games have come to occupy such a prominent place in popular culture. The motivation behind this journey was fuelled by an urge to make sense of and question the controversies surrounding “online game addiction.” Having been a gamer since the early eighties, I have experienced first-hand the various contours and manifestations of online and offline digital games. I was wholly unsatisfied with the ways of understanding and portraying games and gamers that I came across in mass media and academic discussions. It seemed fitting that I marry my training in sociocultural anthropology and communication scholarship to contribute an investigation into the culture surrounding online games. This work is designed to contribute a more nuanced and grassroots (from the ground up) perspective to the debates surrounding digital gaming and its place in society.

Recently, online gaming has begun to be recognized as a vehicle that enables, rather than hinders, social interaction and it has been especially encouraging to see notable in-depth and qualitative inquiries in the field of game studies (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Meyrowitz, 1985; Nardi, 2010; Pearce, Boellstorff, & Nardi, 2009; T. L. Taylor, 2006a). Studies of gamers, though rapidly growing, are occurring in a relatively new field of legitimate intellectual inquiry. In my own pursuit of this research as well as in everyday conversation, I have been frustrated by the disproportionate number of cliché memes such as the ‘helpless addicted gamer,’ Asians as techno-fetishists, gamers as obese loners in their mother’s basements, and the like, upon which mainstream media



has profited for years. Even more troubling is how these memes have been dominating the mainstream discussion and serving to sway public opinion and policymakers towards more negative attitudes about gaming and what it means to be a gamer. Being interested in how society shapes technology and vice versa, I wanted to examine how people's lifestyles are in dialogue with gaming in international contexts. Feeling a sense of responsibility to a community of which I have always felt a part, it was important to point to a varied set of motivations people may have to engage in this activity, as there would be with any other hobby. Showing how gaming is a normal activity people use to communicate with one another in their community was what initially compelled me to head to Korea to first conduct research on this topic almost ten years ago.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this dissertation contains an examination of society and technology in the context of a gaming culture. Those interested in technology, policy, and innovation as they are affected by culture, social structure, and infrastructure will perhaps find the content helpful in their own work.

## **1.2 Purpose of the study**

As the title of the dissertation suggests, I argue that we should think of online gaming as a medium of communication and mode of sociotechnical transformation, rather than reduce it down to a deceptively simple term like, "addiction," which implies a need to regulate and, worse, medicate. Thus, the mission of this study has been to make a case for a nuanced understanding of the place of online games in everyday life by looking at the intersection of such a

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<sup>3</sup> Unless emphasis requires otherwise, Korea here means South Korea.

communication technology and culture. Primarily, the three main questions driving my inquiry have been:

1. What factors have contributed to the prominence of online gaming culture in contemporary Korea?
2. How have online games played a role as a communication medium?
3. How has the figure of gaming interacted with the ground of a local context such as Korea's?

On the ground in Korea, the pervasiveness of online gaming is evident when flipping television channels and seeing professional online game tournaments akin to the spectacle of North American professional sports, along with the ubiquitous PC bang signs that dot the skyline of urban Seoul. Examining emergent practices in Korean society has been vastly interesting to me, as it is a culture that has internalized online gaming as part of everyday life. Kline, Dyer-Witford, and de Peuter specially note that the Korean game industry has become a key node in the “networked environment of virtual capitalism,” through its rapid growth of users, along with the structure and dynamics of the interactive game business (2003 p. 169). I have been fascinated by the factors for how and why gaming has become so popular in this national context, in contrast to other countries like Canada and the United States, where games and gamers are but a mere subset of “Geeky activities” and have not been in the mainstream public consciousness as they are in Korea. This ethnographic look into the nuances and complexities of this dynamic nation serves as a look at how people create

meaning with their technologies and everyday circumstances. In his search for cultural meaning, Clifford Geertz has famously said that, "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun." (1973 p. 5).

Accordingly, my inquiry involved a search for just such webs of significance in Korean culture with reference to the social role played by online games as explored by Simon (2007) in how they mediate communication between nodes of meaning.

The following chapters explore how games may be viewed as a medium of cultural communication, which has been a primary research concern of mine for the better part of a decade. In this study, I aim to provide a comprehensive examination of what is, and has been, taking place in the Korean techno-cultural landscape. One motivation for my study was to provide a counterweight to the dominant media discourses of helpless gamers, (Asian) technology addicts/Techno-Orientalism, deviance, and numerous other oversimplifications.<sup>4</sup> This pervasive sensationalism exists in direct tension with the realities of everyday gamer communities, whose everyday lived situations tell a very different story. Put another way, "to seek for evidence of the 'effects of media violence' is to persist in asking simplistic questions about complicated social issues" (Buckingham, 1997 p. 67).

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<sup>4</sup> A particularly vivid example of such a case involves the swirl of media coverage surrounding the Virginia Tech Massacre of 2007 involving Cho, Seung-hui, whose Korean ethnicity and video-game playing were alleged contributions to his shooting rampage that killed 32, wounded 17, and included his suicide. It is interesting to note that while these aspects of the story were in the foreground, discussions of his access to firearms or possible mental illness existed in smaller numbers.

Wishing to personally engage with the stories of actual people involved, I sought to use the work in this dissertation to lend a sober perspective to the body of mythology increasingly surrounding the dangers of online games, the possible social deviance of those who play them, and what meaning can be derived from the supposedly cold, scientific world of information and communication technologies.<sup>5</sup>

### **1.3 Games as Communication**

*“In the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin”  
-- Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media (p. 47).*

This ethnographic work is situated in the broader games studies literature as a sociocultural study of gamers in context from a communication perspective. I was drawn to an understanding of media in McLuhan’s terms: as an extension of the self (Babe, 2000; M. McLuhan, 1994; M. McLuhan, Staines, & McLuhan, 2003; Onufrijchuk, 1993). After seeing for myself how much more form mattered than content in the field, I found that the dialectic between technology and human will that McLuhan established in his work was a useful way to approach my research for this thesis.

The debate surrounding the positive and negative effects associated with media use long precedes online gaming. For example, one may find evidence of media panics dating back thousands of years, such as the sin of reading silently

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<sup>5</sup> An example of the fear surrounding online activities such as gaming includes the 2009 warning from the US Federal Trade Commission’s (FTC) consumer alert that, “The anonymity that avatars provide can encourage people to “act out” behaviors that may be considered inappropriate, particularly for tweens and teens. Indeed, visitors may find the online equivalent of a red-light district, with simulated sexual activity or violence” (Federal Trade Commission Consumer Alert 38).

in the 4<sup>th</sup> century time of St. Augustine. Additionally, much harm has been done since McLuhan's time in the promotion of a specific brand of media research that either focused too much on the specifics of the content or its dystopian effects with little or no regard for the role played by the user except as a helplessly passive consumer of media. Evidence of this viewpoint can be found especially in the body of scholarship focused upon the television era, which includes Neil Postman's *Amusing ourselves to death* (1985), and Joshua Meyrowitz's *No sense of place* (1985). Moving into the Internet era, media seems to experience a further divorcing from oneself, as exemplified by Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen* (1995), which discusses the user's identity as fragmented and multitudinous as a mere result of being online and able to role play, and more recently the appropriately titled, *Alone Together* (2011), which has received much attention as its assertions contradict the increasingly public and social nature of media. Rather than perpetuate the notion of anomie in Western literature, Korean youth occupying the crossroads of sociality – including the social behaviour I observed in and around PC bangs - are not *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000) in the sense that online worlds somehow usurp offline realities. Though these contributions increase public dialogue to the benefit of media communication research as a whole, I wish to foreground the user in my own work here.

McLuhan's theories seemed to be the best way for me to structure what I had been experiencing in my research, as he regarded technology as an extension of the self instead of something that exists in opposition. McLuhan's ideas have gotten more attention since the publication of the (1994) MIT Press

edition of *Understanding Media* (with an introduction by Lewis Lapham), published thirty years after the original. In 1996, *Wired Magazine* captured the popular imagination of the digital revolution in its article (G. Wolf, 1996) concerning McLuhan's thinking, calling him their, "Patron Saint." In *Media and the American mind: from Morse to McLuhan*, Daniel Czitrom (1982) declared that the most fertile approach to media studies is through an understanding of Canadian Communication theorists McLuhan and his mentor Harold Innis.

Something I found especially helpful as I prepared for my doctoral fieldwork was McLuhan's concept of figure and ground as found in *Laws of Media* (1988), which was the guiding principle behind his famous statement, "The medium is the message." He used the figure/ground dichotomy to look at communication technology (figure) and explain its function in a particular context (ground.) He believed that in order to adequately assess the impact of a new technology, one had to examine the figure and ground (medium and context) together. To look at one or the other independently, divorced of its historical context, was more or less pointless.<sup>6</sup> Angus (2000 p. 104-112) argues that prominent media scholar Raymond Williams (1974) mostly misinterpreted McLuhan's theories. For Williams, the message is key, as opposed to the medium. However, following Angus, I find McLuhan's view that the medium is the message more productive for what I am attempting to convey in this dissertation. After having done multiple fieldwork sojourns, I am more convinced than ever that the games function as a

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<sup>6</sup> For example, some countries like the Philippines have mostly skipped over landlines altogether in favour of mobile phones, illustrating the need to evaluate a technology in terms of its context of implementation.

communication medium (form) and the understanding of its role extends far beyond the message (content) to explain why most Koreans choose to play online games. The medium determines how people interact with content.

McLuhan saw the splitting and dividing of figure and ground as an obfuscation of true and accurate technological assessment and a means of control. “In fact, it is the technique of insight, and as such as necessary for media study, since no medium has its meaning or existence alone, but only in constant interplay with other media” (M. McLuhan, 1994, p. 26). McLuhan cites three reasons why the medium is the message:

1. The present environment, itself made up of the effects of previous technologies, gives rise to new technologies.
2. These technologies each, in turn, further affect society and individuals.
3. All technologies have assumptions about time and space embedded within their design and use.

McLuhan believed that an examination of figures and grounds would allow people to critically assess technology’s role in society. The analysis of both a technology and its context would lend true understanding. That is, the meaning found in the message being conveyed by the medium. McLuhan’s (1994, p. 10) use of an anonymous stanza is particularly fitting to describe the discussion at hand:

In modern thought, (if not in fact)  
Nothing is that doesn’t act,  
So that is reckoned wisdom which  
Describes the scratch but not the itch.

The above stanza is appropriately used in this case to represent a gap in media scholarship looking at figure (scratch) and ground (itch). For the purposes of this work, McLuhan's perspective acts as a counterweight to the many lopsided studies that simplistically interpret a high amount of media use as a pathological condition. Furthermore, I am extending McLuhan's analysis of media to delve deeper into the sociocultural relationships with technology by my inclusion of ethnographic fieldwork of user environments—to look at the place between the scratch and the itch.

The media theories of Marshall McLuhan continue to have salience in the understanding of contemporary technologies of media, arguably to a greater extent in this present Internet age than at the time of their conception in the mid twentieth century. Not only do his theories have new relevance for the current forms of media we have at our disposal, but I argue that the combination of available media and cultural variation in their use, as exemplified in Korea, bring his theories to a new level of relevance for the field of communication. By examining the contextual and subjective meaning in using a communication medium such as online games, I will illustrate the importance of evaluating both a technology and the role it plays in the sociocultural milieu in which it is deployed, in order to truly understand the nature of the phenomenon.

#### **1.4 Outline of the dissertation**

In this work, my focus is the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and its online game culture, which has been simultaneously lauded and derided in local and international media. The swift growth of online gaming in Korea has served



to point out the economic miracle that modern Korean society represents (Kim, 2011). In the years since the Korean War (1950-1953), the southern half of the world's last divided country has managed to transform from a feudal agrarian society into a flagship knowledge/information society. Today, Korean society embraces commercial and consumerist lifestyles in which sophisticated and futuristic hardware is commonplace.

My research seeks out a sociocultural explanation for the oft-celebrated success of South Korea's gaming industry and correspondingly frenetic mainstream online gaming culture. In North America, governmental, medical, and legal communities have used events in South Korea to inspire, defend, or initiate decisions regarding how they want games or gamers to be treated (Clark & Scott, 2009) (in every sense, clinically or otherwise). The tendency towards biomedical discourses (and treatments) being cut and pasted into the diagnosis of online gaming as a problem has been troubling, as has its ability to garner widespread blame as the root of social pathology in the public imagination. Journalistic linkages between the tragic high-school shootings in Columbine (1999), or at the post-secondary level at Virginia Tech (2007), and their perpetrators' video game activities are a key example of the sensationalist coverage informing the public about the entirety of games and gamers as a seriously troubled population. Even more troubling is that these discussions typically influence attitudes, which then become public policy, serving to (in most cases wrongfully) sanction the activities of an inert majority.

Chapter 2 will discuss the methodological rationale and my ethnographic approach to the research. Chapter 3 explains the rise of online gaming in Korea, taking the reader through a condensed sociotechnical history of Korea in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and outlining the trajectory that has brought Korea to its present state of global technological prominence. With that foundation set, Chapter 4 proceeds with presenting a picture of Korean culture, social structure, and infrastructure with the purpose of illustrating the meaning of online games in everyday life by following the actors (Bakardjieva, 2005) and examining youth practices. Chapter 5 covers the games industry and how games have provided opportunities for upward mobility in Korea. The conclusion summarizes specific local circumstances that enable the present gaming culture to exist in Korea according to this dissertation, the limitations of the dissertation, and my future research trajectories.

## 2: METHODOLOGY AND RATIONALE

*This pink eye situation has caused me to hit a new low in my life and general physical/mental health here. After dinner I lay in bed behind the closed door of my room... I wasn't in the mindset to do work. I curled up on my mattress, facing the wall I had gotten to know so well over the last few months, making slight indentations in the grooves with my fingernails... slowly... precisely. It was then that I realized that the way I had dealt with mental isolation my whole time here was to immerse myself in work. No wonder I was at my wits end. It wasn't until this sickness affected my vision and work at the computer that I truly realized how woefully consuming and (sight) work-oriented my life here has been. What made it worse, was that I was in this situation because I had signed up for this whole fieldwork 'thing' myself...*

*I found myself envious of my husband back in Vancouver who was sleeping in our comfortable bed right now, oblivious to my lone ethnographic angst. It was only 8:15pm for me here in Seoul. Maybe I would go for a walk or something. Then the thought of walking in my district... on a cold dark night... alone... in the dark industrial surroundings... turned my stomach. If my friends could see me in this technological paradise now, both eyes matted half shut, pollution-induced bronchitis....*

*My fetal position continued for at least another 5 minutes, with only my own neurotic thoughts to keep me entertained. I thought to myself, " Gee... this*

*is really it, isn't it? I'm defined by my work here. There's nothing else to me. If I can't work on it, I don't do it. I don't have real friends here, I'm an ugly red-eyed alien, and I suck." I had hit my final low of suck-ti-tude. How had my glorious cross-cultural expedition come to this? My life was a sitcom, starring a crazy foreigner (me).*

*I took my mobile phone in hand and just held it for a while. I looked at the plastic Stitch character head that was left dangling on the phone (the body had broken off days ago, leaving only a head). Pathetic. I inspected the different curves, textures, colours, and scratches that were on it. Finally, I text messaged Sang one word: "bored."*

*Not long after, I received a reply, "So, what do you want to do?"*

*Alone in my room, but not truly alone, I realized that this device was my link to the outside world...*

The preceding text was a series of excerpts from my personal field diary, written while conducting my first fieldwork in Korea during 2004. It was a relatively coherent sliver of my darkest, most undiplomatic thoughts at the time, with most of the topics and their related issues raised in this one day never explicitly making it into subsequent publications concerning online games, culture, social structure, and infrastructure. In comparison, this ethnography I present for my thesis ended up becoming a highly sanitized, qualitative study examining the motivations of Korean youth with their participation in online game communities of which the scientific Malinowski (1964), as opposed to the candid Malinowski (1967), might have been proud. One wonders if I could have done

anything else, given the topic, scope, time, financial constraints, and professional/personal ethics concerns. This chapter includes the interweaving of various research methodologies, my personal and sustained engagement with people and places, and how this approach shaped the contours of this dissertation.

## **2.1 Chapter overview**

As members of my Doctoral committee are aware, this dissertation is a continuation of the research journey I started during my Masters thesis, which focused on an ethnographic study of Korean online gaming culture, the fieldwork for which was first conducted seven years ago. While I was abroad, a number of findings cropped up which were immensely fascinating, but I could not explore them within the limited scope and timeframe of my MA. Thus compelled, encouraged, and informed by the insights of the 2004 fieldwork, I resolved to continue the inquiry into a PhD program.

Through an examination of my own triumphs and travails in conducting what has ended up being a longitudinal study from 2004 to present, I will illustrate that there is ongoing utility and value in ethnographic field studies in a humanistic approach to media studies. This chapter presents my rationale for approaching South Korea as a fieldsite, the ethnographic methodology employed, and with the events as they occurred in the conducting of this study as a whole. First, I explain my rationale for using an anthropological approach in my ethnographic examination of a communication phenomenon. Micro-narratives were an important aspect of my work, and hence why my training in anthropology

and the ethnographic mindset played a large role in the design of this research. Second, there is a brief summary of event milestones, which act as background knowledge for my research stay as well as describing various opportunities to have greater participation in the inquiry into Korea's dynamic technological society. I will describe the fieldwork designed in accordance with my ethnographic field plan and the outcomes, which continue to present themselves. Third, I reveal some preliminary thoughts and reflections on my work here thus far. Finally, the rationale for methodological and field choices made will become clear as I transition from the foundations laid out in this chapter to the research findings undertaken in the later chapters.

## **2.2 A Communication thesis with anthropological sensibilities**

In McLuhan's discussion of retribalization, he notes a marked difference in speed of actions in the mechanical age with the actions in the present (at the time) electric age. "Slow movement insured that the reactions were delayed for considerable periods of time. Today the action and the reaction occur almost at the same time. We actually live mythically and integrally, as it were, but we continue to think in the old, fragmented space and time patterns of the pre-electric age" (M. McLuhan, 1994 p. 4). With the instantaneous speed at which those with access to high-speed networks can conduct their everyday lives, we are seeing a simultaneous 'warming' of hot media (typically low in audience participation due to high resolution and definition) and cool media (high level of participation where audience needs to fill in gaps), which has implications for how we examine media studies, and with which methodological paradigms.

The emergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has retrieved the wonder and mysticism formerly or typically associated with magic. Such retrieval of what Katz (2006) describes as “Magic in the Air,” with regards to technology, is what McLuhan might refer to as a form of retribalization and a return to traditional orality and ‘tribal’ social structures of antiquity. However, as Bruno Latour (1993) argues, we have never truly achieved ‘modernity’ in its ideal construct, but rather quite easily retreat to a more natural frame of being. One might even go so far as to argue that the isolating advances of literacy are only now being remedied in the advancement of a greater convergence of media that embraces oral/literate, participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006).

### **2.2.1 Complementary methodology**

With the increasingly diasporic conditions of our present day mobile and global labour forces, the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to anticipate and mediate interpersonal relations associated with one’s sense of home (Miller & Slater, 2000) has become a facet of everyday life. With anthropology’s time-honoured preoccupation with diaspora, there is a natural fitting with an examination of the retribalization (M. McLuhan, 1994) that is occurring within imagined communities (Anderson, 1991; A. Feenberg and M. Bakardjieva, 2004) and the meanings inherent in those constructs. In addition, as lifestyle choices fluctuate through social transformation, it appears that recreation, play, and leisure (or what people believe to be leisure) (Sutton-

Smith, 1997) will become relevant to the field of new technologies at an accelerated pace.

The situatedness demanded by ethnographic methods requires the examination of online games as part of a broader system of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) within embedded, and perhaps mundane social structures and relations. The documentation of these relations may present unanticipated insights that speak to how technology and culture are co-constituted. The anthropological concern with the trappings of cultural symbol, myth, and meaning provides a re-orientation of techno-cultural studies. The richness of the data collected through my choices of this approach will also be a topic of discussion, as are the implications for how I conducted an anthropological inquiry within a disciplinary sensibility deriving from the communication field. This chapter should give the reader an idea of the research I undertook in order to arrive at some of the results I discuss in the body of this dissertation.

### **2.3 Approach to the fieldwork**

This section begins with a discussion of the methodology and rationale for the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in South Korea during the period of 2004-2010.<sup>7</sup> This thesis combines theory and praxis by drawing upon insights from international ethnographic research that I have carried out in and around online gaming communities, both online and offline. I was surprised at the extent to

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<sup>7</sup> Ethics approvals were obtained for all the primary research on human subjects through the Office of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University and the data gathered was treated as confidential.



which some of my most basic questions, which made complete sense in North American contexts, did not apply very much to the Korean context. Throughout my fieldwork, there was the nagging feeling that none of ‘this’ was what I bargained for. Yet, in a strange perverse way, it was exactly what I signed up for. It would be precisely the things I did not anticipate emerging from this type of rich data gathering that would be the most important and provide the most insight. Indeed, I found my informants, and they found me as well. The said and unsaid, along with the eating, sleeping and breathing aspects involved in the ideals of ethnographic fieldwork make themselves apparent throughout the dissertation.

In order to understand more of my surroundings in Korea, I did one year of immersive training in the Korean language and culture prior to my first 2004 fieldwork sojourn. During that 4-month stay, I was welcomed into the home of a Korean family who immediately incorporated me into the everyday workings of their household. I was also affiliated as a Visiting Researcher with Sejong University’s Institute for Technological Innovation in the Department of Business. These relationships allowed me to get an initial orientation to my sociocultural and linguistic surroundings.

I owe a large number of my cultural insights to my conversations and time spent with the members of a Korean English club, whose primary objective was acquiring facility in English through online and offline social exchange. The local members were comprised of Koreans from all over greater Seoul, expats who were generally English teachers in Korea, and random foreigners like myself. The online membership was comprised of people joining in from all over South

Korea, chatting on the website in both Korean and English. Knowing the position of privilege that I could potentially occupy in this club, as explored in depth by Prey's investigation of English acquisition in South Korea (2005), I made a deliberate effort to ensure that my presence worked within the existing parameters of the club. Through the encouragement of the executive members, I became a local member and contributed dues that went towards the rent needed for the meeting space, as well as participated in the casual discussions during drop-in club meetings. The results from that stay that included ethnographic field notes, focus groups, and in-depth interviews of gamers highlighted online gaming in Korea as a product of culture, social structure, and infrastructure (F. Chee, 2006 p. 228). That stay was a transformative experience, especially for how I regarded how and where gaming takes place. It served to lay the foundation on which I built another layer of research inquiry. Most importantly, getting more insight into why people game in Korea was the optimal outcome of this research.

My subsequent (2008/09) stay allowed me to be situated within the Korean cultural milieu for a six-month period while examining the top-down mechanisms that formed the conditions for online gaming to thrive, such as government, industry, and policy factors in a global economy.<sup>8</sup> With a second ethnographic fieldwork stay, I sought to build a more varied data set, incorporating a "top-down" look from government and industry perspectives in addition to the observations at the 'grassroots.' Though rife with its own

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<sup>8</sup> I also conducted research in Korea during 2010 to investigate gaming as part of a broader global study. The personal experience gained from that study served to enrich and inform my assertions in this dissertation.

affordances and restrictions, interviewing more Koreans who were stakeholders in the technological development of the nation added an extended and nuanced perspective to my previous “bottom-up” player-oriented data from 2004. I wished to create a project within a point of tension, comparing empirical evidence with more traditional theoretical frameworks concerned with the underpinnings of society and technology, in order to more fully address the nature of online gaming culture as constantly in flux.

In insights emerging from my earliest fieldwork in Korea, I addressed some of the cultural, social structural, and infrastructural explanations of why Koreans had an international reputation for being particularly susceptible to online games addiction (F. Chee, 2006). In addition to finding a whole host of factors external to any one game, such as the use of PC bangs and other social factors, the promotion and popular play of “old” games such as StarCraft has been key in creating professional online game spectacles, known as e-Sports, which persist to the present. T.L. Taylor (2012; 2006b) has written about the professionalization of gaming, and the instrumental manner in which “powergamers” play intrinsically differently from amateur/leisure players. Dal Yong Jin has also explained in detail about the political and economic situatedness of Korean professional gamers (D. Y. Jin, 2010), which is essential to understanding Korea’s online gaming mediascape. My contribution here was not to be made in examining the professional gamers for whom gaming had a clear monetary and vocational aspect to their motivations, but rather the amateur

and leisure gamers whose everyday lives were more of a mystery that fuelled my ethnographic inquiry in Korea.

During the 2008/2009 stay, I was primarily funded by the Korean Government Scholarship, awarded by the National Institute for International Education (NIIED) in Korea, along with the Graduate International Scholarship from the Dean of Graduate Studies at Simon Fraser University. For this particular sojourn, I received a formal invitation from the Department of Communication at Seoul National University to commence a Visiting Researcher stay, beginning in September 2008. Being affiliated with Korea's top university, I was able to reach out from my extant contacts to better access individuals at other Korean academic institutions, government, and industrial firms who facilitated my research in various ways. This affiliation enriched my field research, which included more interviewing of "elites" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002) in terms of those who are more senior in status or age markers.

Due to practical circumstances such as my relatively young age, Asian ethnicity, and professional status, sometimes my encounters would be alone, accompanied, or within group functions. I anticipated that there would also be a longitudinal aspect to the research, as people I interviewed during my previous fieldwork stay would have likely changed their circumstances and outlook during the four years since my last visit with them. Consistent with the nature of conducting business in Korea, most things rely on introductions, the nurturing of social networks, and snowball-style recruiting in the way of referrals through friendship networks. In terms of formal interview data for the top-down

perspective, I focused upon six informants from government/industry, and eight educators regarding online games in Korea. As one may see in greater detail in the Appendix section of this thesis, I asked them questions regarding what factors they saw contributing to Korea's online game culture.

## **2.4 Objects in the mirror: booth babe or researcher?<sup>9</sup>**

*I have foreign female friends, but they are all foreign looking. When I first saw you, I thought you were Korean. How you would perceive that feeling on your skin, it was interesting that you perceived the same thing. The way you do makeup, and your hair and.... I really thought you were Korean when I first saw you. -  
Mina*

Throughout my fieldwork, it was reasonable to expect that my own situatedness came into play on numerous occasions. As I will indicate at various times in this dissertation, my insider/outsider status, however superficial at times, was instrumental in blending into Korean society and yet remaining a foreign observer viewing phenomena through my own lenses of inquiry. As with any ethnographer, sometimes my looks (age, ethnicity, gender) increased the level of access I had, and other times were a hindrance (Bergstrom, 2009). In this respect, it was very enlightening to 'compare notes' with my female informants, like the one I call Mina. I was curious about whether or not she, like me, perceived a difference in the way not only women were regarded, but Asian looking women and the corresponding expectations of performance of and adherence to cultural norms (Kondo, 1990).

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<sup>9</sup> To answer the question, yes, the inspiration for the title of this section was from having been called a "booth babe" at industry events.

At times, the realities of navigating the games industry for myself were baffling and sometimes utterly depressing. As with many instances of chauvinism, it does not matter how conservatively one may be dressed. One may be dismissed as a 'booth babe' or a 'hostess' who serves a decorative function. It was not so much that I was the one at times being dismissed, as my age, gender, ethnicity, and small stature tend to make that a perennial expectation of mine. What disturbed me more was the realization of the limited role someone who looked like me might play in these professional contexts. Seeing the legions of women employed for the purpose to which I personally took exception caused me to reflect at length on my own position, privilege, and performances. Not to be pessimistic too early, at various industry events I would introduce myself to the women, only to confirm that their presence as attractive women was the only thing required of them, and that they were otherwise in no way involved with games or gamers. Moreover, without a 'foreign female' sign above my head and exhibiting Korean aesthetics, they would look at me in even greater confusion, wondering how it came to be that I was actually a games researcher and not even woefully on my way to permanent spinsterhood.<sup>10</sup> It must make even more sense now to the reader why, when I first found Mina at one of these events, I clung to her even more tightly, due to her rarity. During our chat, we talked about the expectations of Korean women compared with other visibly foreign women in Korea, which brought up some interesting points, which I discuss in a section of Chapter 5 regarding women in the games industry.

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<sup>10</sup> Another stereotype of female graduate students, especially those in a PhD program.

## 2.5 Data collection and analysis

Ethnographic data was collected in fieldnotes through participant observation, informal interviews, and formal interviews, focus groups, and open-ended surveys. While in the field and upon my return to my home in Vancouver, I transcribed my audio recordings, coding and analyzing them by hand. Due to the ethnographic nature of the research and deep engagement with my site of research, I felt it necessary to avoid outsourcing my transcription or analysis work. It was perhaps an idealistic and sometimes tedious approach, but I did not use social science analysis software for my analysis. My question is always, “how do you code for silence?” which, as Geertz notes for the interpretive ability of ethnographers, is part and parcel with distinguishing between a twitch and a wink (Geertz, 1973 p.6). Reading between the words, knowing why someone said, “Umm...” and awkwardly laughed is why having been there is important. The analysis continuously took place in the preparation, conducting, transcription, analysis, and writing periods. In large-scale projects, this is not always possible or desirable, but for the outcomes of my dissertation, this was the personal methodological choice I made for this research write-up in order to further hone my interpretation of the field data. Using my findings from the field, I then compared the empirical findings with the theoretical literature to produce the synthesis found in this thesis.

Pseudonyms have been used, or informants anonymized, with identifying characteristics eliminated as appropriate. Quotes are used directly when they contribute to this ethnographic narrative of Korean online gaming culture, with

their origin deliberately remaining opaque. I have ensured that the data maintains its original integrity and intention while taking care to not compromise my informants.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the anthropology of old, contact with one's informants does not stop with leaving the field (or, in the case of some virtual ethnographies, upon logging off). The in-person interviews and ethnographic work has, in a sense, never halted. I am able to constantly keep in touch with those I have met through various technologies as friends and also if the need arises for follow-ups. It is also the case now where one's informants keep up and read the research they helped to facilitate and inspire. The need for identity protection on my part has been especially important for informants, as cyber sleuthing someone's identity online is possible, and the community is so relatively small at times. The pledge of "do no harm" was maintained to the best of my ability, which meant lots of discussions off the record. Those discussions were enlightening, but not explicit in this dissertation. Indeed, it has been fascinating and this research, as much as it is a moment in time, continues to evolve.

## **2.6 Methodological rationale**

The methodology most identified with anthropological research is ethnography (Agar, 1996; Clifford, Marcus, & School of American Research, 1986; Geertz, 2000; Marcus, 1998; D. Miller & Slater, 2000), which grew out of

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Zimmer's (2010) study on the ethics of research on Facebook have provided a useful cautionary tale of the current power of data, networks, and ability to deduce identities in research. In that same study, he quotes Eszter Hargittai's insights that it is not difficult to figure out identities with only a few characteristics in certain networks.



the descriptive and interpretive writing of culture in a time when the British Empire was attempting to understand the new people with whom it came into contact. Through the ethnographic method, with which many media scholars are now familiar (Allen, 1994), interested parties were able to understand the various cultural differences in the most basic workings of everyday life in order to function and communicate between various tribes. In essence, the ethnographer is the medium who, like Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, is seeing a resurgence of relevance due to the emergence of increasingly uncharted cultural territory as the globe becomes more like a village.

### **2.6.1 New media ethnography**

Contrary to perspectives common in the first generation of Internet scholarship in the social sciences, as exemplified by Turkle (Turkle, 1995; 2011), scholars such as Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2000) and Wellman and Gulia (Wellman & Gulia, 1999) have subsequently argued that the Internet is not a monolithic or placeless 'cyberspace,' but instead is a system comprised of numerous separate technologies used by a wide variety of people in diverse geographical locations and social sensibilities.

The emergence of broadband and other ICTs has accelerated the appearance of a type of participatory culture worldwide (2006). This development was also predicted by prominent scholars concerned with the changing dynamics of technology and society (A. Feenberg, 1999; Negroponte, 1995; Rheingold, 2002). In this light, these developments in new media draw attention to the potential gains of using an ethnographic approach in order to see how Internet

technologies in particular are being used in various contexts. In the ideal outcome of an anthropological approach, the question goes beyond the 'use' or 'effects' of a new medium to include insights into the culture. In essence, the combination of methods I am choosing to employ for this study fits McLuhan's assertion that the medium is the message, along with his call to investigate figure (medium) and ground (context) simultaneously, rigorously, and systematically (1988).

The Internet appeared at precisely the right moment to substantiate postmodern assertions regarding the increasing abstraction and lack of depth in contemporary mediated reality because of their perspectives on identity. The viewpoints of scholars in the early 1990s pointed to a new space in which identity could be detached and thought of as something different from embodiment, exemplified by Haraway's ground-breaking "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1991) and Turkle's *Life on the Screen* (1995). Though these approaches were certainly of heuristic value in an emergent field of inquiry, the corresponding resurfacing of McLuhan's theoretical relevance regarding media as extensions of the self are much more in line with current techno-cultural practices of concern in this dissertation.

As culture becomes retribalized, "tribal cultures cannot entertain the possibility of the individual or of the separate citizen. Their ideas of spaces and times are neither continuous nor uniform, but compassionate and compressional in their intensity" (M. McLuhan, 1994, p. 84). In McLuhan's rumination is the re-emergence of a necessity to assess kinship and interdependence as

cornerstones of communication. Some social phenomena simply require someone to draw attention to what everyday actors in a situation have, in McLuhan's terms, become too numb to see for themselves or even think their actions to be considered culturally significant at all. He refers to Werner Heisenberg, in *The Physicist's Conception of Nature*, who points out that "...technical change alters not only habits of life, but patterns of thought and valuation" (M. McLuhan, 1994 p. 63). The anthropological concern with the trappings of cultural symbol, myth, and meaning provides a re-orientation of techno-cultural studies (Bell, 2006; Dourish & Bell, 2011). Dourish and Bell (2011) have discussed "methodology" formally, "...to encompass not just the craft methods and techniques that a discipline employs to do its work...but also the epistemological foundations of the discipline, and the ways in which methods feature as part of a broader set of conversations..." reconnecting theory with practice (2011 p. 62).

The long, protracted stays in the field that are emblematic of classic anthropological works, combined with thick ethnographic description (Evans-Pritchard, 1971; 1940; Geertz, 1973; Malinowski, 1964) and opacity have led many to question the utility and "actionable insights" arising from such research. However, examples of ethnographic inquiries with profound insight have only been growing in prominence. Indeed, the ethnographer as both 'medium' and 'messenger' is very apparent in just a few instances described here.

Reading about anthropologists like Nardi (First Monday Staff, 1996) who studied users of technology served as inspiration for me to delve deeper into that

area of study. Julian Orr's study at Xerox (1996) revolutionized technological maintenance, customer care, and design by highlighting the particularities of relationships of service technicians not readily apparent to those with high-level decision-making powers. In a direct application to the study of media, an anthropologist conducting research for Intel (Bell, 2006 p. 141) drew attention to the uproar that ensued when Finnish mobile phone users were no longer permitted to receive text messages from a person whom they believed to be Jesus Christ. This study was particularly effective in illustrating that technology, meaning, and spirituality could and would be linked—something that was not immediately obvious in strictly technological accounts of users. Lending anthropological insight about technology, Bell critiques the impetus behind the development of “always-on connectivity and constant updating,” (2006 p. 151) and their potential discord with various forms of religious practice and expression. The design, policy, and business implications arising from such studies are drawing an increasing amount of attention by those involved in the manufacture of products and services, who would benefit from an understanding of cultural practices and meaning making. The convergence of meaning and technology as it becomes more ubiquitous is therefore a positive trend and exemplified in humanistic studies of technology (Dourish & Bell, 2011; Greenfield, 2006), though such studies are still far too few in number.

In the tradition of material culture analysis, anthropologists are as much concerned with how subjects are constituted within material worlds as with how they understand and employ objects (First Monday Staff, 1996; Nardi & Miller,

1990; Nardi, 2010). Furthermore, attempts at hybridized approaches with political economy (D. Y. Jin, 2010) that utilize macroeconomics and meaning-making practices within communities are currently in a state of tension in their examinations of macro factors within micro contexts, but represent a sense of optimism in this mode of inquiry. However, due to one of the entry points of this work being “moral panics in the media” as it pertains to addiction, I was primarily drawn to the concept of the individualization of public problems (Gusfield, 1996) (such as alcohol and online gaming addiction). This called for a multi-faceted approach that I found needed a political economic approach to analysis. While “purists” might not wish these macro and micro perspectives to blend, I have found that an open and interdisciplinary has approach has allowed me to carry out the work in this area to an extent that makes use of my methodological sensibilities and disciplinary training in Communication, Anthropology, and Sociology. In international contexts that could utilize more insight into how technologies designed ‘elsewhere’ are used, I wish to be one of a growing number of researchers drawing attention to how much cultural insights are needed in the very sectors, such as technology, where they have been pushed aside in favour of the ‘hard and fast’ data.

By engaging in this first-hand, multimethod, ethnographic study, I attempt to provide cultural context and some possible explanations for why gaming and its associated activities seem so immersive and compelling in Korea. Numerous reports produced by firms such as PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) already detail the success of the global powerhouse that is Korea’s multi-billion dollar online

gaming industry (D. Y. Jin, 2010; Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2006; Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2007; Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2008), but what are the stories and accounts behind those numbers? Going beyond investigating the content of specific games, my study was driven by the desire to report on an in-depth look at culture, social structure, and infrastructure that might cast the nation's reputation for excessive online gaming in a different light. In addition to that, one may make educated guesses as to why they are not as compelling in other parts of the world. The fieldwork I discuss here serves to add perspective to game research by highlighting sociability as it is created in the interactions between players, online and offline. Having outlined the rationale for choosing an ethnographic approach to examining online gaming as it is situated in a cultural context, the following section explains the particular site of inquiry: South Korea.

## **2.7 Why Korea as a field site**

My interest and subsequent ethnographic study of Korea began as a response to my frustration with how games and gamers were being portrayed in mainstream media as mindless drones, helpless children, or social outcasts, who were enslaved by the powers of digital games. This mode of entertainment, should we (the public) allow it to continue, would, according to the critics, herald the end of productive civilization as we knew it. Moral panics over media use are nothing new (Debord, 1983). There is ample evidence of other forms of media over the centuries that initially caused concern and were subsequently folded into the normalized media ecologies of the cultures in which they now reside, such as the printing of books for mass consumption. At present, however, public concern

surrounds online gaming in large part because of the constantly shifting perception of the role it plays in the lives of youth. A key flashpoint for this concern is Korea.

Reactions to “games” as a category writ large are mixed in how they are framed ideologically (Bogost, 2007), but as one may expect, with a greater bias towards negative aspects. On the one hand, there are the celebratory or instrumentalist accounts of how games are good for cognitive development and maintenance (Chen, 2009; de Freitas & Griffiths, 2008), problem solving (McGonigal, 2011), health (Wilkinson, Ang, & Goh, 2008), and individual social mobility (T. L. Taylor, 2012), as well as those that question the role of games in the digital economy (Dyer-Witthford & De Peuter, 2009; D. Y. Jin, 2010; Kline et al., 2003). On the other hand, the same games can be criticized for eliciting addictive behaviours (Alexander, 2008; Griffiths, Mark D., Mark N.O Davies, and Darren Chappell, 2003; Young & de Abreu, 2011), or diminishing grades at school and inciting violence (Desai, Krishnan-Sarin, Cavallo, & Potenza, 2010). In my research of game communities, I have found a number of rather panicked articles describing the pathological level at which Korean youth in particular were playing games, the strongest examples of which are: Gluck (2002); Ho (2005); J. H. Kim, Lee, Kim, & Kim (2006); and T. Kim (2005). These perspectives pointed to a broader journalistic trend that indicated gamers were both troubled, and in trouble. Having interviewed people who had told me about their complex reasons for online gaming in other ethnographic studies (F. Chee & Smith, 2005; F. Chee, Vieta, & Smith, 2005), I was still dissatisfied with the research that took

for granted the diagnosis of games addiction in psychological terms. Such studies seemed to address a limited number of variables and controls without considering the sociocultural nuances of player motivations (van Schie, E.G.M. and Wiegman, O., 1997; Whang, 2003). I wanted to address the phenomenological aspects of gaming in Korea at the grassroots level. That is, I wanted to investigate the reasons why everyday people in Korea played online games. Phrased as a question, what was underneath the surface of panic in mass media regarding youth supposedly on a runaway train towards a dismal future in a nation of online game addicts? After all, according to Ursula Franklin in *The Real World of Technology*, technologies are developed and used within a particular social, economic, and political context (Franklin, 1999, p. 51). I wished to use ethnography in order to look at the micro circumstances as they interacted with the macro forces (Padgett, 2003). The meta-message I wanted to convey through my analysis was that Korea is not the "mysterious other," to be exoticized and feared amidst what others have charged with Techno-Orientalist discourse (Hjorth, 2006; Hjorth, 2011). With so many sociocultural and historical factors to consider, an analysis without those contextual elements would be at a deficit. I wanted my ethnographic text to represent another truth other than the 'Truth' circulating in greater numbers in the popular and academic communities already.

The academic research concerned with games, hailing from social and natural sciences alike, seemed to echo the (moral) panic that news agencies were all too eager to celebrate at that point. Dangerous precedents were being set with



cases like Sean Wooley (F. Chee & Smith, 2005), whose mother was suing Sony Online Entertainment because she attributed her son's suicide to his EverQuest play. The tendency to assign blame to games and gamers was troubling to me, and I felt that I needed to be a part of ameliorating this state of affairs. There had to be a counterweight to these arguments.

In my work, I have probed the questions of what constitutes disorders and whether game play can be explained as simply as an "addiction to games." Because the literature on online gaming tended to proceed with research on addiction as a foregone conclusion, I decided to problematize the term itself and urge people to re-evaluate the phenomenon of online gaming in popular culture. While the question of addiction has touched numerous activities such as heroin, alcohol, sex, ad nauseum, my inquiry focuses on games as a medium around which people also gather, congregate, and socialize. I would be reluctant at this point to make claims about these other aspects when other research focuses exclusively on such matters more thoroughly than I am able to here, and the debate rages on (Alexander, 2008; Peele, 1989; Rapping, 2000; Schaler, 2000). These inquiries, along with my own, sought to lend the personal perspectives of those who spend time in virtual worlds and online games of many genres. It became clear that this debate would not go away anytime soon, but rather manifest in a slightly altered form the next time another form of emergent media became popular enough to warrant public attention.

In the way of biographical information, having started playing video games before even starting formal schooling, I knew from my own experience that

gaming could be a very social experience. Further, there were also many different types of games out there, but everything was being painted (or rather tarred) with the same brush. A perennial debate is whether or not gamers should be treated psychologically or even physiologically (Clark & Scott, 2009; Young & de Abreu, 2011). My search for nuanced understandings of the motivations of gamers brought me to the works of an ever-growing cadre of scholars who are cornerstones of the global conversation on the social conditions of games and gamers (Boellstorff, 2008; Castronova, 2005; Consalvo, 2007; De Castell & Jenson, 2007; Dibbell, 1998; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Itō, 2009; Malaby, 2006; Nakamura, 2008; Nardi, 2010; T. L. Taylor, 2006a). I hope that my work adds to this conversation in how it illustrates the complexities inherent in studying the role of gaming in different cultures.

After exploring the construction of addiction and pursuing the activity of online games as more of an attempt at community formation, I was increasingly sensitized to the discourses and representations of gamer culture, to which I myself belong. This archetypical representation of the hapless game addict as discussed above was compounded further by Techno-Orientalist discourses in which one often hears “Those Crazy Korean Gamers,”<sup>12</sup> where an entire nation, ethnicity, or continent could be reified as hopeless techno-fetishists or completely dismissed altogether as “Other.” This was the time when my research trajectory turned towards looking at South Korea as an instance of how online gaming has played an instrumental role in sociotechnical transformation of a population.

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<sup>12</sup> A search using the terms “Crazy Korean Gamers” will garner many results, including videos documenting aspects of Korean gamer culture.

Explaining my work in this light shall be my task for the remainder of this dissertation.

### 3: THE RISE OF KOREAN GAMING

*...Then I finished my *juk* for breakfast, and went back to my place to change into more appropriate walking shoes. I thought I'd be walking quite a bit because my intention was to go up north to the Myeongdong area and see what the PC bang/café situation was like there. As I was walking along the back street toward my subway station, I came across a dusty construction site, punctuated with red and yellow "PC BANG" signs. Intrigued, I detoured from my path and trekked up the stairs...*

*At the third floor, I was met with a World of Warcraft banner, and behind it, the entrance to a relatively nice café with faux wood benches and PCs, with the leather chairs that are now the staple of any halfway respectable PC bang.*

*Wanting to be self-sufficient, I grabbed a card at the front desk and proceeded to find my corresponding workstation, #29. I went to 29 (in the smoking section, which happened to have more going on at that point) and the Ajeossi<sup>13</sup> asked if I was a smoker, and I said no. So he briskly ushered me to sit at one of the workstations on the other side.*

*Frankly, I was a bit disappointed, as I didn't see (or smell) a difference because it was all the same air (and there were more gamers to observe on the smokers' side), but I complied.*

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<sup>13</sup> A term referring to the male proprietor, but generally used as "Mr." or referring generically to a "middle aged man."

*Perhaps he wanted to keep an eye on me (they don't see many females there so I am an oddity in many ways) and so I went to the other side where a couple of guys were playing casual games quietly.*

*The workstation at which I was now sitting prompted me for a Korean National ID Number (NIN) (which, as a foreigner, I did not have). I hit the other button, and the manager Ajeossi came up behind me and said because I did not have a membership at this PC bang, I had to go in through the other dialogue box and just enter the number on my card. So the Ajeossi now knew for sure I was a waegook saram<sup>14</sup>, and my having to explain my life story to him would be sure to follow.*

*As I got into the system, Ajeossi meandered back to the front desk. I felt like I should just chill out here for a while to explore the different options on the system and soak up the "atmosphere" as it were. However, I did not do much of that, given how strange I felt with Ajeossi's eyes boring through the back of my head.*

*I tried logging onto my North American Battle.net account to no avail. It was also telling that the Internet Explorer browser had not been updated in a while and I kept getting the prompt to update to IE 8. I softly let out an exasperated sigh...*

*With Ajeossi milling around seeming to want to talk, I thought maybe this was a good opportunity to ask him some questions. He came over and I gave him my card and we exchanged our background stories.*

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<sup>14</sup> Foreigner

*When we established that I was an academic researcher interested in games (as opposed to law enforcement or the like) he attempted to show me some of the games, and upon clicking the icons there were patches he needed to install (showing some time had passed since these were accessed).*

*He said the popular games were Aion, WoW, and Call of Duty. Looking around, I saw some fellows playing Starcraft, and also Counterstrike. Ajeossi told me he had an Aion account and was level 25. So he showed me his character and how he could fly around the world. I asked him if I could take pictures and I snapped a couple.*

*When we were just casually chatting, I asked him what the usual clientele was, and then asked if it was elementary or high school, and all he said was “I don’t like them to come... it’s not good.” I realized he had become more guarded with that question, given the increasingly stringent attempts at regulating the game times of students in public and private spaces. Whether or not he was making that statement for my benefit was uncertain.*

*I asked him what was typically the busiest time, and gesturing around the relatively roomy café, he said today (Sunday during the day) was slow, but on weekday afternoons until 11pm it was busier.*

*It is a 24 hr PC bang, and in the wee hours of the morning from 11pm-7am it costs a little more. As he was recounting his story, he told me that he had been running this PC bang for 10 years, beginning three years after the IMF crisis. He said it was an investment for his ‘retirement,’ because his major from one of the top universities in Korea was in Business and he used to work in finance.*

*After the IMF period, his was one of the jobs that were lost in the 'consolidation process.' He said this to me while making a folding down motion with his hands. His rationale for starting this PC bang business was mainly for his son, but he told me his son got another job somewhere else, so he's running the PC bang instead. We talked about him having learned English in business school, as well as some Chinese (Mandarin) and half a year of Japanese, which he pointedly told me he did not like very much.*

*A weird moment was when I casually asked if he lived in the area. He gave me a brief look of uncertainty and told me how he used to live in the south of Seoul...Then all these other places. Then I asked what about now? And he gave me another look, and said, somewhat more guardedly, "From 7am, I work here..." and trailed off.*

*I replied with "Oh..." as if it was my sudden realization as well. It was somewhat fuzzy as to whether or not he just slept there at the PC bang or had fallen on tough times. I could not bring myself to ask him so crassly and explicitly to confirm what our eye contact had in that moment. He did not end up naming a specific neighbourhood. He merely stated, "This job... it's very hard."*

*It turned out that I ended up briefly meeting his son, who happened to be buzzing in and out of the café with a soapy tray and rubber gloves on. Seeing my surprise, Ajeossi quickly said to me his son happened to be in town helping to make lunch. Ajeossi also added that, "My son's wife's sister lives in Canada." Again, it was a little odd.*

*During our verbal exchange that walked the line between fluid and halting, I felt as though he was not the type of person who would outright lie to me, but he probably would not volunteer information if it was potentially embarrassing. This was definitely one of those important cases of reading between the lines, acting upon non-verbal cues, and interpreting silence at crucial moments.*

*I asked if there were any women who came to this PC bang, and he answered that his wife helped him run the place when business was slower, typically in the daytime. A telling answer that women were quite the oddity here.*

*By the time the silences were getting longer and we were both looking at our feet, I paid for my time and said I might come back when it was busier, and took my leave. What I did know, however, was that I had just been thoroughly engulfed in a richly ethnographic moment and I needed to make sense of what just happened.*

### **3.1 Chapter Overview**

As far as technology is concerned, South Korea has outdone most countries in the world. It is a global leader in the production of semiconductors, cars, ships, and gadgets (Hira, Morfopolous, & Chee, 2012). Korean brand names such as Samsung, LG, and Hyundai have become commonplace in millions of households with good reason. The nation has truly undergone a reinvention and reimagination of itself, from a war-torn destitute country to a trailblazer on the information highway.



At first blush, a discussion of Korea in merely economic terms as a contemporary “miracle” (Amsden, 1989) is in line with the celebration of technology being solely responsible for emancipating nations from poverty. In a classic case of what Mosco calls the “Digital Sublime,” (Mosco, 2004) in the collective vision and belief in digital lifestyles, Korea’s turn towards the panacea of the information economy has indeed been remarkable in every aspect. The extreme success of online gaming very well fits into modernist narratives, but they fall short of addressing the arduous labour, geopolitical circumstances, and cultural context for why Korea is now a technological “powerhouse” in the world. After all, as Deleuze is noted for saying, “Technology is social before it is technical” (Galloway, 2004 p. 79). Korea is a particular case that must be examined within the boundaries of its national circumstances. In the first part of this chapter, I will describe the foundational aspects of Korean social history, culture, and the present new media scene in South Korea. In the second part, I will examine the political and economic policy implications in and around the global and local game industry.

As a whole, this chapter serves to document the factors that contributed to the rise of online gaming in Korea to its current state of prominence. It shows how games and platforms in and of themselves are not the sole explanatory measure of success. That the popularity of online gaming in Korea can be attributed to key technological policy decisions in Korea is not commonly discussed in games literature. Also, deliberate choices in trade relations and

restrictions have influenced the path dependency of online gaming, which I will further describe.

In quoting the World Bank's description of Korean economic development, Robert Bedeski (1983 p. 3) aptly paints a picture of the economic miracle that appeared to take place in Korea:

"From a position uncomfortably close to the bottom of the international income scale and without the benefit of significant natural resources Korea embarked on a course of industrial growth that became one of the outstanding success stories in international development."

Though the term 'miracle' has been bandied about when it comes to describing the situation, decades later Meredith Woo-Cumings' (2001 p. 373) expressed dissatisfaction with the notion: "The East Asian Miracle leaves unexplored the basic social and political underpinnings that propelled growth in East Asia. Even when it deals with the question of the role of the state in economic development, it approaches the question ideologically."

Korea has participated in an extraordinary moment in global communication history. Subject to what Nancy Abelmann (2003) and others have called a "Compressed Modernity" as well as what Cassegard (2001) describes as the more general shock of modernity (2001), the nation has propelled itself into becoming a bona fide networked information society (Castells, 2004). This has occurred even as many around the globe are still chasing that utopian notion, many find attaining the designation elusive. Drawing upon extant theoretical literature on Modernity (A. Feenberg, 1995; P. Kim, 2011), the reader will find a discussion of how notions of modernity came to be adopted and reworked to the

geopolitical and social realities on the peninsula. Through a sociohistorical discussion including Japanese colonization, the Cold War, Korean War, and subsequent political/economic ramifications that framed the workings of Korean life, I will show how the institutions emerging from those times of creative destruction came into their present form of influence today. These national factors are reflected in the discussions I had with my informants. These histories inform and mediate their understandings of Korean life.

After highlighting the sociohistorical underpinnings of Korean institutions, this chapter touches upon the place of an 'education culture' within the hearts and minds of the nation. Korea's disproportionately large investment in education compared with other OECD countries, and its emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math fields, along with (to a lesser extent) military exemption policies have facilitated the nationwide growth of the now-pervasive online gaming.

As gaming grew in prominence, government and industry alike began to see it as an economic panacea for Korea. One cannot underestimate the role that large corporate entities, the Chaebol (like Samsung, LG, Hyundai, etc), play in almost all the affairs of Korea along with its sense of nationalism/nationhood. The chaebols and government science and technology initiatives shaped the landscape of Korean communications (Larson, 1995) and with it gaming, and continue to do so.

This discussion then turns in the direction of a global event: the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 (D. Y. Jin, 2011 p. 31-49), which I argue was a catalytic

moment that created a perfect storm of pre-existing and resultant conditions for the online games scene in Korea to flourish. At the time, Korea had just realized the implementation of a nationwide broadband policy, thereby enabling high-speed Internet access throughout the country to its over 50 million inhabitants. As Stewart (2004) points out, there were various educational obstacles to achieving a sophisticated level of literacy in these technologies for the average person, even if the infrastructure was a positive step. The financial crisis, termed the “IMF Crisis” domestically, served to upend much of the extant wealth and power structures that had asserted themselves over the nation’s affairs until that point. With international auditors throwing open the books and reforming the chaebols, there were many job losses. This new unemployment rocked the nation to its core, including throwing into question traditional roles determined by class, gender, and age. However, this new upheaval also gave rise to a flurry of new entrepreneurial activity by some business-savvy individuals. Moreover, according to Jin (2011 p. 45) the Korean government needed a high-level economic change in order to stimulate the economy after the 1997 crisis. One of the major shifts in economic policy beginning in 1999 was an increased focus on domestic consumer marketing by encouraging credit card use and e-commerce. Korea’s economic recovery could be attributed in large part to a strong recovery in consumption (D. Y. Jin, 2011 p. 47).

This combination of events turned entrepreneurs towards many start-up activities, including running Internet cafes or, as they are termed in Korea, the PC Bang. I have argued elsewhere (F. Chee, 2006) that the PC bang is a

cornerstone of social interaction, serving as de facto community centres all over the country. They are the flashpoint of social interaction, especially for youth, in the hyper-urban capital city of Seoul, where more than 10% of the Korean population resides. The creation of these gaming centres, to the number and extent in which they now occur, would not have happened were it not for the particular reverberations of the Asian economic crisis of 1997.

Korea serves as a particularly rich field of inquiry for many reasons: 1) rapid industrialization fuelled by geopolitical tensions and nationalism 2) class tensions associated with social and geographical mobility of Korean diaspora (Abelmann, 2003), complicated further by 3) a pervasive Confucian ideology (Confucius, 1979) which emphasizes filial piety, ancestral ties to the land, and subservience of youth. Moreover, the tension of globalization and contemporary Western notions of the malleability of fate in terms of economic mobility has become more prevalent in modern Korea (Bedeski, 1983).

### **3.2 The rise of gaming – culture before policy**

Throughout my interactions in Korea both official and non-official, there was a respect for authority and structure. Yet, at the same time, I would notice a sense of cynical pragmatism for how more things might get accomplished while humouring the crushing weight of the bureaucratic powers that be. In this respect, it seemed widely acknowledged off the record that ‘culture’ comes before ‘policy.’<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Policy, in the Korean use, often implies more of an ‘action’ or ‘plan’ than a rule/law.

S: “If I were to say a short story about the Korean IT industry... a combination of the gaming and the PC room came before the government policy intervention. The culture came first. How it worked was that after the war, we had this word “palli palli.” When [Koreans] took up the Internet, they got frustrated with the old copper lines. They went to the PC room so they could access [Internet] faster. They wanted more. [With the] introduction of gaming, they wanted more. [With the] introduction of StarCraft, they wanted more. So, there was the existing culture, but when it mixed with the PC room, gaming, everything exploded.”

In my investigation of the events and policies precipitating the rise of online games in Korea, a dominant sentiment I encountered was that theory and policy produced an aesthetically pleasing skin in which to deliver a package of directives associated with the messy realities of culture and politics. The opinion of a manager at a government agency in Korea I interviewed exemplified the general narrative I would encounter in investigating the rise in Korean online games. He said that the biggest milestone in the path towards Korea’s destination as an Online Games superpower was nationwide broadband Internet access, which enabled the widespread proliferation of PC bangs, and consequently online games. I asked him why he thought ICTs in Korea have been successful, and why Korea is considered “the gaming hub of the world?” He attributed the success in Korea to online games and to the policies that have promoted the IT industry.

S: “The gaming industry of course... I have to be honest it at first wasn’t considered much in the beginning, but as time passed on with the success of Lineage, then people started to get serious and consider gaming. But in terms of history, originally when [the agency] first started it was more for the purpose of helping the arcade industry. This is way back at the beginning, but as the online side grew, so [the online games agency] grew and the online grew. Arcade died off.”

Interviews such as the one with this manager produced very rich data. Between my primary data gathering methods and secondary research, there would be a dialogue. Though I had my interview protocols to guide the conversation, sometimes there was much to learn from just letting the subject talk about what they found most important. Pulling out themes from the topics brought up in these conversations or going on what might have perplexed me in my fieldnotes, I would then need to delve deeper into sociohistorical materials to add focus to the picture developing in front of me. The themes in this chapter reflect the dialogue between what my informants highlighted as important to the rise of gaming in Korea, along with how history, economics, and geopolitics are important to evaluate how online games came to be in Korea as well.

### **3.3 Compressed modernity and geopolitics**

When faced with things that surprise me in the field or otherwise, there is the desire to immediately make sense of it in its sociocultural context. So right from the beginning of my research on Korea, I made myself as aware as I could of Korean history, geopolitics, and culture, along with Korean value systems. It was clear to me that a holistic evaluation of social history needed to be part and parcel with an evaluation of online games in Korea, when even the lack of uptake in console gaming could be traced back to Korea's animosity with Japan (the homeland of console systems like Nintendo and Sega) and resultant boycott of Japanese products until just recently (D. Y. Jin & Chee, 2008).

The ambivalent relations with Japan have not ended. While I was in Korea the summer of 2008, Korea and Japan were embroiled in an argument

over ownership of a small island (in the “East Sea” relative to Korea, or the “Sea of Japan”) between the two countries (known as Dokdo, Korea or Takeshima, Japan). Hour after hour on television I would see government-sponsored advertisements on the issue, which would dredge up the sting of the Japanese 1910-1945 brutal colonization of the Korean peninsula. This issue was so important that the Academy of Korean Studies conference in which I participated was originally set to take place in Fukuoka, Japan but was instead pulled back to Seoul in direct protest of the Dokdo issue.

It was also an ever-present reality that while in Korea, I was technically living in a war zone. Not ten days after Japan surrendered in 1945, the Korean peninsula was partitioned along the 38th parallel by the USSR and USA into North (The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) and South Korea (The Republic of Korea). The North became led by Communist ideology with support from USSR/China and the South by American Capitalism. The North ambushed the South in 1950, which began the Korean War and only ended in a ceasefire armistice treaty in 1953. The two Koreas many casualties later were once again partitioned along the 38th parallel with the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) as a mine-laden 4km wide border between the two nations. Through colonization, liberation, partition, and various military regimes, it may come as a surprise that only as recently as 1992 South Korea had its first civilian government in more than a quarter of a century. The capital city of Seoul, where I was living, is almost right at the 38th parallel, with many North Korean missiles pointed right at the city. There are periodic skirmishes along the border to this day, with South Korean



males having compulsory military service for 2 years and 2 months after high school with very few exceptions.

According to Robert Bedeski (1983 p. 3), modernization in Korea became a full-fledged political program under the military rule of Park Chung Hee, who is known in the country as the architect of Korea's aggressive Five Year Development plans that are credited with the transformation of the country from its agrarian to industrial economy in less than thirty years, starting in 1962 (Bedeski, 1994 p. 79). Guided by the government, the cooperation between private investment and public credit ensured that its mixed economy grew despite its adversity following the devastating Korean War (1950-53) and a lack of natural resources in a 100,210 square kilometre area.<sup>16</sup> Despite regime changes, this aggressive development model has persisted in pushing Korea from its industrial to information economy.

### **3.3.1 Korean Confucianism – a brief history**

Yoon (2006) has analyzed Neo-Confucianism and traditional Feudal structures in order to understand the emergence of Cyberkids in Korea in their mobile and online modes of sociality. Because Confucianism pervades everyday life in Korea, and is a major force in structuring social life, I have found it beneficial to draw upon Eastern philosophy in order to discuss how it has an influence on the social shaping of online games.

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<sup>16</sup> For comparison's sake, that is equivalent to three times the area of Vancouver Island.

Confucianism is a philosophical doctrine named after the Chinese intellectual Confucius (551-479 B.C.). It has been credited with maintaining social order in a feudal system consisting of relatively autonomous, self sufficient, farming communities (Hong, 2004 p. 57). Along with other influences like Buddhism, Shamanism, and later Christianity, Confucianism is a dominant ideology in Korea, the principles of which may be found in both the family and, by extension, the organization of government.

Korean society in its present state is commonly touted as the most strictly Confucian country in Asia. Due to Korea's position on the peninsula between Mainland China to its West and Japan to its East, the nation has traditionally occupied a position of geopolitical defensiveness, subject to persistent cultural (and biological) exchange between all three—both consensual and resisted—at various points throughout history.

Chinese Confucianism came to Korea as a result of cultural exchange between the two nations during the bloody Three Kingdoms Period (220-280 A.D.). Along with Buddhism and a *mélange* of spiritual influences, Confucian values had a great influence on the education, morality, political systems, and collective identity of Korean people (Nahm, 1993). Korea is especially intriguing, as the traditional universalism typical of Confucianism appears to have been replaced by nationalism, while still stressing the Confucian tenets of "...achievement, social harmony, and education as the vital means of transforming society, [along with] deference to authority, inequality in social relations, and the extended family as the basic social unit" (Bedeski, 1983 p. 13)

As Hong (2004 p. 56) writes, Confucian doctrine emphasizes the social order of a hierarchically-organized state through ethical principles and codes, such as the Three Fundamental Principles and the Six (later Five) Cardinal Relations. The six cardinal relations include relationships between parents and children, husbands and wives, elder brothers and younger brothers, rulers and subjects, teachers and students, and between friends. These relationships are considered the pillars of society and must be upheld in order to maintain an orderly healthy society.

Because Confucianism is not a religion, but a way of life, it has been arguably more seductive and willingly adopted by Koreans of all persuasions: typically urban intellectual classes, Shamanistic Koreans in rural areas, and even Evangelical Christians. This has occurred through a series of recessions and renaissances of Confucianism, such as the Neo-Confucianism movement during the Joseon (Chosun) Dynasty of the 1400s and even more recently a rebirth of Confucianism in the late 1990s, both of which have served to maintain a semblance of social cohesion during times of national unrest and upheaval. In the following section, I explain just some of Korea's societal influences, its spirituality, and family dynamics.

### **3.3.2 All in the family**

The Korean concept of family is quite pluralistic. A 'family' in contemporary Korean society sits at the intersection of many ideological dichotomies: Eastern and Western, local and global, Collective and Individualist.

Confucius made the natural love and obligations between members of the family the basis of a general morality (Confucius, 1979 p. 18). The concept of a family in Korea goes much more beyond the North American conception of one's immediate 'nuclear family,' but is more reflective of 'clan' and 'kin' and 'tribe.' Linguistically, one's age defines how one addresses and is addressed within the household, as well as in the street. The hierarchy of language is highly present as a correlative of age, and in Korea, gender. The familial structure extends outside the co-sanguinal family and into modes of address within Korean society, such as calling relative strangers "sister," "brother," or "grandmother."

As previously mentioned, the ideology of the Confucian Six Cardinal Relations, with apparent age and gender hierarchies, are pervasive in Korean language and social structure. Benedict Anderson (1991) would refer to this familial stance as an "imagined community," in that it serves to conceive of the nation in a deep, horizontal comradeship such that people would be willing to sacrifice themselves for its cause.

### **3.3.3 Reciprocity**

While living in a Korean household, I would frequently hear, "Katta-wa..." as a family member left for the day. In Korean, "Katta-wa," is a very informal way of saying, "Go, and come back." A Korean family member staying at home typically says this to another family member who is leaving the house. This imperative to go and come back extends beyond the everyday to symbolize the reciprocity inherent in the ideology that permeates Confucian thinking.

The general Confucian attitude towards reciprocity is that our obligation towards others should be in proportion to the benefit we have received from them. Intrinsic to the structure of Confucian collectivism is the mutual dependence among the relational parties, conditional on each party's realization of culturally assigned respective roles, duties, and responsibilities. That is, loyalty and obedience from those with lower social positions must be reciprocated, but this is contingent upon the higher-position partners fulfilling their responsibilities by realizing the principle of “benevolence” in their actions (Hong, 2004 p. 57).

In contemporary Korean society, people are now caught in a type of double-bind. On the one hand, the society is structured around the deliberate privileging of the elder and male members of the family-society. The reasoning for such privileging, however, is due to the established patriarchal forms of governance and societal roles. For instance, the oldest male at the table always pays for the meal; therefore it would make sense for the oldest male to occupy the highest socio-economic status. On the other hand, amidst charges of “ageism,” “sexism,” and increasingly globalized cultural practices in Korea, the expectation that the oldest male is the best-off may not always be the case, but tradition holds that he must still pay. As a result, he may get into debt, while less is expected of his subordinates who may be better off. It is one of the many ambiguities within the current social transformation occurring in Korea in the expectations of adherence to Confucian hierarchical modes of practice. While the changing nature of age and gender roles is evident in Korea at the moment, it

may not be a mystery that traditionalists argue in the interests of 'societal harmony,' that traditional hierarchical structures continue to dominate.

In present day Korea, it is perfectly acceptable for children to remain economically beholden to their parents well-into their thirties. While this may mean something different for each family, the moral aspect is important. The 'moral' of the story is still that one's elders have sacrificed of themselves for the younger generations, and for that there must be reciprocity.

Confucian doctrine is quite explicit in the links it makes between the benevolence one shows within their family, and one's character and performance as a member of society. In *The Analects* (I, 2), Confucius states, "It is rare for a man whose character is such that he is good as a son (hsiao) and obedient as a young man (t'i) to have the inclination to transgress against his superiors; it is unheard of for one who has no such inclination to start a rebellion." Love for people outside one's family is looked upon as an extension of the love for members of one's own family.

The Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s saw the South Korean government urge its citizens to contribute their gold jewellery in order to boost its foreign reserves. While this request may seem unrealistic to North Americans, many Koreans did, in fact, contribute what they could from their possessions. When I asked a Korean about this phenomenon during a fieldwork stay, she told me, "We didn't think it would make much of a difference, but people did it for the symbolism of helping our country." Indeed, these 'family' ties of reciprocity

continue to persist and exemplify themselves in the everyday affairs of Koreans around the globe.

### **3.3.4 Ambivalence – intergenerational guilt**

Throughout my experiences in Korean culture, I have tried to understand the social mechanisms at work, and in particular the “ties that bind.” That is, the social glue that compels those in a social framework to remain committed to upholding its structure. Just as I explored Eastern philosophy for insights regarding what I was observing around me in Korea, I also looked to Western philosophy. Through the Confucian paradigm, I was seeing a lot of what seemed to be guilt. In my readings of Nietzsche, I found that what he had to say about creditor/debtor relationships had some parallels worth exploring in my work.

Nietzsche (1989 section 19, p. 88) ruminates on the ambivalent guilt of the living and the dead with reference to the creditor/debtor relationship: “The civil-law relationship between the debtor and his creditor... has been interpreted in an...exceedingly remarkable and dubious manner into a relationship in which to us modern men it seems perhaps least to belong: namely into the relationship between the present generation and its ancestors.”

According to Nietzsche’s discussion about the original tribal communities in primeval times (1989 section 19, p. 88), “the living generation always recognized a juridical duty toward earlier generations,” and that obligation to founders of the tribe was both practical and sentimental. It is only through the sacrifices and accomplishments of the ancestors that the tribe is able to exist. It

is apparent that one must pay those ancestors back with sacrifices and accomplishments. However, this debt constantly grows greater and more difficult (but no less important) to satisfy as, "...these forebears never cease, in their continued existence as powerful spirits, to accord the tribe new advantages and new strength" (1989 section 19, p. 89). In this sense, one is able to easily relate the present state of Confucian filial piety and ancestor 'worship' that is prevalent in Korean practice.

Nietzsche asserts that in order to reciprocate adequately, sacrifices such as feasts, music, honours, obedience must be given. One must fear the wrath of the ancestor and his power, thoroughly conscious of the debt to him, as the tribe grows more prosperous. But he also asks, "can one ever give them enough?" In the following section, I shall provide an illustrative example of the interaction between guilt, obligation, and ritual.

### **3.3.5 Japanese colonization**

Another layer to understanding the national psyche in Korea is by looking at the historic relationship between Korea and Japan, along with what that relationship has meant to the structuring of government, corporate entities, and policy.<sup>17</sup> Japanese colonization formally began in 1910 and lasted until 1945. This annexation was motivated by the need to control Korean resources and to use the peninsula as a launching pad for geostrategic reasons, points illustrated

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<sup>17</sup> Scholars of Korean history will note that though the peninsula has been historically mired in the power plays of the Three Kingdoms, along with tensions associated with Japan for much longer than the period indicated here, I focus on the events since Japanese colonization in the early 1900s as it pertains to this dissertation. I have discussed this period with Koreans who have indicated this time as heralding the industrialization of the country.



by the Russo-Japanese war which had only just concluded in 1905. There were certainly negative effects to colonization, and this was a period that continues to haunt the memories, and in many cases the casual everyday conversation, of Koreans to the present day.<sup>18</sup> On one occasion, walking around Myeongdong, a busy shopping district in the centre of Seoul, I came across a demonstration asking for compensation from the Japanese for the use of Comfort Women by which Korean women were forced into sexual slavery during 1932-1945 for the Pacific War (Yoshimi & O'Brien, 2000 p. 1). Related to that was the Seodaemun Prison (now a museum) was used to imprison, torture, and execute political dissidents during the Japanese occupation, is also a vivid reminder of this bitter time in Korean history. Both times I visited this site to learn more about this time period, I was struck on an emotional level by the feeling of collective wounds that are very obviously still healing.

Given the relative freshness of the wounds mentioned above, it makes sense that the first significant event in shaping Korean industrialization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Japanese colonization. State-firm relationships in Korea can be better understood by examining the evolution of the Korean state over the course of the 20th century (Hira et al., 2012). During the Japanese occupation, the use of the Korean language was suppressed, and education was largely limited to vocational training geared towards developing a skilled workforce. These acts were also meant to crush Korean nationalism. The Korean colonial state was highly subservient and limited to the prerogatives of Imperial Japan (Seth, 2002).

On the other hand, there were tangible benefits that set up the groundwork for the Korean “miracle” that followed. The first is the setting up of infrastructure, including an extensive transportation infrastructure (railways and ports). Basic educational facilities, including schools were also created. Perhaps the most important benefit, however, was the development of a managerial culture and set of skills that had a lasting impact.

### **3.4 Cultural Factors in the present Korean market**

There are a number of cultural factors to tease out in the following pages regarding how social history and contextual circumstance provide a comprehensive picture of how online gaming rose to prominence in Korea.

Having spent a significant amount of time immersed in the Korean technocultural landscape during my fieldwork, I found a number of sentiments towards technology particularly remarkable. Commensurate with the aforementioned overlap in government and industry people and practices, Korea has a significant history of active promotion of a technologically oriented lifestyle across all sectors. The prominent promotion and celebration of conspicuous consumption, often couched in nationalistic and modernist sentiments, has successfully contributed to the inclination toward technological neophilism. Enthusiasm for the latest and fashionable technologies lend themselves to promoting more of a popular gaming culture than in other countries. Korea appears to have a captive, and simultaneously demanding use culture (P. Kim, 2011). For example, during my time as a Visiting Researcher in the Department of Communication at Seoul National University, I had the opportunity to provide

input on the research of graduate students. I found some of their projects interesting, primarily because it allowed me insight into what Korean graduate students found interesting about technology, culture, and the human condition in Korea. A research question that was indicative of the prevalent attitude towards technological adoption was whether or not mobile phone usage should be viewed as a human right. It showed me how mobile communication was a "...powerful and natural complement to interpersonal communication in Korea" (O & Larson, 2011 p. 91)

### **3.4.1 Hangeul**

The government worker I interviewed stated, "The gaming experience is one of the aspects of community. The community is the real reason for people to come and play." From a linguistic point of view, products developed for the Korean public in the Korean language also increase the level of domestic adoption in content and devices. Under King Sejong (r. 1418-1450) the Korean syllabary known as Hangeul was invented, and metal movable type was used in printing as early as 1403 (Bedeski, 1983 p. 18). The Korean phonetic alphabet (unlike ideographic writing systems like Chinese, for example) has enabled the rise of ICTs in Korea. The 22-characters of the Hangeul alphabet easily transfer to a QWERTY type of keyboard and expressing oneself in a limited number of characters through the small spaces afforded by text messages and chat systems is easier than in most languages in the world. For example, the "bang" in "PC bang" is spelled using three symbols in Hangul, arranged in a single character block: "방." So, to say one word in English would take 4 character

spaces, whereas in Korean it takes one space. One can imagine how in a forum like Twitter that limits statements to 140 characters, one could express a great number of ideas in 140 syllables, while in a language like English, 140 characters would probably be a terse statement. Indeed, even at the time of introduction, the language system was a democratizing force for a population that up until then had only used the Sino character system known in Korea as Hanja. This kind of literacy has facilitated the transfer to using electronic devices to communicate.

### **3.5 Foundations of computing**

*“The communication revolution: some people saw that this could really turn things around. Because Korea already had heavy industry, all these things... we needed something more and they turned to the IT side.” – Korean Games Industry Executive*

Myung and Larson (2011 p. 83) state that through government guidance, Korea achieved what it called, “the world’s best broadband infrastructure,” and that by 2001, it led the world at just over half its population using the Internet. Considering that Korea’s infrastructure was decimated in the middle of the 20th century due to its Civil War between the North and the South (1950-1953), and before then its culture and language suppressed by Imperial Japan (1910-1945), it is mind boggling to fathom the level of mobilization required in all sectors to journey from a primarily agrarian, to industrial, to its present information-centric society within such a short time. Invoking the myth of the *Digital Sublime* that Mosco discusses in his (2004) book of the same name, Korea is an example of how the information highway acts as a restructuring agent (Menzies, 1996). The

nation currently serves as a model for many developing and developed nations for the levels of ICT usage and resulting modern technological life.

The success of the online gaming industry is attributed mostly to widespread Internet access, but also to a host of other catalysts. One significant factor in the rapid rise of technological adoption in Korea included the aggressive government and industry promotion of a digital utopia. One of my interviews with a general manager in a Korean governmental agency promoting games is especially enlightening for this discussion of public promotion of Korea's Information Society and the necessary approval and cooperation of the public.

“The government saw the value in having the whole nation connected by the Internet. They had these catch phrases, these banners or slogans. They pitched it, and it worked. People bought into it, even the companies bought into it.”

It seemed that the Korean populace was accustomed to these types of government initiatives from the Park Chung Hee era:

“In Korean: “Choose, and Concentrate,” back from the Park Chung Hee era. He had this economic system...Every five years, we change the focus. That's how we had heavy industry, light industry. He is the one who laid out [the plans]. Of course he is criticized for being a dictator, but he laid the foundation.”

Indeed, in looking at the way the chaebols, government, and the populace at large have moved together in a relatively unified trajectory, it would be fair to say that it is through garnering the public's willingness and complicity towards the end goal that Korea is the closest the world has seen a nation come to the realization of an Information Society.

### 3.5.1 A perfect storm: 1997

In many ways, 1997 was an especially pivotal year in Korea for creating the conditions precipitating the growth towards an Information Society. The unexpected events that preceded this transformative time and their sociological manifestations are absolutely central to understanding the rise of Korean online gaming in its current state.

In an attempt to create a fully functional and globally competitive information economy, the Korean government, through its comprehensive Korean Information Infrastructure plan, set up a plan for nationwide broadband Internet access in March 1995. From 1999 to 2002 alone, the Korean government invested a total of \$11 billion into broadband Internet services (D. Y. Jin, 2011 p. 45).<sup>19</sup> Along with this infrastructural initiative, the “Cyber Korea 21” policy focused “...financial and human resources toward the technological advancement of information and communication networks and to attract investment from the private sector” (D. Y. Jin, 2011 p. 45). Due to the interplay of political and economic circumstances, along with a healthy dose of state paternalism, access grew cheaper and more accessible to the everyday public.

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<sup>19</sup> Myung and Larson (O & Larson, 2011 p. xiv) have addressed the same frustration I have experienced with international data, definitional issues, and the governmental agency data that have become canon amongst researchers. They have articulated the shortcomings of an over-reliance on de-contextualized statistics as a persuasion tool. I present the qualitative data I have collected here as a contribution to the overall picture and encourage the evaluation of the findings on their own merit.

### 3.5.2 Korea's Economic Crisis as catalyst

*“The policy came after that mixture [of game culture and PC bangs] was already there. The policy contained it in a way that was more productive. The policy wasn't 100% deliberate. It's a mixture. You need the explosion to kind of push.... You need to get the industry in a certain direction.” – Government-industry relations insider*

According to Woo-Cumings (2001 p. 363), “The crisis of 1997-98 was a disaster waiting to happen, given the highly leveraged nature of the chaebol,” and that “for the period of 1988-96, corporate indebtedness of Korean firms was greater than that of practically any other firms in the world” (2001 p. 357) and a reorientation of economic policy and practice to include other things like online entertainment was essential. In order to give the reader an idea of the extent to which the economic crisis of 1997-98 affected the everyday life of Koreans, one must explain the place of the chaebol in Korea.<sup>20</sup>

In line with Confucian hierarchies, chaebols are family-type enterprises, with the CEOs as patriarchs, often literally headed by family dynasties. According to Biggart (1998 p. 316), “Samsung founder Lee appointed two sons, two daughters, a daughter-in-law, and a father-in-law to head Samsung enterprises. Professional managers were integrated into the upper echelons over time, but family ownership and patrimonial control continued to characterize

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<sup>20</sup> “Indeed the Koreans dubbed the crisis the “IMF crisis,” making the nature and cause of the event deliberately ambiguous”... “The crisis and the subsequent bailout also inserted international financial institutions, mainly the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, deeply into the reform process in Korea, greatly raising the stakes of reform. The virtue of this was that the international financial institutions could run political interference for the new regime, with every unpopular policy and outcome being blamed on the IMF--from legalizing layoffs and sky-rocketing unemployment to massive corporate bankruptcy ...” (Woo-Cumings, 2001 p. 363).

Korean businesses in the 1990s." Additionally Bedeski (1994 p. 86) outlines that a common practice is for a senior executive to 'retire' and set up quasi-independent firms that are in practice part of the executive's former company. At the time of his writing (pre-crisis and subsequent reform), LG Group had 62 companies, and Samsung had 37 sister firms. Moreover, the Korean government has been in a parent role as well, simultaneously guaranteeing and disciplining the chaebol--the four most prominent being recognizable in North America as Samsung, Hyundai, Lucky and Goldstar (now merged into the single entity LG) for their electronics, ships, and cars that play a role in the global movement of goods, information, and people.

What one may not realize, however, is how ingrained company/brand-specific consumption is in the lifestyles of both the legions of chaebol employees and the Korean citizenry at large. An example of "company life", as vividly described by Woo-Cummings:

"The typical Hyundai worker drives a Hyundai car, lives in a Hyundai apartment, gets his mortgage from Hyundai credit, gets health care from a Hyundai hospital, sends his children to school on Hyundai loans or scholarships, and eats his meals at Hyundai cafeteria. If his son graduates out of the blue-collar work force and enters the ranks of well-educated technocratic professionals (which is the goal of every Korean parent), he may well work for Hyundai research and development" (2001 p. 370).

Despite not being a chaebol employee, I was not exempt from this brand-conscious existence while living in Korea. I have lived in a block of Hyundai Apartments that are typically constructed with Hyundai goods by Hyundai (or a closely affiliated partner). Similarly, my friends lived in other chaebol apartment



blocks, such as Daewoo or Samsung. Though it was not obvious at first, I realized I was brushing my teeth with LG toothpaste and eating Samsung peanut butter once I read the fine print on the labels. Employees of any of the chaebols made sure to use an LG cell phone if they worked for LG, even though they expressed such sentiments as, “I would prefer the Samsung one,” with a nod and a wink. In essence, consumption habits in Korea have been intrinsically tied to employment and identity due to the nature of chaebol life. One may imagine, then, at a time when the lives of even greater numbers of the Korean populace were completely tied to chaebol life, how this existence was turned on its head on a large scale with the massive layoffs of the “IMF Crisis.” The financial crisis was highly visible, but the social fallout was perhaps more severe because of how it shook the meanings of work and everyday life.

### **3.6 Ajeossis through adversity**

*The mothers and fathers generation, they would say, “you are the first generation that doesn’t have to worry about food.” After the economic base and infrastructure, they need something to enjoy.*

*Not just American pop music, not just American movies. Pop music was gaining popularity from 1988. American AOL kind of time, and through that setting, men and women could meet and fall in love in that setting. - Michael*

Returning to my encounter with the Ajeossi who owned the PC bang at the beginning of this chapter, I wish to now draw attention to how the dialogue in that PC bang indicated the very factors that led to the rise of online gaming in Korea.

As a result of “tens of thousands of lost jobs and company bankruptcies” during the 1997 economic crisis (D. Y. Jin, 2011 p. 45), those employed by the

financial sector, along with everyone else, needed to deal with their new circumstances. Suddenly without the all-encompassing support that came with company life, many found themselves alone, with little choice but to find a way to become entrepreneurs of one sort or another in order to survive. The number of individual stock investors alone increased from 1.32 million in 1997 to 3.97 million in 2002 (D. Y. Jin, 2010 p. 23). Moreover, the PC bangs gave these stock investors the means to check on their investments without the need to subscribe to broadband services at home.

As other work on Internet cafés have shown, such as Wakeford's (2003) in London spaces, the PC bang in the Korean context afforded many different types of activity. For entrepreneurs at that point, it presented an opportunity to start a business fulfilling an unmet need of connectivity (D. Y. Jin & Chee, 2008). For those who were unemployed and between jobs, the PC bang served as a substitute "office" for people to go every day and night. Some of these people had not told their families about the change in circumstances. For youth, it was a place to access computers, games, and socialize in between school, cram schools (hagwons), and home life.

### **3.7 Domination of PC gaming in Korea**

Due to Korea's colonization by Japan in the early 20th century, as well as its longstanding concern with Japanese cultural invasion, the Korean government had until 1998 banned Japanese cultural products, which included console games, films, and music. With the ban lifted, Korea gradually opened the market to Japanese culture, phasing in previously black market products, with console

games from Japan making their public appearance in the Korean marketplace by 2002 (Lee, 2002).

As discussed earlier, the historical tension between the two countries has proven persistent and difficult to surmount (Hjorth & Chan, 2009; D. Y. Jin & Chee, 2008). For example, Japanese companies who anticipated large profits in the Korean game market found that the endeavour generated disappointing revenue results (D. Y. Jin, 2010 p. 50). With Japanese console makers such as Sony, Nintendo, and Sega experiencing difficulties penetrating the Korean market, Korean firms found an opportunity to develop their own domestic game industry.

While this explanation for the low console use in Korea is completely illogical in terms of the merit of the games, cultural and historical factors determined technology choice in Korea for many gamers.

### **3.8 Education, literacy and effects of prioritizing STEM**

In Korea, it is not difficult to see that education is a priority for most citizens. The messages that education is the highest virtue and value one can have are ubiquitous. Michael Seth's examination of educational development in Korea notes that this has been central to its transformation in the latter part of the twentieth century. Indeed, an examination of how Koreans regard education provides insight into "...the nation's rapid economic, social, and political transformation" (2002 p. 7). Attainment of formal education has been the one thing that most Koreans could control in a chaotic heap of other variables. After

all, “in the absence of a good family background, the amount of formal education is still a factor in social intercourse and political capacity” (Bedeski, 1983 p. 14) in Korea.

The narrative of the bootstrapped individual is common Korean lore and celebrated. Working in tandem with Confucian ideals for education, one may find self-made lawyers like the 16<sup>th</sup> President of Korea, Roh Moo Hyun, who came from very humble beginnings as the youngest son of a farmer. He was part of what Koreans call the “386 generation” who (at the time of inventing the term) were known for being a politically active group in its thirties, who went to university in the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s. His generation was also the first generation to grow up in the most upwardly mobile and prosperous era, becoming the decision-making elite of the country. What is more, Koreans spend the largest share of their income on education globally (Seth, 2002). While I navigated the streets amidst the throngs of buses shuttling students from regular sessions of school, to hagwon, to another hagwon, it was plain to me that an inexhaustible public and private appetite for education, along with the opportunities it afforded was very much alive in the information-centric 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In order to improve Korea’s economy, the government prioritized STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics). While this prioritization occurred at the expense of investment in the critical social sciences and humanities (Seth, 2002), these initiatives contributed to the growth in the industrial and informational capacities of its domestic workforce such that the

nation is a global contender where STEM is concerned, has a strong export economy, and is a veritable hotbed of technological activity due to its domestic talent. “No nation spends a larger share of its income on education” (Seth, 2002 p. 5)

### **3.8.1 The global games industry**

After spending my first month of fieldwork in Korea, I was invited by an American games publisher to participate in a “business matching” conference jointly held by Korean government agencies with the intention of finding global publishers for game developers. Through my voluntary participation in facilitating these dialogues and partnerships, I learned first hand from the Korean company representatives that Korea was utterly saturated with games and game development talent, which was why they were reaching out in their attempts to export games through global partnerships.

At various points throughout the years of researching online games in Korea and participating in government/industry games functions akin to those discussed above, I have formed numerous relationships in those sectors. With the conferences, workshops, and casual meet events acting as the essential “introductions” needed to transact in Korean culture, I was able to nurture these friendship/business networks, and naturally, these assisted greatly in my access to knowledgeable and high-ranking informants who have played a large role in shaping the insights shared in this work.

### 3.8.2 Military exemption policy

*Some of the entertainers in Korea--some singers, they do service and finally it was revealed that they were not working for the company. It's one way of escaping military service.- Michael*

Military service for males in Korea is compulsory. At some point in one's late teens or early twenties, one is expected to give up over two years to this service, which is highly regarded and looked upon as a major transition to male adulthood. So much so that in job applications, one receives advantages over other candidates in the form of extra 'points' and/or consideration for having completed military service. Even celebrities are officially not exempt, and in my interviews/discussions, people cited the saying, loosely translated, "Only a god can escape military service."

Michael imparted to me his first-hand knowledge regarding the military exemption policy:

Florence: So I heard that if you are in a technical university that you can escape military service?

Subject: Yeah. There is a way. Middle sized companies, they can have some specific number of space for Ministry of Service. It is not real service, [but a] kind of artistic way of military service. Most of them are programmers. Game programmers, they work for the company for 3 years and then their service is done.

S: I work with those.... With those who serve military at the game company. And they... applied through their....

F: Ah, network.

S: Yeah.

F: So is it like a personal favour?

S: mm mm... <nod>

Military service presents a break in a Korean male's otherwise rather linear trajectory of life and career development that males elsewhere may not face, and this has implications for the way in which they use online games as a medium of communication. There are a few exceptions to which my informants drew my attention. That is, for talented programmers and engineers accepted into competitive university programs, there is a policy that exempts them from military duty, provided they stay in the country for five years. This policy makes majoring in these STEM disciplines quite attractive and though not solely responsible for the prominence of game development talent, might suggest additional considerations for the pervasiveness of online game culture.<sup>21</sup>

### 3.9 Government policy and industry

*The Korean gaming industry has been marked [by controversy] more than film industry and drama and construction. When government needed, the Ministry of Information and Culture, they all say culture is the key--Film, Games Industry--that Korea has to focus on. The day after, they stand against Internet and games. - Michael*

From a global and local industry standpoints, the dynamics between Korean business and technology policy has presented some fruitful outcomes as well as challenges. On the one hand, state-guided infrastructural initiatives have been instrumental in providing the conditions for success of the Korean online games industry (D. Y. Jin, 2010; D. Y. Jin, 2011; O & Larson, 2011). On the

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<sup>21</sup> According to the 2010 Business Higher Education Forum STEM report (BHEF, 2010 p. 4), 15.6 percent of Bachelor's degrees in the U.S. were awarded in the STEM disciplines, compared with 37.8 percent in South Korea.

other hand, according to my informants, there are distinct challenges in what some in the industry may regard as too much interference, censorship, and micromanagement (such as government demanding that games companies adhere to online curfews or setting development timelines back to accommodate a certain level of violence or gore). This has been especially frustrating to a young industry that has become accustomed to blazing trails and high levels of social and economic mobility relative to older, more established ones.

It is likely that one might find a bit of cognitive dissonance when it comes to the discourse in and around the Korean online gaming technoscape. On the one hand, due to the prominent role in the Korean economy, the government supports online gaming through promotion, facilitation, and sponsorship of its glamorous events. On the other hand, it also sponsors Internet and online game addiction centres that are charged with the mission of curbing online game play.

In my interview with a government-industry manager, when discussing the trade minister responsible for online games, we talked about the economic drivers of such a seemingly contradictory policy stance. Having been born during the Korean War, the Minister was not terribly interested in games, but,

S: "He changed his mind when he saw that the Korean video gaming industry is almost 50% larger than the Korean movie industry. Looking at that, they started thinking wow... this might work. Last year, 2008, we exported something like more than 1 billion USD worth of [online] games all over the world."

An example of a recent industry/policy clash has been termed the "Cinderella" or "shutdown law," which prohibits those under 16 years of age from playing online games from midnight to 6am (J. Yoon, 2011). The policy was



initially conceived of as a strategy to curb online game addiction, but has not exhibited any effectiveness in the months following its implementation in late 2011. There are several reasons for this, which link back to youth online habits. First, the need to log onto websites in Korea using one's National Identification Number was circumvented long ago for doing sundry tasks ranging from pornography to the online grocery shopping which a number of expats wished to do. Those who are underage would simply use fake numbers or those of family members, rendering the prohibition ineffective. Second, the law only applies to select games oriented towards younger audiences, and not the most popular ones. Third, the law might have actually backfired and driven any activity by young people further underground. The unintended consequences are numerous for a law that was initially intended to exhibit a governmental proactive stance when it came to issues of Internet addiction.

### **3.10 Online habits and lifestyles in tandem**

*"I don't need to go to the bank all the time because I can use the Internet. I can buy things over the Net, I don't have to go to stores all the time. More than 50% of what I purchase is through the Internet. Diapers, everything. Negatively [blushing], I'm a gamer..." – Seoul resident, middle-aged male*

This chapter provided the reader with an idea of the complex foundations upon which online gaming came to be built in Korea. It also highlighted the mediating role of social relations, including notions of Confucianism, recent pivotal events in Korea's global history, and the continuing struggles within.

Understanding a nation by examining one dimension of its development is problematic in and of itself, without modelling one's own technological policies and development in the hopes of replicating such rapid adoption and prosperity. I seek to argue that above and beyond the context of technology and policy, it is imperative to closely look at the social conditions in this specific rise of technology use in order to gain a more complete picture of the specificities of Korea's transformation to learn: what is/is not replicable, and what should not be replicated.

Having experienced household life while living in Seoul, it was plain to me that the relative convenience of doing things over the Internet coincided with many incentives: sites enabled online ordering of groceries and general household items along with free delivery to homes. To a number of Koreans I observed and talked with, a notable benefit for them was that they could be more selective about when to go out into the press of overcrowded urban environments, which are often noisy and unpleasant. For the resident Korean population, the domestic conveniences of broadband enabled services are numerous.

Not just to do with convenience, the everyday affordances of the Internet act in tandem with the prominence of PC gaming. It is also important to note the history of censorship and relatively recent restrictions on live performance culture, which included the cancellation of performances not deemed appropriate (for any reason, including being foreign) (Republic of South Korea, 2001). Laws such as the "Public Performance Act" have influenced the attitudes regarding

possibilities for entertainment choices in Korea. Online gaming has thus provided an opportunity for people to partake in communal activities in public spaces in the form of eSports spectatorship, PC bangs, and the like.

### **3.10.1 The elephant in the room**

Naturally, it would not be ethnographic fieldwork without more uncomfortable topics brought up by informants. Many academic Internet studies do not discuss the role of pornography due to potential taboos, but to ignore the impact this aspect has had on the social shaping of these technologies would be to provide a less complete picture and misrepresent human behaviour online (Halavais, 2006). As broadband access has played a major role in the adoption of PC gaming in Korea, it has also fostered a whole set of other activities in tandem. During a more candid moment of my interview with Michael, his comments indicated to me that both pornography and games of many types (gambling, casual, MMORPG, etc) should be thought of as part of one technocultural landscape carved out by similar affordances.

S: Kind of like AOL, HiTel or KT, Koreans spend time online... Online games were popular... and another thing was nudity-type things.

F: Oh, pornography?

S: Yeah. That was a major driver. Users get together in an Internet café, and that was how the public was exposed to broadband. Download, what would take overnight, in less than an hour. Of course it is illegal, like music, but... that time, Internet was a big entertainment feature.

In terms of what contributed to the popularity of online culture, he naturally pointed to the nation's broadband penetration rate, along with advertising and aggressive governmental promotion of what can be done with the Internet to the general public.

Michael noted that gambling games also played a prominent role in creating user demand for Internet services.

S: Another thing that made Korean online games successful was Internet bubble time was in Korea at the same time... Internet starts with Hangame. The Korean game; poker kind of game. Hangame was the first one to try that kind of experiment.

Unlike Hangame, Korean Web services like the recommendation-based search engine Naver and Daum community portals only focused on improving their advertising models and did not experience the same level of success, though Naver attempted to use Adwords before Google.

S: Hangame did well with free games but at that time Hangame that was the only way we have to go. Otherwise we have to find another one.

Indeed, the overarching culture, social structure, infrastructure, and policy galvanize to reinforce gaming and its place in mainstream Korean culture, as I shall discuss in the following chapter.

## 4: GAMING: MAINSTREAM YOUTH PRACTICES

*“So we’re going tonight?” I asked, in a text message to Han.*

*“Ye ye. See you at the subway station. Exit 2.”*

*Tonight was going to be all about a games tournament and I was excited. Han said I would be able to meet and talk with his good friends there, a couple of whom were self-described online game addicts.*

*Once I got myself to the station to meet Han, we walked to a coffee shop to meet with one of his best friends from high school, with whom I could chat about his online gaming habits. Over coffee, we were able to chat casually, and then do a longer interview with the questions I had prepared for gamers, to which Han’s friend responded with enthusiasm and, at times, confusion. I started to get an idea of what was appropriate to ask in the Korean context, and which questions simply did not seem to apply here. Clearly, the Internet café research I had done in North America could not just be rehashed here. After a while, another friend joined us and we all left together for some pre-games dinner.*

*We showed up for dinner at a barbecue restaurant. We took off our shoes at the front and shuffled across the laminate floor, through the greasy blue smoke permeating the air from the other tables, to sit at one of many large rectangular tables. As we waited for the other friends to show up, the Ajumma<sup>22</sup> brought*

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<sup>22</sup> The middle-aged female equivalent of the male “Ajeossi.”

bottles of water, plastic cups, colourful side dishes, and soju<sup>23</sup>. One by one, our table filled with friends who pulled up their cushions to the casual feast. I was definitely the outsider in so many ways, but particularly because these were friends who were in a collective 'inner circle,' having known one another often since primary school. Their level of comfort with one another was clear in their ease of interaction. Despite my status as the outsider, Han's introduction to the group allowed me instant rapport, and save for a few moments of shyness, my foreign presence seemed promptly forgotten and replaced by the bustle of the smoking, crackling, popping of cooking meat along with calls of "ONE SHOT!"

After everyone paid their 10,000KRW<sup>24</sup> share of dinner, a couple of the fellows had an intense craving for ice cream to offset the spicy meat and kimchi. So, all of us went to the corner grocery store and bought either cigarettes or frozen confections from the Ajeossi. Standing outside the shop smoking or eating ice cream, we chatted and then gradually made our way to the PC bang.

"We are here!" Han announced. The PC bang was quite non-descript, with a small lit sign indicating its presence in B1 (basement level). We trudged down a flight of steep stairs, and opened a frosted glass door to a veritable emporium of PCs in rows, games posters and paraphernalia, a couple zone, and a snack bar.

Being relatively early in the evening post-dinner, we were able to commandeer an entire section for our "LAN party." This had been what I was

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<sup>23</sup> A Korean beverage

<sup>24</sup> Approximately \$10 USD

*waiting for. I was excited to play with a large group of self-described “game addicts” in Korea and got ready for a rousing night of participant observation with StarCraft, which I had experience playing from when it first came out in North America years prior.*

*As my Terran base was destroyed quicker each time, it became clear that I was clearly outmatched. I was a bit disappointed how quickly the game was over for me, even though I had braced myself for “pwnage.” Not to be put off, I took the opportunity to observe the others as they yelled their intentions back and forth, joking and trash talking. I also spent time observing activity in other parts of the PC bang, and playing other games when Han or the others opted out of a round.*

*From experience as well as what I had been told, going from place to place throughout the night (as opposed to just sitting in one place for dinner, dessert, etc) provides the chance for people to excuse themselves from the outing and go home or to some other engagement. To leave in the middle of a ‘round’ would typically be considered less polite. After the group had their fill of gaming, we all went to a chicken baengi. In a bright yellow and blue stall, we sat down on stools around pitchers of Cass beer and a couple of mounds of fried chicken. This was the time when stories from military service were traded and those who were not yet attached could be playfully jibed about not having found girlfriends yet. As it was still a “work night” for those in the party with employment, the night wound to a conclusion and we said our goodbyes.*

*“Text me when you get home so I know you’re ok.” Han shouted after me.*

*I did not fully realize it at the time, but that was the night years ago that my network in Korea truly exploded.*

## **4.1 Chapter Overview**

To call gaming an addiction is to woefully misrepresent the prominent role this medium plays in the everyday life and culture in Korea. Having discussed factors that laid the foundation for the rise of games, this chapter now shifts gears to examine specific instances of how gaming interacts with the local culture, social structure, and infrastructure. The insights in this chapter are informed by my fieldwork in Korea.

The online gaming culture that has evolved in Korea for the last decade has been fascinating for me as an ethnographer. The megacity of Seoul, where I spent the majority of my time in the country, has been an especially rich and dynamic site for this research. I consider myself most fortunate to have been present at various crucial moments in its evolution, partaking in overwhelming spectacle, and experiencing the mundane minutiae of navigating everyday life.

Through the narratives I collected from others as well as through the process of reckoning with my own reality of living and operating within Korean power structures for an extended period of time, I became sensitized to three main themes: 1) Culture 2) Social Structure 3) Infrastructure. To phrase things in terms of McLuhan, these three themes encompassed what I wish to state about the occurrence of gaming as a Figure on Korean Ground. By far the most complicated work has been in the weaving of ethnographic insight with an



understanding of the local media ecology. This chapter is indeed the richest and most rewarding to write for bringing my original contribution to readers, as I could not have obtained these insights without having been deeply engaged with local residents in this particular Korean context.

#### **4.1.1 Culture**

This chapter describes how people navigated the cultural intricacies of their day-to-day lives, where online gaming and technology in general figured prominently.

Why has gaming been the object of derision much like other forms of media controversies? In the end, is the distinction (a la Bourdieu) (Bourdieu, 1984) between what is and is not a real and important communication medium merely a subjective judgment based upon high/low culture and ideology? For example, why is a sport like golf typically met with respect, but online gaming met with strange looks and chuckles? As Williams writes, (Attallah, 2002; Williams, 1974) aesthetic judgments as to what constitutes "good" and "bad" have been known to create hierarchical relationships between the culture of the affluent and the culture of the working classes and those hierarchies replicate and prescribe how people act within these institutions. Unlike most other places in the world, games are not merely the province of a stereotypically marginal community in Korea. As indicated by games scholars focusing on Korea (Hjorth & Chan, 2009; D. Y. Jin & Chee, 2008; D. Y. Jin, 2010 p.60), online games shine in the spectacle of Korean mainstream mass culture in the form of television shows,

celebrities, and as an everyday activity that intersects pursuits of work and leisure.

At present, the PC Bang is a gathering place where youth do a wide range of social activities such as meet friends, have dates, or blow off steam from a demanding school day. These emergent practices that toggled between online and offline spaces were very intriguing in how these spaces resembled Venn diagrams more than spheres of existence that were separate from one another. In the couple zones of PC bangs, sharing a loveseat with one's date could be done while playing StarCraft, instant messaging, or shopping online. The PC bang could serve as a meeting place for an hour or two between schooling, or as a rallying point between activities during the night. Even in the hours while the subway system was closed, one could find a comfortable spot in a leather chair at a computer and surf the Web, sleep, or eat something until daylight.

Second, there is a celebrity culture surrounding professional gamers, who have very lucrative (albeit relatively short) careers in online game competitions. This activity is often referred to as Pro-gaming or eSports (D. Y. Jin, 2010; T. L. Taylor, 2012). South Korea's mainstream game culture became especially known internationally when game players like Guillaume Patry, moved from his home in Canada to South Korea specifically for the chance to make a living competing in these online game tournaments. In a now classic interview with Geartest.com, he confirmed that he was living the dream of many aspiring eSports athletes: he was winning thousands of dollars every tournament, dating supermodels, rubbing

shoulders with celebrities who also played video games, and gaining acceptance for his gaming in Korea when he could not elsewhere.

"There are 25,000 PC game rooms ["bangs"] in South Korea. It started out with pool, then karaoke and five years ago, game rooms," Guillaume said as he explained South Korean gaming culture. "In high schools, everyone knows who's best in math and StarCraft." The rankings for StarCraft are posted right next to the academic results in South Korean schools, he said.

Guillaume's eyes light up when he describes the difference between the popular acceptance of gaming in South Korea compared to the rest of the world. Outside of South Korea, gaming as a profession is largely unknown, and gaming is often viewed as something for socially maladjusted teenage boys, he says. In South Korea it's a different story (Geartest.com, 2004).

While the number of PC bangs have since dwindled due to the emergence of Wi-Fi at coffee shops and increased portability of sophisticated personal computing devices, this interview is still particularly enlightening for why Korea is a particularly compelling case for the study of mainstream online gaming culture. These events problematize the dogmatic categories of online and offline, as the gaming culture in Korea clearly illustrates the porous nature of those boundaries.

Third, I attempt to theorize the interpersonal dynamics afforded by the role technology plays in the Korean cultural landscape. In his book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1994), McLuhan employs the Greek myth of Narcissus as a metaphor to describe what happens to someone experiencing the extension of themselves afforded by a particular medium. According to McLuhan, the myth is powerful for how it illustrates the fascination men [sic] feel, "by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves" (McLuhan, 1994, p. 41). This is exemplified in Korean media ecology by how the

youth can be found communicating by way of online gaming avatars (Pearce et al., 2009), such as “minihompys” in Cyworld, which is a Korean social networking site predating Facebook, and doing any variety of activities on their mobile phones, which are increasing in prominence through smartphone usage.

McLuhan uses Greek myth of Narcissus to talk about the numbness reflected in ‘narcosis.’ The myth explains that the youth was so captivated by his own reflection in the water because he thought it to be another person. He stayed there so long he grew roots, and that gave us the Narcissus flower that grows beside water in the present day. McLuhan connects this myth with his own media theory in that this extension of himself by this mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the “servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image” (M. McLuhan, 1994, p. 41). This concept is also discussed at length in Onufrijchuk (1998). Once Narcissus adapted to the extension of himself, he became a closed system. With such a myth directly concerned with a fact of human experience, the metaphor of Narcissus seems the beginning of a more reasonable explanation for the heavy use of media than its typical dismissal as a medical “addiction.” The Millennial Generation (Pew Research Center, 2010)<sup>25</sup> has particularly been publicly criticized for their “Narcissism,” and exhibitionism in their use of online media (Conger, 2011). Yet, it would be unfortunate to accept this label without an understanding of possible theories of media use.

Having observed the types of pressure Korean youth are under in matters of educational achievement (Seth, 2002) and familial expectations, I gravitated

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<sup>25</sup> For the study, those born between 1980-1998, though the term is often synonymous with Generation Y, which has less precise dates ranging from the late 1970s to early 2000s.

towards this theoretical understanding of this environment that, to me, resembled a pressure cooker. In my candid conversations with Korean parents, they would often bemoan the state of education in Korea as being too achievement oriented, how they were spending too much money on supplementary schooling, and how things might be different for their children without the competition parents feel amongst each other regarding their children's achievement. From the point of view of those embroiled in the system, being shuttled from lesson to lesson, any relief from the pressure cooker system, however brief, would be savored amidst an overall ethos of "just survive." The 'numbness' of Narcissus that McLuhan describes presents an alternative understanding for media use that places the user at the heart of a type of social 'shock.' "For if Narcissus is numbed by his self-amputated image, there is a very good reason for the numbness... a person suddenly deprived of loved ones and a person who drops a few feet unexpectedly will both register shock" (M. McLuhan, 1994, p. 44). He maintains that shock induces a generalized numbness or an increased threshold to all types of perception, and, as a result the "victim" of this shock seems immune to pain or sense.

McLuhan asserts that it is the Narcissus-style continuous embrace of our own technology in daily use that places the user in a role of subliminal awareness and numbness in facing the extension of ourselves. As a consequence, people easily become servomechanisms of the very technologies of which they feel in control.

When a person extends oneself, there is a resultant amplification in the sense of that extension. The Narcissus myth accounts for the numbness of blocking of perception as a type of self-defense mechanism to allow the nervous system to bear such amplification and extension. McLuhan argues that Narcissus' image is a self-amputation or extension induced by "irritating pressures." However, as a counter-irritant, the image in turn produces a generalized numbness or shock unrecognizable to Narcissus. "Self-amputation forbids self-recognition" (M. McLuhan, 1994, p. 43).

McLuhan then attempts to draw further parallels between the nervous system and media use. He posits that the body, as a group of sustaining and protective organs for the central nervous system, serves as a buffer against sudden variations of stimulus in one's environment. He goes on to say that sudden social failure or shame is a shock that some may "take to heart" or that may cause muscular disturbance in general, signalling for the person to withdraw from the threatening situation (M. McLuhan, 1994). As pseudo-scientific as this line of reasoning may seem, it does pose a reasonable metaphor for the social reasons as to why people may 'retreat' into unhealthy or destructive forms of media use. It is therefore interesting to explore how these concepts may apply to the examination of online gaming in everyday Korean life, explored in this chapter.

#### **4.1.2 Social Structure**

Does Neo-Confucianism affect the Korean Techno-Cultural environment, and if so, how? In a Confucian society such as Korea's, age is privileged. The

games industry is somewhere that Korean youth can, and have, thrived. This success is indicative of how age and class structures are regarded in Korea and are worth exploring here.

As Robert Bedeski (1983 p.17) suggests, the transference of Korean experiences to other societies would be imprudent, as the "...society is comprised of various ethnic groups to create a single linguistic and cultural entity. During the period of historical integration, Korea also adapted Confucianism and Buddhism from China." John Lie's critical work on the political economy of Korea asserts that, "there was nothing obvious or predictable about the path of South Korean development. It is a singular story that cannot be explained by any general theory of national development and offers no simple model for other developing countries"(Lie, 1998 p. viii). This aspect is important to consider as other countries examine Korean models for direct application to their own national policies (O & Larson, 2011 p. xiv).

First, family home dynamics in Korean cities necessitate that the majority of socialization occurs outside the home. Privacy is a premium. This has given rise to the 'bang culture' (room culture), which facilitates activities away from the home, and away from critical prying eyes of family.

Second, online games as a medium of communication serve as a hierarchy leveller. This is akin to playing a round of golf with the boss, but in most cases being allowed to beat the boss. Feenberg's (1995 p. 198) examination of Kawabata's famous novel, *The Master of Go*, vividly details how gaming and social structure can intersect—that a person's social rank colours the

interactions on and off the gameboard (or on and off the playing field as the case may be). Feenberg's study shows an interesting parallel to the Korean context in terms of the fluidity of online and offline interactions.

Third, gaming has provided an economically convenient activity for Korean youth, for whom there is a limited set of affordable leisure activities. Due to the low cost of PC bangs at about \$1 an hour, they work well with student budgets when even a visit to the coffee shop costs at least \$2 or more. The corresponding increase in young people's literacy in computer games and technology also fuels their dreams of careers in the domestic games industry, including the possibility of gaming at a professional level. As mentioned earlier, these opportunities are much more likely in Korea than in any other country in the world.

According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) figures, Korea is number one in the world for time spent at work. This has immense implications for how communication technology is used, as work and play are blurred. Indeed, workers in South Korea have the longest work hours in the world. The average South Korean works 2,390 hours each year, according to the OECD. This is over 400 hours longer than the next longest-working country and 34% more hours than the average in the United States (1777). In Canada, the average of hours worked per year is 1717. An average workweek in South Korea is 44 hours or longer. Many people start their day at 8am and end at around 7pm or later, often having dinner before returning to work. Until legislation in 2004 that virtually abolished the six-day workweek in



chaebols, South Korea was the only country in the OECD that worked Saturdays. South Korea and Japan are the only countries where death by work, or "karoshi" (in Korean: 과로사), is a recognized phenomenon.

The interaction between work and play has been significant in Korean culture, particularly from agrarian traditions like flying kites between toiling in farmer's fields. It would appear highly likely, given my experience with Korean work days, that the seamlessness between work and play practices has contributed to the notion that Koreans are particularly addicted to gaming due to hours clocked. Compared to Calvinist notions of the separate nature of work and leisure, the Korean practices of interspersing the personal with the professional seems rather normalized.

#### **4.1.3 Infrastructure/Policy**

South Korea has achieved the highest broadband penetration in the world through deliberate investment initiatives. It is one of the most densely populated nations in the world, with 10 million living in Seoul (and 25 million living in the National Capital Area), out of a total of 50 million living within a 100,210 square kilometre area. Much of the terrain is hyper-urban, and green space is scarce, as is general public space. Internet cafes, malls, and other commodified meeting places compensate for the scarcity of community space.

This section discusses findings associated with the infrastructural affordances of online gaming in Korea, and potential policy implications arising from the investigation. First, as the previous chapter on the rise of Korean

gaming explicates, there were many contributing factors that created the current information infrastructure in contemporary Korea. It is not only the information infrastructure that is of note, but how people navigate the everyday instances of this infrastructure as it intertwines with the previous sections of culture and social structure. Second, I shall discuss how these spatial factors (modern urbanity) and social upheaval have been leveraged in ways that are not readily apparent to a cursory analysis of online gaming in Korea. Family, economic, and geopolitical pressures (to name a few) all provide insight into the function of gaming vis a vis a type of McLuhanesque retribalization. Third, the various strategies and patterns of youth as they move through these technologies shall be discussed as the chapter wraps up.

As others (Bedeski, 1983 p. 11) have suggested, Korea is an example of "...how US defense of a small and threatened nation has provided a margin of security so that the country could take advantage of opportunities in world trade and the free exchange of technology, and build a totally new infrastructure." Moreover, as with many Asian countries, the modernization efforts have mixed with a relatively recent massive restructuring by way of Japanese colonialism and war.

## **4.2 Korean gamers and sociality**

Alongside a growing awareness and respect for media scholarship has been the proliferation of work decrying the displacement of a greater public welfare, health, civic engagement (Putnam, 2000) and general well being by one form of electronic media such as the television (1985). The online videogame

has garnered much attention as a potentially 'dangerous' and diabolically 'addictive' medium (Clark & Scott, 2009). Analyses that focus on the specific medium more than the environment in which it interfaces with people largely obscure the bigger picture of how societies responds to electronic media and act upon knee-jerk suppositions.

One may note this trend in other forms of media such as print, but most notably television in communication studies. Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) asserted that because of electronic media, physical location no longer plays an important role in shaping our experiences and behaviors, nor does the physical presence of people "with" us. Although Meyrowitz concentrated primarily on television, his work is typical of a particular perspective that sees the impact of electronic media on society as unidirectional as opposed to mutually co-constituted.

#### **4.2.1 Global village – the end of space in networked societies?**

Cultural artifacts such as television or videogames can have different ascribed meanings depending on cultural context. Throughout this thesis, one may see how the matters of physical and cultural embodiment do indeed matter. We are not, as some would wish, "post-geographical" nor have national borders become less important. One might argue that national divisions play an even larger role in differentiating our modes of production in vastly different media

ecologies.<sup>26</sup> As Franklin (1999) asserts throughout her work, technologies are developed and used within particular social, economic, and political contexts.

In my own work, I have championed the need to assess the culture in which media is created and the context in which it is used in order to arrive at valuable insights about people's experiences. As digital games are increasingly recognized as a growing pastime and mode of social expression, it becomes that much more crucial to contribute to the dialogue regarding the interplay between technology and the development of human relationships.

Brian Sutton-Smith (1997 p. 120) has asserted, "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." His work has been notable for putting forward the view that the rhetoric 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. Phrased another way, in order 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. In the Korean case, it is very much the case that contrary to general media portrayal and popular belief at global and local levels, the reasons for participating in online gaming are diverse, many of which

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<sup>26</sup> For example, one may look at the contexts of social media use during the Arab Spring in early 2011 or how Facebook is facing legal action in Europe under the accusation that it violates local privacy laws (Pidd, 2011).

go beyond the games in and of themselves. The reasons implicate a whole host sociocultural factors that I have and will point out in this chapter.

### **4.3 Figures on Korean ground**

We are just beginning to figure out how technologies have been affecting the daily lives of individuals within a society such as Korea's and vice versa. No longer able to remain aloof and dissociated in our global village, engagement with the exotic 'others' of media has instead become deep engagement with global counterparts who may affect our daily lives on a regular basis more than even next-door neighbours might. There is an emergent body of research in the area of Korean media (Hjorth, 2006; D. Y. Jin, 2011; Jouhki, 2008; K. Yoon, 2006) that examines the massive social upheaval being experienced on this particular Ground.

McLuhan showed his concern by noting that the new media and technologies that we use to amplify and extend ourselves constitute, "huge collective surgery carried out on the social body with complete disregard for antiseptics" (1994 p. 64). Current media scholarship concerning Korea is only beginning to assess the social fallout inherent in a time of both mental and physical national flux, acceleration, and disruption.

Research on the appropriation of technology in Korea forces media scholars to study not only the content, but "...the specific medium and cultural matrix within which the particular medium operates" (M. McLuhan, 1994 p. 11). That is, in this case, 'form' trumps 'content' and "the medium is the message."

The technological Figures on South Korean Ground are of particular interest for this thesis, particularly because of the rapid transformation from a primarily agrarian, to industrial, to information economy that has only occurred within the last fifty years since the Korean War (1950-1953). In the last decade, the emergence of nationwide broadband Internet access has only quickened the pace of technological change in an already frenetically adapting sociocultural milieu. In many ways, youth have had to reimagine their communities in unprecedented ways.

#### **4.3.1 Togetherness in context**

Most of the discourse surrounding addiction to technology, in the way video game players are viewed as “patients” to be drugged (F. Chee & Smith, 2005), or attendees at Internet addiction camps like the Korean “Jump Up Internet Rescue School” (Fackler, 2007), individualizes the relationship to the offending ‘substance’ (or medium). This viewpoint comes at the expense of viewing the situation as a cluster of mediated social relations that facilitates human connection. As with many other communication technologies like television (Postman, 1985), online games have been regarded as frivolities, and users guilty of isolating themselves from ‘real’ social interaction. Moreover, excessive media use has been implicated in a perceived lack of civic engagement, as in the case of American society written about by Putnam (2000). This discourse privileges offline and established activities as the only means of true communication. One may observe this in the discourse of “virtual” versus “real” life, as it implies that online activities are somehow not real. Using what

Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004) asserted in their viewpoint that online communities are “imaginary” social constructs, I would say that in the Korean case, embodiment still persists and is creating community both online and offline, most often as one.

Prior to heading to Korea, I had conducted North American studies of gamer culture and what Vieta, Smith, and I called the “Interactional Self” (F. Chee, Vieta, & Smith, 2006). This study used sociological phenomenology forwarded by Alfred Schutz (Schutz, 1962; 1966; Schutz, 1970) to argue that users are one self rather than separate, fragmented presences between the online and offline. Qualitative inquiries have done much to advance the perspective that online spaces present similar qualities to those of offline communal spaces (Wellman & Gulia, 1999), namely Third Places as termed by Oldenburg (1997) as used in (Kendall, 2002; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). According to Oldenburg (1997), third places are those places that are neither work nor home, but provide psychological comfort and support. Although he 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 and other national contexts. These are liminal spaces between online and offline worlds. This perspective is found in Nardi’s field study of online gaming in Chinese Internet cafes, (Nardi, 2010) and in Lindtner and Szablewicz (2011). This chapter contributes to the argument that the culture associated with online gaming is inextricable from the offline cultures in which its users live.

#### 4.4 Korean Narcissus numbness

McLuhan notes that technological innovations do not necessarily introduce absolutely new elements into human society, but may still accelerate and enlarge the scale of previous human functions which in turn create new lifestyles (work and leisure). In no other country has this acceleration been more concentrated and apparent than Korea. The pace of technological adoption, as evidenced by Koreans' many uses of information and communication technologies in their myriad forms, has served to create a sort of Narcissus-like numbness society-wide. Perhaps the rapid social transformation in all aspects of material and social life has caused Koreans to cling even harder to the technologies implemented along its own path to the Information Superhighway.<sup>27</sup>

In a nation of nearly 50 million people, over half play online games in the form of popular MMORPGs like the iterations of World of Warcraft/Aion/Lineage, RTS genres like StarCraft, or online poker/GoStop (which are also counted as online games in statistical reports) (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2006; Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2007; Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2008). This figure is overrepresented in proportion of population by the younger broadband Internet generation accustomed to these modes of communication. These same users also likely possess a mobile phone and Cyworld "minihompy," which is a personal profile webpage preceding the North American Facebook phenomenon by several years, but with similar multi-faceted modes of social networking capabilities. In the last few years, Facebook profiles have also gained in

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<sup>27</sup> According to informal discussions amongst academic Korean Studies scholars, former U.S. Vice-President Al Gore is credited with promoting this term in Korea.



popularity, according to the Koreans who told me, “Cyworld is for Korean friends, Facebook is for foreign friends.”

While it is easy to fall into the seductive trap of recounting the sheer numbers of Korean social media and gaming users that one may observe in Hjørth (2006), it has been intriguing to consider what keeps this momentum of media use going in Korea. McLuhan’s assertion is that various physical and social therapies are forms of communication, and whether they are physical or social, may serve as a counter-irritant that aids in the maintenance of equilibrium with the body’s nervous system. Whereas pleasure in the form of recreation, such as sports, entertainment, or narcotics serves as a counter-irritant, an antidote for irritating forces, true comfort is the removal of irritants. “Both pleasure and comfort are strategies of equilibrium for the central nervous system,” (M. McLuhan, 1994, p. 43) but when it is impossible to remove the irritant, people retreat into their reserves of counter-irritants. Along with that, “any invention or technology is an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies, and such extension also demands new ratios or new equilibriums among the other organs and extensions of the body” (1994, p. 45). Korean youth are certainly dealing with many ‘irritating pressures’ that may be driving them to the metaphorical side of the water in order to assume the same position as Narcissus staring at his mediated reflection. As I noted earlier, there is the presence of familial obligations, pressure to be the top student in school (many youth are in some type of tutelage from sun up to sun down, every day), and general peer pressure to conform. I marvelled at how aptly McLuhan described the stresses and

pressure of the type that I encountered Korean youth operating both within and under while gaming: "...And we often create artificial situations that rival the irritations and stresses of real life under controlled conditions of sport and play" (1994 p. 42). For example, the ubiquitous PC game rooms in Korea extend and expand upon the physical spaces and opportunities in which youth may engage with media or evoke a notion of community centre. In most other places around the globe, PC game rooms and the chances to access broadband Internet are much harder to come by (F. Chee, de Castell, & Taylor, 2011). Thus, "it is the accumulation of group pressures and irritations that prompt invention and innovation as counter-irritants" (1994 p. 47). Using McLuhan's Narcissus as a metaphor, one may interpret the way Korean youth use these technologies to both ameliorate and perpetuate the various irritants that are only increasing in contemporary Korea.

#### **4.5 PC bang culture and why games are anything but anti-social**

The previous chapter pointed to how Korea's unique history, limited geographical area, and governmental support have encouraged the development of a sophisticated broadband infrastructure, gaming culture, and the PC bang. In this section, I will explain how the PC bang became a vital centre of activity in Korean neighbourhoods, serving many purposes, including compensating for services one would typically think belonged to other institutions.

Due to their relatively high 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). These places often contain people of like mind and like interests. In Korea, such third places become especially important because entertaining one's friends is rarely done in the home due in large part to spatial and cultural reasons.

At a third place such as a PC bang, one can choose from a myriad of activities including 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 warm and safe 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. Where other arguments (Kendall, 2002; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006) concerning specific games suggest that MMORPGs and other online hangouts are a site that encompass behaviours warranting their categorizations as a "Third Place," I argue that the online games themselves are yet more of a "fourth place," especially when situated within the third places of PC bangs where embodiment still reigns as a chief determinant of action. Though there has been some debate about this conceptualization (Jonsson, 2010), the evidence I have encountered in the contextual studies I have carried out point out that the games themselves are often not the prime motivator for people to go to a PC bang, and engagement continues to be primarily determined by one's conditions of embodiment. There is no one single 'cause' of excessive online gaming if one thinks of it as a means by which people

communicate; nor are the reasons for the activity a universal, cross-cultural physical “condition” diagnosable in biomedical terms.

As mentioned earlier, PC bangs are typically very popular as places to go because of their cheap rates and accessibility. Every neighbourhood in Seoul averages about one PC bang per block. When one looks out at the cacophony of densely built structures, the ubiquitous PC bangs are easy to spot. It is interesting to note that the rate for PC bangs was substantially more expensive (about \$10.00 U.S. per hour) in the late 1990s. As availability and competition in PC bangs has increased, prices have decreased. In recent years, the rate has generally stabilized around the \$1.00 (U.S.) per hour mark, with some places offering discounts at nonpeak times, with even greater discounts for ‘members.’ These rates are much more affordable to young people on a limited income than that of other, more expensive “bangs” with other activities, such as “noraebangs” (karaoke room), “DVD bangs” (movie watching room), or board game bangs, which are at least \$2-3 more expensive per hour.

At the street level, one may often see multiple PC bangs within one building on different floors, indicated by flashing neon signs. “PC방” rarely exist on the first floor, as those are usually occupied by other businesses such as service shops. Thinking back to the times I would explore different PC bangs, I remember venturing up or down tiny, dingy, often dodgy looking stairs and passing through a tinted glass door with that little bit of trepidation and anxiety of what could possibly lay in wait, as I have learned over the years that the conditions are quite variable. At times the cafes can be comprised of five

computer stations, or more than a hundred with deluxe executive chairs. The air can be oppressively thick and blue with cigarette smoke, or clear and sweetly perfumed depending on the type of cafe. The equipment may be old or state of the art. I have gone into 'low-spec' cafes that favour MMORPGs with lower hardware requirements, and state-of-the-art cafes capable of running the latest and most demanding games, such as FPS (first-person shooter) games. If the PC bang has adequate capacity, it may contain a specially demarcated "couple zone" in which the stations are two computers in front of a "couple chair," in the form of a loveseat or expanded chair without a separating armrest. The section, usually darker, is designed for dating couples in need of socially acceptable proximity bonding in a quasi-public environment. The general area may have a snack bar, varying in size. Standard items available tend to be oriented around basic sustenance, such as vitamin drinks, water, soft drinks, bags of chips, cookies, and instant noodle soup bowls (ramyun).

Upon entry, one can get a plastic card from the clerk at the front counter for paying by the hour, though in recent times PC bangs have favoured memberships and payment tied to specific users while providing incentives like discounted or bulk hourly rates.<sup>28</sup> At the computer, one will be prompted to enter either the card number, or more often than not, one's membership number in order to activate the billing time for that computer station. Especially perturbing to me as well as other foreigners was that many transactions online require a National Identification Number (NIN), often necessary to gain access to even the

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<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, this has implications for security, data collection, and invoicing.

most basic Korean websites, including retail. To Korean citizens, this number usually presents greater convenience and less friction, but to the interlopers like myself, it was the difference between being self-sufficient and an “alien.” Upon leaving, the clerk punches in the number of the card, and the tab is settled.<sup>29</sup>

#### **4.6 Function of the PC bang**

The PC bang in Korea has become an institution that serves a number of different purposes. By being open 24 hrs a day, 7 days a week, they serve functions that may compensate for shortcomings in needs fulfillment in other contexts. For example, according to K. Stewart (2004 p. 62), “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.” In my own field observations and interviews in Korea, I have seen media use and less formal modes of interaction with a wider range of peers than might otherwise occur at home or school. The participation of young Koreans in online games represented one facet of a broader community and way of life.

That Korean youth are spending their hours at PC bangs makes a lot more sense when one realizes the reasons why. Rather than dismiss the participants as “game addicts,” I present a few examples of the various motives one might have for spending a lot of time gaming at PC game rooms or

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<sup>29</sup> Unlike North American subscriptions where one has to activate or deactivate accounts such as in World of Warcraft, for those whose subscriptions have lapsed in games like AION, it is possible to log onto one’s account from a PC bang and pick up where one left off.

otherwise. It will become apparent that those motivations have very little to do with which game is on the screen.

## 4.7 Family Pressures

*“Why would anyone want to see my home? It’s like my closet.”  
- Korean informant, middle aged, male*

A particularly memorable gamer I interviewed was a university student in his late twenties, who made a point to say that he spent as much time outside of his home as possible and that his reasons for going to PC bangs were not just about the games. His everyday routine would be to go out to dinner with his friends; go to a PC bang in his neighbourhood; and, while there, play a variety of games, including Lineage, StarCraft, and Kart Rider. Upon arriving home around midnight when his parents were asleep, he would go online in his room, and play for another few hours. One might assume that playing games in a PC bang meant that the player had no other access to computer games, but more often than not the players I encountered do have home computers. Why then, would someone pay money to play the same games outside? The reasons range from exhibiting one’s gaming skill, to various private/public behaviours in the forms of online dating/gambling/daytrading, but a major reason this player cited was that he could smoke at PC bangs, whereas at home he could not, as his parents frowned upon that habit. Two other major reasons were his lack of “comfort” in his own home and deliberate avoidance of encounters with his parents. Comfort, as he sees it, is most likely his ability to be himself amidst friends, smoke elsewhere and escape the constraints of intergenerational friction he feels living

with his parents. Although things are changing slowly to reflect Western models of behaviour, 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 other informants, are rather typical attitudes of Korean youth living with their parents. For him as well as others, the PC bang was a way to escape the various familial constraints of his domestic environment.

Another informant actually talked about his lack of desire to play online games, but that he did so in order to spend time with his friends, which was further evidence that motivations do not rest solely on the desire to play games for their own sake. One interviewee would go to the PC bang most weekdays after drinking and spend about three hours playing StarCraft, despite having access to good computers at home. He bemoaned the fact that he found the skill demands of StarCraft too difficult and that as long as playing a game was a condition of spending time with his friends, he would really have preferred playing simpler games. Whether they were 'only casual', 'recovering game addicts', or 'not gamers,' those I interviewed still spent time in PC bangs and reported spending at least an average of five hours per week in games in order to be with others and maintain bonds with their peer groups. As Sutton-Smith states, "It has been shown that sometimes players play primarily to be with others" (1997 p. 105), which coincides with the Korean gaming culture observed in this study.

Referencing their own multi-sited fieldwork experiences that include investigations in South Korea, Dourish and Bell indicate that homes are



extremely private places (Dourish & Bell, 2011). Socializing is typically done outside the home, and in the Korean context my own fieldwork experiences have made it clear that there is great reticence to treat the home as anything more than one's closet, with living conditions and family thoroughly exposed in close quarters. In contemporary Korea, it would be unorthodox and in many cases even unseemly to invite someone back to the home, especially under the critical gaze of elders.

#### **4.7.1 Courtship**

Online games have played a part in courtship for Korean youth. The PC bang infrastructure has helped many escape the constraints of family. I encountered many young couples using the game atmosphere in PC bangs to engage in courtship practices, and it was common to have "couple zones," which are separate areas specifically designated for couples. Sometimes these zones are dimly lit, with comfortable couple-oriented seating and PCs that are closer together. Though the PC bangs at present have more competition in this regard from an increasing number of coffee shops, free Wi-Fi, and a proliferation of personal laptops, the opportunities for courtship around game-specific play are significant.

One particularly memorable interview (F. Chee, 2006 p. 233) that centered upon this topic was with a female university student who told me she had been playing the massively multiplayer online role-playing game Ragnarok as well as Kart Rider for about 1 year and she considered herself "addicted." As the interview went on, I found out that she and her boyfriend had been dating for 1½

years. It turned out that after the first six months of their relationship, she started playing computer games with him at PC bangs as a way to be together in a warm place during the winter. Being students, they did not have much money and it was the best solution for doing activities with one another on a budget. Although she said that the games she played were fun and the time she spent at PC bangs ranged from 15 to 20 hours 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.

Yet another example from my interviews with gamers (F. Chee, 2006 p. 234) was of a couple in their early twenties, who met online by playing Lineage together almost 40 hrs per week. They credited their mutual passion for the game that initially allowed them to meet offline at a Lineage event. The man recalls seeing her and experiencing, "...love at first sight." The woman, however, did not notice him at first and ignored his advances at the meeting. Afterwards, they would encounter one another online in Lineage, and he would try to get noticed by stepping in to protect her from harm during enemy attacks. After a while, this impressed her enough so that she consented to finally going on a date with him. Their relationship slowly evolved. After a year and a half, the couple told me they were helping one another cut down on the time they spent online playing Lineage but were still going to PC bangs and using them as places they could meet.

In recent years, seeing my previous informants court, find careers, and get married has been interesting from a games point of view as well. Consoles have become more popular, and tend to be given as ‘housewarming’ or marriage gifts as a symbolic gesture that the couple will game together once living together. I have been told that the infatuation with the console lasts about two weeks and then proceeds to ‘gather dust.’

#### **4.8 StarCraft and the rise of online game spectacles: eSports**

*StarCraft* is a clear example of how form has trumped content. If one is discussing how online games came to occupy a place in Korean mainstream culture, it is essential to highlight the central role Blizzard’s Real-time Strategy (RTS) game, *StarCraft*, played in the popularizing of online games in the Korean imaginary. In North America, the *StarCraft* franchise enjoyed some popularity, but not nearly to the extent that it has in Korea. Considering that *StarCraft* is a game that was released in early 1998, it has been both remarkable and perplexing that such a game would continue being popular more than a decade later. It certainly captured the imagination of the government agency manager I interviewed, who told me that his familiarity with games dated back to arcade games thirty years prior to our conversations. However, while working for a government television station years ago, he came across eSports.

“[eSports] provided me with a totally different perspective. Media broadcasting at that time was suffering from a lack of content. Suddenly, they had a new phenomenon. Games. It was really interesting and I wanted to be a part of it somehow.”

He then started playing online games such as the popular Korean MMORPG Lineage and StarCraft, along with a whole host of other games, which he credits for his current work in the games industry. His time with members of the games industry and working with the government served to broaden his perspective, as he was in the process of starting his own games business when we last spoke.

#### **4.9 Games and social status**

*“You could annihilate your boojangnim [director’s] base and they can’t say anything. <laughs> and you can laugh about it.” –  
Salaryman*

Related to the discussion on Confucian social structures, games also serve the role as a leveller of social hierarchy. On many an occasion, I have gotten the sense that the ‘real’ workplace interaction in Korea occurs outside of the typical 9 to 5 workday. This is evident in the “salaryman” culture, where the daylight hours are spent executing tasks and the night is spent nurturing one’s social/career ties. Online games have become part of this ecology in Korea as one of the mediating activities between colleagues—superiors and inferiors alike.

In the quote starting this section, my informant is talking about the relatively high barrier to social interaction, or the restrictions to expressing oneself in everyday Korean life. As I have mentioned in my own encounters, almost everything is done by introduction and networks. In the case of online games, the ‘networked’ access lowers barriers to entry, as it provides an

opportunity to interact with new people, or those with a previously high power-distance relationship (Hofstede, 1997), such as that of a superior/subordinate.

“If you have a common reason to talk, it’s much easier. StarCraft provided the window for that. Other than drinking...[Games are] a group activity. Culturally, they don’t come up to you and go, “Hello...” They don’t say this a lot. Your life is your life, and you don’t mix.”

#### **4.9.1 Demarcations – Wang-tta and Chae Myun**

While games can serve as a hierarchy leveller in some cases, on the opposite end of the spectrum, the online game can also serve as a site of negotiation for offline status.

During my earlier fieldwork in Korea, I came across what I identified as the Korean social issue of Wang-tta, which includes the act of singling out one person in a group for the purpose of bullying and ostracization. It is a difficult term to translate into English from Korean. 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 modelled 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. While there are concepts along similar lines in other cultures, such as scapegoating, the issue of Wang-tta is not commonly known or written about outside of Korea (F. Chee, 2006). The concept of Wang-tta exists in opposition to the admiration for people who can game excessively (and as a result, game well). After all, as a player quipped, “To be really good at something in Korea, you have to be crazy about it, or else you

can't do it." It therefore made sense that a key motivation to excel at digital games is to not be the 'Wang-tta' and be a full participating member of one's peer group.

It is important to include what one of my informants stated verbatim about Wang-tta, because it illustrates the aspects of gaming, peer pressure, and time investment so very well:

"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. "

Indeed, a primary motivator to play games in Korea appears to be so that one may achieve social acceptance among peers. The PC bang, in this way, provides a crucial moment in that it is an arena of talent exhibition in games. That is, one might practice playing at home, in order to "perform" at the PC bang where his or her talents in a game would then be scrutinized and "peer-reviewed."

Refusal to partake in game play could subject one to isolation and ridicule, which would severely impact someone's "chae myun" or "ability to save face." The fear of being made a "Wang-tta" could indeed motivate many young people to take every opportunity to practice the games of their peer groups to become more skilled and less subject to such ridicule. Also, the experience of gaming itself is time invested in nurturing a social network, and the worst thing would be for one to feel somehow left behind in skill, or movement as a group. Thus, not being good at games would be tantamount to possessing a social deficit, and

present immense social pressure to invest time and effort into being good at games.

Another way of thinking about Wang-tta is through Johan Huizinga's (1955) discussion of the way spoilsports are treated. "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" (1955 p.11). Roger Caillois (1961 p.7) has 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." In the Korean context then, anyone who threatens the sanctity of the play community subjects themselves to being singled out as Wang-tta.

In my studies, there have been acceptable circumstances for a player retreating from the group due to external circumstances. 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 doing compulsory military service for 2 years or going abroad to learn English for 1 year or more. Once such a player returns back to the home community, there may be more generosity regarding one's life changes. Statements my informants made regarding such returns, such as, "it's no longer fun" or "my priorities changed," could be interpreted as a way to "save face" and have one's lack of gaming not be reflective of a character flaw.

An example of the abatement in pressure to game can be seen in the story of an extremely hardcore game player who recalled engaging in

tournaments that went on as long as 36-hours. However, his playing habits changed when he went to the UK for English language courses. While abroad, he found himself cut off from most of his peer group as well as Korea's broadband infrastructure. When I asked him what his major reason for cutting back on gaming was, he quipped:

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.

After his return to Korea, he resumed playing with his friends, but at a much lower rate. When I asked what he ended up doing during his time in England instead of playing online games, he responded with a chuckle, "Drinking. Smoking." At the time of our interview, he spent "only" 6 to 7 hours per week playing games in order to focus more on graduating.

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. 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.

As for females, there are also most definitely gender differences in the way women as opposed to men are esteemed in their peer groups. On more than one occasion, whether it was after losing a StarCraft match or an off-the-cuff remark after an interview, I have asked, if I could ever be considered "Wang-tta"



or made fun of. A response that was particularly telling of the wide gulf between male and female gamer worlds was, “Of course not. Girls are different because they don’t have to be good at games.” The common stereotype, which was reflected by the young women with whom I spoke, seems to indicate that women or girls tend to like “simple” games such as Kart Rider or Tetris. However, as a number of scholars have reflected upon in their work, the motivations for online engagement by women are not only varied, but go far beyond “cute” (Hjorth, 2006), involving a multitude of complex constructs of gendered identity and agency (Consalvo & Paasonen, 2002). Despite online game play still being heavily skewed towards male gamers, the gender implications of gaming continue to be a source of fascination that I am considering in future analyses of gaming communities.

#### **4.10 Military Service**

When I was transitioning from my Masters to the Doctorate, I had an interesting discussion at MIT with a professor after presenting some of my initial results arising from the Korean fieldwork. He asked me a pointed question: “So, are you saying that South Korea plays games because of North Korea?” I paused for a second, and replied, “Yes. I suppose one could say that.” The phrasing of the question may have been intentionally leading, but there was a certain truth in that statement that has remained.

Much research concerned with the geopolitics of the Korean peninsula from a wide range of disciplines has expounded upon the threat of the communist North upon the democracy of the South. “Within half a decade, the

Korean War brought new social and political dislocation, which still profoundly affects the nation” (Bedeski, 1983 p. 20). However, an explicit link between that threat, compulsory military service, and participation in online gaming in Korea is an original articulation found in this work drawn from my interviews and observations over the course of my research on Korea.

Though I did not travel to Korea looking for a link between military service, online games, and the condition of the youth, I could not help but become aware of an existence so radically different from my relative lack of military exposure on the Canadian West Coast. Tales of the formative experiences of compulsory military service and the clear articulation of brotherhood bonds that result from that service pervade my field data. By drawing this aspect of military service into the discussion of online games and mainstream Korea, I hope to show how, like education, the focus on military activities is a confluence of culture, social structure, infrastructure, and policy as they manifest in the Korean national context.

As Robert Bedeski (1983 p. 21) writes, “Korea has been under a constant and acute security threat since 1948, requiring a large military establishment, a government capable of mobilizing national resources for defense purposes, and a society oriented towards maximizing security efforts against internal subversion and threats from outside.” As a consequence, the nation has been driven by a sense of insecurity, whether it be in terms of poverty, military prowess or national identity. To establish ideological unity, past governments have “relied on either

coercion, the threat from the North, or vague historical nationalism” (Bedeski, 1994 p. 79).

Through no urging on my part, my informants would bring up the 2-year period of compulsory military service as a prominent aspect of a Korean male’s coming of age. As one of my informants recounts:

“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.”

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 presents challenges for re-integration into civilian culture after isolation. Additionally, there are ambivalent feelings of the reception one will have once back into the social network of origin.

When doing military service, the majority of recruits are cut off from Internet access and may only write letters to loved ones by conventional letter mail. 40 days off site are permitted, and may only be taken in increments of fewer than 10 days. One may suppose that this temporary severance of civilian ties ensures that the social network becomes oriented around one’s military cohort and that the conditions for forming a brotherhood bond become optimal.

As mentioned in the previous chapter regarding military policy, this compulsory service takes place in a Korean male's late teens or, more generally, early 20s. Through what my informants told me, upon returning it seemed as though there was a certain shock when re-entering the previous social network, and that spending time gaming with one's friends (at PC bangs, online, etc) was a method of easing that re-entry. Less explicitly, one may socialize, and meet people on online matchmaking sites, look for jobs, engage in e-commerce activities, and a whole host of other everyday activities enabled by broadband connectivity in Korea.

This compulsory military service could very well be thought of as in place 'because of North Korea' and the complicated relationship with online gaming that results has occurred in ways previously unanticipated. Consequently, this aspect of Korean life has profoundly impacted the mechanics of youth culture in which hardly any aspect is left untouched.<sup>30</sup> These factors are not typically in the same discussions as online games, but they do much to speak to player motivations and life choices heading into middle-aged "Ajeossihood."

Years ago, when a primary informant was 25 years old and in his final year of university, he claimed he no longer played online games (F. Chee, 2006). Going on a hunch, I interviewed him anyway because I wanted to give him the space to have a dialogue with me about online gaming. It turned out that prior to

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<sup>30</sup> What is more, there are suggestions that "...conservative Protestants in Korea have been a key force in stigmatizing any objection to military service as unpatriotic and undesirable, in part by designating Jehovah's Witnesses (and Quakers) as a cult." - Personal correspondence with Korean scholar Judy Han.

his 2.5-year break, he was, as he put it, “addicted to StarCraft.” He played the game for four years seriously, and upon returning from military service, realized he was a “lower class player,” and he quit “...because I wasn’t very good at StarCraft.” Related to my initial hunch, and other observations that he spent time at PC bangs and had social gatherings focusing on game play, I probed further by asking if he went to PC bangs for his friends. His response was illuminating:

Yes, mostly. I go to [the] 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 [a] 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.

Indeed, my observations of those who have returned from military service seem to be that one is somewhat ‘adrift’ socially. The re-insertion of oneself into a social network, whether it be in the PC bangs, online or offline, is one way of reconstituting and nurturing a sense of sociality and belonging.

#### **4.11 Returning to play again**

This chapter discussed the role online game play has in the broader culture, social structure, and infrastructural environment of Korea. Rather than perpetuate the global media portrayal of gaming as an anti-social activity, the examples provided here show games as an extension of the self in order to reach out to others.

By understanding online games as a communication medium, we are then able to understand that it is a means of facilitating human connection, rather than cutting it off. Instead of Korea being a mysterious nation of game addicts, we are able to see that there have been a number of other factors that contribute to the popularity of online gaming among youth.

The next chapter extends the discussion of how online games afford a greater opportunity for the upward mobility of youth given Korean government and industry initiatives, and the circumstances of these same people who have gone on to find careers in and around the games industry.

## 5: THE GAMES INDUSTRY AND UPWARD MOBILITY

*One chilly night in the middle of winter, after an evening of barbeque and norae bang with a group of friends, we squeezed ourselves into one of the many taxis prowling Seoul to get back to our respective homes. Joking amongst ourselves, and then including the taxi driver Ajeossi, we all felt a sense of camaraderie with one another. As we passed by an exit on the freeway that pointed towards the direction of Busan,<sup>31</sup> I made an off-hand joke that we should just keep going to Busan. The taxi driver's eyes grew wide and he immediately asked everyone in the car if they wanted to go to Busan. We all agreed that while it was an amusing notion to entertain, that we couldn't possibly take a taxi from the top end of the country to the other, even if it meant five hours of driving through the night.*

*The driver's tone got serious. "I'll drive you there for 150,000 Won." We laughed it off and talked about how crazy an idea that would be, while doing the math. He countered our banter with, "120,000 Won then. You can't beat that. It's winter. You're comfortable." We assured him that as tempting an offer as that was, we were only joking and we simply could not take off spontaneously. As we proceeded to chat about other things, the driver, seeing that the last exit for Busan on that stretch of freeway was immanent, slowed the car down and crept into the exit lane. He asked one last time, "Are you sure you don't want to go to*

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<sup>31</sup> Busan is located on the southern tip of the Korean peninsula, about 227 kilometres away from Seoul. 150,000Won would have been the equivalent of less than \$150USD.

*Busan?” We insisted that we did not. Slightly deflated, he slowly returned to the main freeway, saying how nice the journey would have been. Upon reflection, the taxi driver’s behaviour was not without reason.*

*Recounting the events with the taxi driver to an informant the next day, he shrugged, and merely said, “Yeah. It’s hard to earn 100,000 Won.”*

## **5.1 Economic Everyday Pressures**

In Korean, it would not be uncommon to hear someone say, “It’s very hard to earn 100,000 Won,” whether it be for reasons of class entrenchment, debt in a globalizing society, or the precarious nature of jobs still felt at the street level in the days since the Asian Economic Crisis. Our taxi driver in the story above would have most definitely preferred ending up in Busan with a guaranteed lump sum for the night, more than his usual uncertainty-filled grind of 4000-8000 Won fares throughout the wee hours of the morning.

This chapter is a discussion of the games industry and the opportunities for upward mobility in Korea. Bearing in mind the previous chapter’s discussion of common youth gaming practices, yet another facet of the question concerning how gaming has become such a mainstay in the Korean economy becomes even more apparent in the sections to follow, which outline the challenges faced by the online games industry.<sup>32</sup> This portion presents the issues that became apparent through my ethnographic fieldwork, further supported by in-depth interviews with

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<sup>32</sup> As indicated earlier in this dissertation, I have taken care to ethically manage the confidential nature of my informants’ data, ensuring that professional identifiers and privileged information shared in confidence that may have indirectly helped with my study are not explicitly disclosed here.



government and industry insiders. The economic pressures, though less visible due to many instances of multi-generational living arrangements, have been highlighted as a major concern in mainstream Korean media. This concern is primarily due to the declining sense of meritocracy, as it used to be the case where education was a guarantee of upward socioeconomic mobility and success, whereas at present there is no such guarantee and a degree is merely the price of admission into a veritable Gladiator's arena of competition. Many university graduates still cannot find jobs (O & Larson, 2011 p. 6). One example of the persuasive narrative of a bootstrapped individual having changed his stars from modest beginnings is former President Roh Moo Hyun, who studied for the Korean bar exam without enrolling in law school. Such days are already viewed as somewhat of a golden age, as students with advanced degrees from prestigious universities are currently unable to find employment.

Due to the 24-hour nature of Seoul in particular,<sup>33</sup> I found it very easy to do almost anything and everything at any hour of the day. This also meant that if I were walking around a plaza in the middle of the night, it would not be out of the question to wake a shopkeeper from a nap to make one's transaction. I often wondered, and eventually made an educated guess that this was probably not the shopkeeper's only occupation and that instead of isolated incidents, working around the clock had become a normal fact of life. In recent years, youth unemployment and general precarious nature of work has become an increasing concern in Korea (Staff Reporter, 2012). Media reports (Staff Reporter, 2011)

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<sup>33</sup> As well as other Korean cities, albeit to a lesser degree.

have discussed the common condition of youth in their twenties typically earning less than \$1000 USD a month. Of those youth, there are more women employed than men in that age gap for predictable reasons of military service and the consequences resulting from that hiccup in one's education and socialization. Most of the time, employment for Korean youth is precarious, in the form of part time or fixed term contracts. Even with university degrees, a small fraction of those graduates earn a 'decent' income of \$2000 USD per month.<sup>34</sup> Such conditions of employment have approximately one fifth of workers supplementing their incomes with second and third jobs, as the contribution from those jobs can range anywhere from an extra 10-50% per month over one's main source of income.<sup>35 36</sup> An executive I interviewed from NHN (Next Human Network) Corporation relates the positive effect this had on the online games industry acquiring talent:

S: Coming back to the point of the young talent, [those who] graduated from the major or renowned universities like Seoul National University or KAIST, or Korea, Yonsei Universities--those young talented individuals have joined Internet games industry. Particularly because those young talents typically go to... the bar exam, or government official exam, or to conglomerates. After that

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<sup>34</sup> According to National Health Insurance data, 1 in 7 young people in their twenties earn less than 1 million won a month. That's about \$1000 USD. Out of 2.4 million of those employed in their 20s, 15% (360k ppl = 150k men and 210k women) earn less than a million. Most are employed part time or on fixed term contracts. 220k in the age group earn 2 million won per month. 1.75 million are four-year university graduates. This means 1 in 8 people in their 20s with a university degree has a job that pays a decent income (Staff Reporter, 2011).

<sup>35</sup> 1 in 5 salaried workers has a second job, according to jobs website Incruit. Nearly 20% of salaried workers are also moonlighting. The number is on the rise. Reasons include extra income, self-improvement, opening one's own business, retirement, and a hobby. Sometimes it supplements one's main income by 11-20%. A small proportion say it might be over 50% of the main income (Staff Reporter, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> 20% between 15-29 are out of work. Hyundai Research Institute. The real number was 1.1 million unemployed young people. Government data do not include those who have given up looking for work, or those are in private training or studies. Critics say government unemployment statistics no longer even remotely reflect reality (Staff Reporter, 2012).

IMF crisis, the public sees that the engineers in those conglomerates had to leave the company. So, doctors, medical schools, became very popular. At the time, people wanted more stable jobs.

Koreans have been especially troubled by the grim job market that has resulted in typically high-prospect doctoral degree holders or those with prestigious degrees obtained overseas competing for unpaid internships, driving up competition for jobs in small and medium-sized enterprises. The prospects for humanities majors are even grimmer. They have little hope in finding jobs in their areas. The existence of this practice has given rise to a term, "Freeters," which has been used to describe those who make a living by teaching privately or straddling two to three part-time jobs (Staff Reporter, 2012).

## **5.2 Careers as game makers and players**

*One of my colleagues mentioned, "Why do you keep playing those online games? What do you want to be when you grow up?" If you said "I want to work in a game company," your parents would go crazy. But actually, our company, the parents want them to go to conglomerate. Social ... their showing, the young generation, ah you must have company working like Google. Former generation said, earn enough money. - Michael*

While careers in the Korean games industry are generally well regarded at present, the reasons for those jobs maintaining their status as viable options for success remain unclear. Curious about these factors, I incorporated a longitudinal aspect to my Korean fieldwork. That is, I was able to keep up with the trajectory of some key informants from my first study, who had self-identified as current or recovering games addicts. In my visits years later, they had since

started careers in the games industry in roles ranging from developers to managers, to executive and directorial roles. Their thoughts regarding the industry from a domestic and globalizing point of view are presented below. Several of these informants had occupied then quit or rejected higher paying prestigious careers with major chaebols like LG or Samsung in order to obtain a sense of greater fulfilment and operate outside the typical confines of hierarchy, as they saw it.

Michael, an executive for a major games portal, mused about potential reasons for the attraction to the games industry, including the lack of formality and mobility:

S: It was like Google at the time [of the venture boom season 1998-2000]. You didn't have to wear a suit and tie. Brilliant ideas needed... at that time people still wanted conglomerates but young talent ventured into these venture companies.

F: they could make something of themselves early in life.

S: Right.

The lack of formality also extended to the semi-corporeality of corporations. Michael mused aloud at how large companies could operate out of "parking garages," which was an indicator of this moment of transition from brick and mortar firms to more distributed models:

S: They create games software, then they upload it for free. They become Nexon. After NCSoft IPO, Mu—success. Venture capital started investing in games industry and some talented guys were flown in. Design, game design, graphics, after that they were able to organize companies into online game companies.

Mina, a game producer I interviewed with whom I formed a rapport through numerous Korean online games events, implicated the lack of other accessible forms of entertainment for youth due to a history of censorship as mentioned earlier with the Public Performance Act.

S: Could be partly my personal experience being a part of production, but when I look at Korea, there isn't much entertainment that young people can enjoy. The music industry is very limited and small, and we used to have a law that bans a certain type of music performance before we became a full democracy. So if that's the case what do the children do? They play computer games and on top of playing games they want to make them. I think it was a part of lack of entertainment and we don't have much of a playground or nature to play so they're stuck in their house and they start making games.

### **5.2.1 Recruitment**

I caught up with one of my informants from the 2004 study who, at that time, was a self-professed recovering game addict. Gene subsequently became involved in the games industry as an engineer turned developer and has provided an excellent longitudinal example of someone who was in the throes of intense game play who then went on to have a career in the local games industry. Gene provided his input regarding the process of recruitment through his years of experience in the industry. He explained:

S: They recruit from Internet sites like Daum Korea or they post the recruit[ment notice] under their homepage. The gaming culture is very well acknowledged by the students so they voluntarily find the recruiting. The major game company also [recruits] the same way like Samsung...once or twice a year.

On the other hand, Michael, an executive in the games industry, provided a more network-oriented viewpoint to recruitment. His input tempered Gene's

relative optimism, given that it implied the persistence and importance of old, elite school networks.

S: At that time, those young talents who studied management, majored in engineering science, they joined Naver, Daum. The Hangame community [was] also from Yonsei University, Nexon also--all at the school [where] they all knew each other, that kind of thing. They were like conglomerates.

F: Were they from outside Korea?

S: Inside. At the initial stage they were mostly from inside. Before, Korean films were only something for the old people. So only Hollywood movies were worth going to big cinema. At that time, Korean movies had popularity over Hollywood movies because they had Korean humour. That's something that foreign movies could never get. Those born after 1970, they were the new generation.

S: Still, students study in other majors because the professors and instructors aren't trained in that, you know? Or computer engineering or animation, or cartoon and the others are not from games industry. Not many people from the successful developers, they didn't turn in their careers to professor.

F: So how would a person get a job in the games industry then if not by schooling then by what?

S: These days, the marketing or business development, the big companies they recruit from the universities. NCSoft, they hire from SNU, Yonsei Universities, they do well.

### **5.3 Between the local and the global**

*You know so we invest a lot of money, and the Korean games get made for less than 3 million dollars and they don't do very well outside of Korea but it's a very hard mindset. I mean, you look at Blizzard spending 60 million some of the American cycles are 25-30 million we're 10% of their development costs. Pretty easy to do. But here, there's enough and all these work, so they think why would we spend another half million... - Joel*

At games industry events in Korea, I would come into contact with business development, sales, and development personnel representing local and global games companies. From the first “business-matching” events in which I sometimes participated as a volunteer liaison, I became keenly aware of Korea’s saturation of local development talent that was in desperate need for international partners, mostly in the form of investment and publishing/distribution. On the one hand, the local struggle was how to get Korean games published globally due to a glut of games development talent. On the other hand, the global to local challenge involved employing local talent in the effort to localize popular games like World of Warcraft in terms of language, play, and content.

*Korean companies they used to do everything in house, and now that’s changing. Even big companies like NCSoft, they started buying solutions from outside vendors. So I guess by giving up some part they created a market for industry technology of companies. - Joel*

There is also the concern from everyone about Chinese competition. “Already... Chinese custom online games are more competitive than Korean online games.” Michael noted that without localization efforts, “we will lose everything....this cultural thing, we should favour our local. So it’s more than protectionism. Korean games are losing ground.” In essence, it makes sense that geopolitical concerns are influencing how games are made, played, localized, and popularized in Korea.

## 5.4 A flatter hierarchy in games careers

When I asked Gene about the attraction to these jobs in the local Korean games industry, he emphasized that the opportunity for creativity came from small team sizes and a less pronounced hierarchy as a game developer, rather than what he might find working for a large company.

S: Yeah of course it's creative but overall, the big companies...are getting their projects ready. The thing is there aren't that many people in the team so the difference between the manager and the team manager and director is not so hierarchical.

Related to the discussion of games being relatively new and small scale enough to subvert traditional viewpoints regarding Confucian age-based hierarchies, this "flatness" appeared to be a major attraction to my informants. The relative openness with one's superiors in dialogue and trading ideas is an attractive aspect of a career in Korea that leaves many who work for the larger chaebols wanting:

S: We can really bring up the ideas or we can do the work really, and not be criticized for joining, gathering. And also we don't need to do full time work without any things to do. And also we have a better chance to go up.

What Gene was emphasizing here was that the typical corporate culture was not as dynamic as that of newer gaming companies, nor were elites as entrenched in the gaming companies as their equivalents in the chaebols, so that there was more room for growth. Moreover, the founders of the most successful games companies had up to five years of experience in major chaebols. For example, NCSoft was primarily founded by those with experience at Hyundai.



S: Right. But they found it not suitable for them. They had some feeling of limit to what they could do, but they were able to venture into other things because it was new. Having their own business was of course a salaryman's dream. But of course [in] the early days it was unconventional [by] Korean...standards. [It] was possible because they were more experienced.

The flatter hierarchy was further realized due to the generational gap in expertise with Internet technologies and the broader information economy. While some would see the intergenerational gap in technological literacy as a hindrance, Michael outlined the positive aspects for those less senior and entrenched in the established power structures:

S: They cannot compete against the elderly people established in the early 40s, 50s. [The elders] had the knowledge, connections but, like the Internet, "What? What's that? What for?" [The younger people] were the only guys who know about programming, computers, and computer entertainment. [The elderly] don't have the experience [figuring out] what the Internet, the computer, can do. They were kind of like—walls--the entry barrier for them.

He credits the introduction of "Hitel" by Korea Telecom in 1991 for fostering technological literacy amongst the younger generation, which was similar to the AOL service in the United States of, "You've Got Mail" fame. Computers were something that the older generations feared or even abhorred.

S: Their advance, in a way, before in their generation, the experienced ones had the authority in the long period. Now those who are in an entry level can compete. But our generation was exposed to computers and HiTel, they were not afraid of computers, the Internet and tools, web. They were able to go out to the world.

Moreover, as Mina explained, the freedom inherent in smaller, more level hierarchies found in the information industries have been more attractive than the prospect of working in a larger company:

F: So, what makes you stick with independent consulting as opposed to going to work for a major company?

S: Freedom. And well I've worked in a company before and the organizational setting is fun, but starting from scratch to set up something that I was in is also fun as well. Whatever I see, if I come up with an idea I can just stick out my business card and make it a business. That's freedom. Complete freedom.

## **5.5 Industry history according to the industry**

Earlier in this dissertation, I laid out the sociohistorical factors of what I believe to be the catalytic forces behind what has helped the games industry in Korea be as successful as it is. This section presents the perspectives of those in the games industry and their own impressions of what has occurred, and the challenges along the way.

I interviewed Joel, who represented the global perspective of an international company that was working with the local Korean games industry in order to develop global markets for their products. Given that he had been based in Asia and visiting Korea for over ten years, I asked him his opinions regarding what has brought the Korean games industry to its current state. He identified four primary things:

- 1) A captive cultural market
- 2) A "tendency towards piracy, which meant that the cultural market wouldn't thrive anyway."
- 3) Platform and the PC bang culture
- 4) Key movers and shakers in the right time/place: "I think the Korean guys, the Korean industry was very very bright the guy from Nexon, NCSoft, were clearly innovators at the right time and the right place."

Regarding the captive cultural market, Joel was referring to the idiosyncratic nature of the Korean technoscape—linguistically with its use of Hangeul as well as its sociocultural tastes that have been difficult for global firms to address, let alone penetrate. The second element was a tendency towards piracy, where he was dismissive in tone due to the prevailing notion and practice of what the West would typically classify as piracy. His third point, of PCs as the gaming platform of choice and the role played by the PC bang, is consistent with my assertions earlier in this dissertation. As Japanese consoles were not significant in Korea during the economic crisis, Joel asserted that, “PCs [were] the gaming platform of choice in Korea [during] the economic downturn...when a bunch of guys got up in the morning and had nothing to do except go and sit in a PC bang, and they didn’t want to say to their wives that they had lost their jobs.” Additionally, and related to the PC bang culture, he stated that “I don’t think there are as many entertainment choices for the average Korean as there is for the average American.” Lastly, along with the perfect storm of events that contributed to the present game culture that I wrote about in documenting the rise of gaming in Korea, he mentions that, “The Korean government also wanted to make Korea the digital capital of the world. The agencies had a real profound effect on the digital games industry, like KGDI.” In the following section, I will discuss how the industry made sense of this perfect storm.

### **5.5.1 The IMF crisis, phoenixes, and turd blossoms**

There was a great deal of manoeuvring in the game industry around the time of the IMF crisis. Of course, these are but a subset of success stories about

making lemonade from lemons. However, in this respect my informants, including Joel, Michael, and Mina, who recounted stories of economic collapse, coping strategies, and subsequent success, were ideal.

According to Michael, the IMF crisis during 1998, there was a concurrent Internet boom with numerous outfits calling themselves 'dotcom,' "...and you find investors, and that's it." That was the status quo until approximately the year 2000. Meanwhile, a number of talented younger individuals, having benefited from investment in the knowledge industries, were starting to flood the marketplace with their talent. "[During] the venture boom season [of] 1998-2000, most of the companies, called Web Agencies, they made home pages for corporations. At the time, [the] government advertised that we had to be #1 in [the] information revolution. Otherwise, we, Korea, would lag." With that last statement regarding Korea, he looked off into the distance, and what followed connects to my earlier discussion of Korean-Japanese relations and technology:

S: Because we once had that experience 100 years ago. Which was 1910, and we ended up colonized by Japan. Because at that time when the Western countries came and opened the market for trade, that's when Korea closed the door. Father of King Gojong. The government reminded us that a century ago, we failed because we closed our country. Now we have to go forward and we should be the pioneers.

The use of nationalism and the spectre of failure against foreign powers are repeatedly invoked in efforts to mobilize the nation and galvanize sentiment. In this case, it was used to sell the Information Society to the Korean public. The use of key words, slogans, and propaganda was readily apparent in popular media.

S: This is once in a century experience. That's why Hana Telecom was able to do that, because otherwise it must have been very hard. Of course it was an investment business, but Korean Government [was] interested, so [they] pretended not to see so they [did] not intervene.

F: Ah, so backstage.

S: Yeah, backstage approval. But in the message advertising that information is the key. Basically we should be first to make something. IT was the key word for government. IT, venture, globalization, "Americans: stand back."

The last statement of "Americans: stand back," was referring to the resentment over the external audits and admonishment the chaebols received during the crisis period, when many of the conglomerates were forced to liquidate their assets. Whether it was the spectre of Japanese colonization or the deftly constructed proto spectre of American neo-colonialism, the call to action resulted in effective marketing for the Korean information industries.

After the success of the movie industry, the government actually ...had a cultural budget and they distributed it to some of the VCs. Venture was the key word. Popular. Venture was the only way for Korea to move forward. They needed political slogans, and stuff like that. Anyway, at that time, that's what made PCs. Some portion of money to the gaming industry.

### **5.5.2 A legitimate and respectable industry**

With the direct infusion of cash along with minimal conditions, online games soon became a legitimate and respectable line of work in which to be involved. Mina notes that games have transformed from being thought of as the province of child's play to being recognized as a business "with authority" and multi-million dollar transactions. While at first blush it may seem a matter of trivial categorization and semantics, it was the very matter of classification that

could either hinder or help the viability of online games companies at crucial points. Michael draws attention to how the listing of a company affects the rates at which games could borrow money. “NHN used to be #1 in capital at ten trillion Won. After this financial crisis, it went down. In Korea there are two stock markets. Korea Stock Exchange and ... it moved from KOSDAQ. It was quite inconvenient [to games people]. When you go to the bank and borrow loan you get a better rate to those who work in a listed company. When your company is listed in KOSPI, big bank, then you get a better rate.” Where analysts previously covered the industries as consolidated entities, the Internet industry was disaggregated from divisions such as semiconductors.

S: Samsung electronic, cover Naver let's say, NCSoft at the same time. Now it's more specialized and separate. The one analyst that specializes in entertainment, and one analyst covers all those players. Internet, games, and also gambling.

So, on the one hand the figures are more auditable, but confusing in a different way, as Internet, games, and gambling are still under the same classifications. “Covered sometimes at the same time, but still, it's still game or online game and portal are still in the same group.” This realization of qualitative differences within quantitative classifications presents many implications including that of policy, but despite that, lent the large numbers needed to launch the online games industry into a widely recognized industry with financial clout.

## **5.6 Military service and the industry – same same, but different**

*[For] the Korean male, the military is an issue. 2-3 years, in the military in their critical time [of life] is a big issue. - Michael*

As previous chapters have shown, the military is an inextricable part of life on the Korean peninsula. This section opens up the issue of military service specifically in terms of its dynamic with the Korean IT workforce from the perspective of those involved with the games industry. Though I did not have explicit questions regarding military service in my interview guide, my informants would broach the topic of their own accord. Their perspectives were always slightly different from one another and immensely fascinating. It showed me how very much military service was a fact of living life in Korea, and as someone who was studying an industry dominated by men and steeped in a patriarchal culture, it made sense to embrace a study of this important phenomenon as it pertains to how people make sense of their social roles.<sup>37</sup>

Michael's input regarding the contingency of IT work during an otherwise rather definite period of a Korean male's life is important to focus attention upon here, because military service is often discussed as a matter of course.

S: And the Korean government said, was if pass an exam and prove you are able, instead of going to the military you can work in an IT company, because young companies have a hard time finding good talent. They don't know when they will go bankrupt.

What Michael describes is a type of 'alternative' military service, which allows those trained in STEM related disciplines to spend 3-5 years in an IT company

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<sup>37</sup> An article by Royse et al (Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, & Consalvo, 2007) systematically analyses the challenges involved with women and games, articulating the numerous assumptions, viewpoints, and types of engagement involved in this area of scholarship. As my methodological choices for this dissertation allowed for my engagement with subjects to occur organically, the analysis largely focused on the challenges facing mostly males in these gaming spaces. While a pervasive gender analysis was beyond the scope of the work here, it is an area where I am making links with my ethnographic data and current/future research through a gender lens.

instead of going through conventional military training. While not all of these recruits went to Internet or online game related companies, one can imagine how this alternative stream might be attractive to youth. The classification of the companies also mattered differently years ago: "IT had such a broad meaning at that time. But still the thing is IT/Internet are different but still at that time they were categorized as a pack."

Naturally, upon realizing what Michael was saying to me, a disconcerting feeling settled over me, considering how until then, I had talked to people who had extolled the virtues of going for military service and presented it as a matter of course. I asked him just how big the numbers were, to which he responded, "Mmm... Not that big because they have to pay-- I mean they have to pass. It depends on the university." He explained that there are the divisions between the Arts and Sciences, *Mungwa* and *Igwa*, respectively. Those who go towards *Mungwa* are not eligible for exemption of this nature and the design of the system was quite confusing at the onset, with some in grey zones joining the IT industries.

S: 1990s to the end of 2000, the literature [students] take advantage [and went towards the] technology service degree [requirements] and so of course they do Business. Those young talents were able to go to Naver, NCSoft, and the programmers, but sometimes those *Mungwa*, they thought they [were] programmer(s) but in reality they work in the business side, the social. But anyway my point is they join the Internet and game industries.

Thoroughly intrigued by this potential motivation to join the IT industries, I mused that the Korean males with whom I had discussed military service were extremely proud of the fact that they had gone through those years, and that they talk about



how close they are to their 'brothers.' I mentioned that it was quite unusual to not go for military service, at which point Michael's tone seemed more hushed, and he acknowledged this in the affirmative. "Military is something like a hot potato, especially for Social services, and public office stuff. It is something that you should do." He proceeded to tell me that though the public sentiment is that everyone must and therefore should go for military service, if it is at all possible to be exempted, people would undoubtedly jump at the chance.

F: Doesn't it affect the rest of your career if you do not?

S: At that time, yah, but Presidential Candidate Lee--when he compete[d] against Dae Jung Kim, actually Lee lost, mainly, he lost because his son was [exempted]. Military. From that perspective, of course to go for public office, you have to [do the service].

He conceded that it was necessary to maintain that the majority of people had to go for military service, or the whole system would be compromised.

F: Do you think it makes the IT field more attractive to young men, or is it not a factor?

S: It's a sensitive subject. If I knew that then, I would also want to join. But at that time...

F: Why doesn't everyone want to do this then to escape military service?

S: There's not much room for that I think...But you know, [those at a] low level, they don't get it. Because otherwise, parents would never [allow their children to] go... bribing, paying, everything to get their sons exempted so it [would be] worth it. People [are] definitely upset, "Oh you're exempted from military service? Then you are the son of God." And there is a... minimum type of service: "Oh you are the son of a human." Regular military service? "Oh you are the son of darkness...<chuckles>"

F: <laugh>

S: [I] Very jokingly say [this], but it kind of reflects the society.

It would be reasonable to believe that the incentives to join the IT industry might have served to direct talent towards those areas than they might have otherwise.

F: If someone joins the IT industry, and then doesn't go for military service, do they have to stay in IT?

S: No no. It's only 2-3 years, not over 5 years. Of course [the company can make] a very competitive offer and they do thing[s] like get a degree. Many of them actually stay, and they help the young company to grow. Some of them get reward for that but it's their choice.

Michael credited this government policy with allowing young talent to populate mid-sized companies in Korea, which have been typically short of skilled knowledge labour. The older generations in the chaebols could not fulfil this role, and this was the opportunity for early career mobility in the Korean IT industries.

## **5.7 Online Spending and Earning**

*If you think of it like a hobby, like fishing, you can buy really expensive things. It's the same. - Gene*

As one may see, online games in Korea have meant more than play and leisure. The nurturing of this industry has presented youth with opportunities to generate their own income at earlier ages, and navigate the challenges present in a post-IMF crisis economy. Having its own idiosyncrasies, the Korean market has demanded different strategies for users and companies alike in terms of local

economic challenges and business models. Through sustained conversations with industry leaders and observations of the mechanics at the user level, I was able to catalogue some of the primary differences between models that may have worked in North America, but do not in Korea, and vice versa. Michael talked about the early days of microtransactions:

S: We tried the item sales model, and that was quite successful. 10cent, small amount of money or something like that—users are willing to pay. So with Lineage success, users are exposed to the idea that you can play game and you can pay for Internet entertainment.

One example is the shift from subscription-based games to free-to play. In my discussion with Gene, who manages localization efforts of games from all over the globe for the Korean market, he asserted that the differences in game markets were both cultural and technical. For many Korean users, the American model of a subscription-based game was simply too high a barrier for entry, economically or psychologically.

One may observe this to be the case in other emergent economies where, for reasons of piracy or financial constraints, the North American business models do not work. Therefore, the microtransaction business model, where a user plays the game for free but can buy in-game items, has been much more successful. As online gaming is a largely social endeavour, more users at the onset of a game begets more users. Staying in the game, one is more inclined to make purchases for status, vanity, or other reasons. Subscription models have typically failed in Korea due to the competitiveness of the market.

S: Many MMORPGs [have] already turned to micropayments. The only subscription model in Korea is Lineage I and II and World of Warcraft. Only 3 games are subscription based. Most games accepted micropayments. In Asian countries, they accept. The remaining markets are European and North American. I think they're still worrying about the web-hosting fee. Basically when the game is created they have to pay more for hosting the game servers.

Since the time of the interview, even World of Warcraft has gone free-to-play in order to keep up with the rapid dominance of gaming on social network sites and other low-barrier to entry games.

Another example is what some may derisively call the “pay-to-win” model, where players with enough incentive to win over others are willing to use money to gain in-game advantage.

S: If people want to have strong character, they pay for character and building up. You already know that. Money for one level, and they're making their own business, and they gather, like 8 players. So two: they can get items. Their business is getting items and making money from characters levelling up, so they can get really unique item[s] really unable to compare to other[s]. Lineage is a competitive game and if you are strong you can really conquer everyone.

Players can typically acquire goods on auction sites such as Itembay, but now more so by ‘network.’ “Game items that can sell for cash in the Korean market is valuable, so the game companies work to make it sellable.” Prior to joining the games industry, Gene had many years of experience making money from selling in-game items as he was going through university.

When I asked Michael about why he thought Koreans would be willing to make microtransactions for their gameplay, he noted a number of things, including gambling appeal:

S: The game can contain kind of a gambling thing. Of course it was a potential legal issue, so they were very careful, but they sell game money. It could be like, under avatar, with that model, everybody. If you apply to Hangame, you create your own avatar, you can buy clothes.

The PC bang also had a role to play in minimizing the practicality of subscriptions in the Korean context.

S: Of course with Lineage you have a monthly subscription, but you pay \$25 for the game, and you pay \$2 for per hour use at [an] Internet café. At that time [that] made a lot of users, and showed them what they can do. Try it at an Internet café, and they think ok let's try, and then they think they want to have that environment in their house.

An instructive moment was during an outing with one of my friends at a PC bang. Working for a games company every day, he had let his personal AION subscription lapse. However, he was able to log on at the PC bang, as the IP-pricing model generally does not require users accessing the game from a PC bang to have an active subscription.

## **5.8 Women in the games industry**

*“You don't look like a gamer.” – Random Ajeossi*

*“Why? What does a gamer look like?” - Me*

While faring better in the games industry than in other more entrenched occupations, women are still nowhere near parity in what is often an environment that could be perceived as merely tolerant at its best, and as we see in current attitudes towards women in games, hostile and threatening at worst (Funk, 2012; Travers, 2000). The concerns highlighted in this section regarding female

mobility in the games industry encompass but a mere sample of challenges in career mobility that is important to consider because it presents yet another facet of how the online games industry may attract and retain talent. As in the case with North America, women are not typically steered into gaming, as they are not into STEM disciplines. The same systematic barriers to participation exist in the Korean context. What I am showing here are possible motivations to play based on the opportunities one may find in a relatively new industry.

### **5.8.1 The enemies of games**

*I didn't add any negative, but online game, since it became more popular: the female group—we jokingly call the enemy of the Korean game industry. - Michael*

During what I thought was the end of my interview with Michael, he made the above comment that I ended up pouncing upon, and probing further into, as it illustrates, with Korean ideological frames, the adversarial role into which females are typically cast when having anything to do with games. This pervasive ideology and rhetoric presents some immense challenges for a female population, which is already reticent when it comes to achievement in STEM disciplines and professional mobility in a male-dominated culture. When explicitly referred to as the “enemy” of the Korean games industry, I had to ask for clarification, and he proceeded to elaborate:

S: Parents, that means “Mom”—they always say they prohibit children from playing games. Online games, or whatever. Another is “Wife,” they want their husband’s time. They want their husband not to play online games. Instead of [gaming] she wants him to spend time with her.

Typically female occupations were also implicated:

S: And, teachers. Most of the teachers now in Korea are female--no online games. Online games are thought to be the #1 factor that lowers the academic performance of children and mind stability.

In this way, significant others like wives and girlfriends are not thought of as participants, but adversaries, and killers of all kinds of male forms of amusement.

S: Yes. Korean online game industry now faces some adversaries. ...it's like violent, or sexual issues of movies, novels, that kind of thing. Online games are regarded as some equal form of entertainment as sports. Hockey, soccer, basketball or baseball. But it is not bad to play.

Phrased in terms of an ultimatum and the "best of evils," gaming provides a way for males to indeed be technically and physically present in the household, while socializing and connecting with others in the *Alone Together* (Turkle, 2011) sense.

S: Of course girlfriends or wives want their husbands to spend more time with them instead of watching or playing sports, but which do you prefer? My playing online games or watching soccer?

Indeed, one may see how this scenario of games serving a panacea for the otherwise painful nagging of females in the extra-domestic amusement endeavours of males can be just as harmful in the construction of female roles vis a vis a keystone industry like games.

### **5.8.2 Navigating the industry as a female**

In contrast, during the course of my fieldwork I had the chance to have sustained contact with Mina, who I first mentioned in Chapter 2. I found her to be a particularly dynamic woman in the games industry, and she recounted her

experiences in navigating male-dominated Korean business culture. At the time of our formal interview, her activities centered on business development and sales around the gaming industry. Talking mostly to “Ajeossis,” her days revolve around liaising with developers, engineers, purchasing departments, and relevant decision-makers.

The most interesting part of our interview was when the conversation meandered past my prepared questions. Because she was such an exceptional case in the games industry, I was fascinated by her strategies in navigating the restrictions inherent in merely possessing a female body and gaining access to “the boys’ club.” One such example is the after-work hours networking activities that are crucial to career success in corporate Korea. The practices that involve consumption of alcohol and patronizing “room salons” into the wee hours of the night have served to alienate or keep the few women in the industry out of potentially beneficial career-oriented networking that often take place at such gatherings. I wondered though, about Mina’s specific strategies for advancing her career and ‘playing along’ with others who may be inclined to initially exclude her from activities.

S: Well I like partying, so customers often feel uncomfortable because there is a woman’s presence, but after they got used to it. So I think it’s more a matter of a limit on the corporate card than my presence. There are some places that I’m not supposed to go, like a room salon.

F: Do you go anyway?

S: Ye-ye. Yeah. And then... well if it’s my very close contacts, they don’t care. They are like I look like a girl too. Sometimes yes, sometimes no...



Mina then described what she did for contacts with whom she had less of a rapport and who would be unsettled by her presence.

S: Not so close contacts, take them [for] the first round. After they get a little tipsy and rowdy I just leave the [credit] card at the front and pay, and pick up the card the next day.

To be fair, even Korean males in the games industry with whom I have discussed gender dynamics say that there are fewer expectations of after-work activities. Dismissing activities like going to hostess bars as archaic, the ones who have made the switch from larger chaebols find the change refreshing in that most of the time, the everyday developer or company worker in smaller games companies do not have to partake as enthusiastically in these extreme corporate culture practices. The younger men see increased time away from the demands of work contexts as a benefit as well. Mina made note of this aspect, “The gaming industry I don’t think they do room salon,” but qualified it by saying that at times they inevitably bled together, “Korean business in general, especially Ajeossis in penguin suits they like room salons.”

In general, the gaming industry is a much more relaxed environment for almost anyone feeling the constraints of rigid hierarchies and establishmentarianism. After all, according to Mina, those in the gaming industry tend to favour casual (as opposed to formalized) drinking, or going home and playing...games. “Let them do what they want to do. That is the best gift.”

While working for men in subordinate positions, Mina noted that she was praised for achievements and treated well. However, when it came down to

actually negotiating, she pointed to times where proceeding as a normal person proved too much of a mental barrier for the people with whom she was dealing.

S: That's a tough one. Gaming is a male dominant industry. But being a woman, the big problem is when I started seeing Ajeossis as an equal dealer. When you go face to face with the same weight of the deal—this is what I'm going to give you, so you give me this-- I want this. I don't know why. On the negotiation table, they're not used to it. Not comfortable with it.

Indeed, her being a female was at times so insurmountable a barrier that explicit requests for males were made.

S: Some people might directly tell you, "I much prefer male sales person. Change the account manager." I was in that position before.

Ultimately, Mina feels that the games industry provides a more relaxed and friendly environment that is relatively free of the very formal social meetings of corporate culture. "Even the Christmas card is formal. But the games, I don't have to be super friendly, and I can be natural and myself." So, in the meantime, she is staying put in the games industry.

## **5.9 Attraction and repulsion**

Though the games industry has more opportunities for the career mobility of younger people, traditional structural restrictions and biases are still very much apparent to this day. This chapter presented the everyday appeal of the games industry and how it manifested as an upwardly mobile career choice for many Koreans.

In speaking with those involved with the games industry and experiencing the enablers and constraints for myself, I identified how the industry was able to attract talent through a number of economic and political incentives afforded to those in the IT industries. Meanwhile, the reverberations from the upheaval of the IMF Crisis and the imperatives of military service for young Korean males continue to be felt in this industry, but in many ways discussed, these very contingencies were instrumental in propelling the Korean online games industry to its current level of prominence, legitimacy, and respectability. Online games are well-integrated into the Korean media ecology, and one may see this in terms of how online spending and earning in games, while having entirely different models from North American context, fit into the circumstances of Korean gameplay while attracting a number of people who are gaming for numerous and varied reasons.

The motivations one may have to join the online games industry are just as varied, but much has to do with the policy and culture. Flatter hierarchies in newer, less established companies that include younger talent, as well as a less entrenched corporate culture tend to be major attractions. Even those typically on the margins, such as women, who are constructed in adversarial terms, have managed to find roles affording themselves more agency and decision-making in the games industry than in other career paths.

During my time in Korea, it became clear to me that activities like smoking were male activities (cigarettes were passed around freely in the military), but that women should not smoke. A woman smoking in public places was unseemly

behaviour, though I would see built-in ashtrays in women's washrooms everywhere, including universities where men smoked at their office desks. This indicated that there was an awareness of such activities occurring, but that they should not take place in public. I asked Mina about her perceptions regarding these taboo activities:

F: do you think it would be any different if you were a foreign looking female?

S: Yes. Because Korean people have a dual standard. For example...a foreign woman smoking a cigarette, if she's good looking, people would say, "Wow, she looks so cool. Just like a movie star." If she's an ugly foreign looking woman smoking, people would say, "Oh. She's a foreigner." Nobody cares. And if it's a Korean woman who smokes...older generations would say—she's a bad girl.

Being a smoker herself, it was not surprising that Mina explicitly brought up smoking as a sore spot.

S: Young people, a lot of guys my age say they don't care, but not for their girlfriends; not for their future wives. That's just one example of how Korean people would view foreign women and Korean women.

As I have hinted, one notable exception has been the PC bang for acting as a grey zone for public/private behaviour outside the gaze of those who might scrutinize youth behaviour. Women freely lit cigarettes at PC bangs, and it is completely unremarkable behaviour in that context. Perhaps they would be inclined to find a game to play during that time.

Clearly, there is a long way to go, but there are many appealing aspects of online games to young Koreans. Accordingly, there are many reasons for a thriving games industry that have very little to do with games.

## **6: CONCLUSION – MOVING FORWARD**

When I first started researching online game addiction in 2002, I knew very little about Korea and had only the most passing familiarity with its history and people. A decade later, things have certainly changed and my time there, through research and friendship, has been utterly transformative for the way I regard games and culture. It has both informed, and laid the foundation for my approach to examining contextual issues in technology and society, namely seeing online games as a medium of communication. My subsequent interest in Korea's gamers, language, and culture developed very much as an anthropological thirst for participating in and observing the everyday lived realities of an intriguing set of people. Though examining the role of online games in Korean life may have served as the initial spark of interest, it lit a fire that illuminated many of the insights discussed in this dissertation.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (2000; 1983) is known for stating "a scholar can hardly be better employed than in destroying a fear." No more vividly is this sentiment realized than in the public discourse surrounding the irrational fear and misunderstanding of new forms of media, especially online games. In my work, I have pursued my research as both an individual and collective pursuit. Individually, I have sought out cultures and everyday lives that may shed light upon the role played by online games in our society. Collectively, I have used these findings towards teachable moments that demystify the losses and gains

afforded by new forms of media. Accordingly, I regard the work here as a rejection of the construction of online games as a problem to be regulated, which is a viewpoint that is all too ubiquitous in mainstream media.

Rather than oversimplifying a heightened level of engagement with online games and gaming, I showed that there are many reasons people play games in Korea. It is not enough to call the Korean phenomenon “addiction.” Rather, online games in this sense are a medium of cultural communication, and part of an intricate system of culture, society, politics, and economics. This dissertation has been concerned with the tangible world that surrounds ‘virtual’ ones, and how those worlds exist in symbiotic dialogue with one another. That is, rather than being concerned with life 'behind' the screen, I argued for the perspective that the lives surrounding those screens are indeed social and intersubjective (F. Chee et al., 2006). Thusly, I have conducted this study of communication media in a cultural context bearing this in mind.

My research presented an atypical critique of the typically celebratory and/or panicked tenor associated with technological adoption in Korea. Reports that clearly laud the rapid uptake of ICTs in Korea, citing forward-looking policies and innovative implementation (Lewis, 2004), have highlighted the online gaming industry and its place in popular culture as an economic strength and path to the nation’s future in the global information society (Lee, 2005). Considering both the positive, negative, and indeterminate outcomes in the case of Korean online gaming, some have felt compelled to ask questions to the effect of, “Should the use of online games be regulated?” (Miller II, 2002) or “Does this case show how

society shapes technology, or vice versa?” (A. Feenberg and M. Bakardjieva, 2004) or even, “Can Korea’s case of policy and ICTs be used as a model for other countries in how cultures receive and appropriate technologies?” (Ho, 2005). My questions have been considerably simpler, but the answers more complex.

As stated in my introduction, the three primary questions driving my inquiry have been:

1. What factors have contributed to the prominence of online gaming culture in contemporary Korea?
2. How have online games played a role as a communication medium?
3. How has the figure of gaming interacted with the ground of a local context such as Korea’s?

In particular, I wished to look at the relationship between various social pressures experienced by Korean youth in their everyday life, and their media use. I argued that these relationships do not exist independently from culture, social structure, and infrastructure, but are rather facilitated by such. My goal has been to build an increased understanding of cultural factors specific to Korea in the evaluation and implementation of technology and its associated societal consequences. Furthermore, I attempted to link the government policy initiatives, industrial relationships, and social history that, I argue, have been instrumental in driving the frenetic pace of technology use-culture in contemporary Korea.



Games are receiving an ever-increasing amount of attention in the media and the academe. It has given me a sense of purpose to create a project that documented how games as a medium of communication arose from information infrastructural initiatives. Such a path is a repeat, as we have seen with the Minitel (A. Feenberg, 1995), where an information-based initiative truly caught on in popular use only when it became a way people could communicate and socialize. In this study of Korean sociotechnical transformation, I have given a comprehensive analysis of what gave rise to online gaming in Korea, how it is employed in mainstream youth practices, and why some of those same youth continue to be involved in the games industry as they make careers for themselves.

I felt that I went to Korea being relatively sure what the motivations of those who run Internet Addiction centres were. I was also quite certain about why professional gamers pursued their activities everyday with fervour. My puzzle and main preoccupation has been how users (the so called addicts and self-professed gamers) made sense of their world. How did they come into gaming and what were their motivations? If I lived in Korea, participated in, and observed the culture, would I end up having similar motivations, or at the very least understand those motivations?

## **6.1 The remix society**

A goal of my dissertation has been to temper the debates surrounding online games addiction by considering how the socio-political and economic imperatives of global society have manifested, particularly in the Korean cultural

milieu. My keenly insightful informants, as well as intensive ethnographic fieldwork have driven the insights here. In my research, I have looked at technology and society through the lens of Kenneth Burke's Definition of Man in *Professing the New Rhetorics* (Burke, 1994 p. 53-54).

*Man is  
The symbol-using (symbol making, symbol misusing) animal  
Inventor of the negative  
Separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making  
Goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order)  
And rotten with perfection* (Burke, 1994).

As technology is a symbol of many things (including progress, modernity, transcendence, emancipation....) it is especially helpful to view it as such during my study of Korean phenomena during my time there. Ethnographers like Abelmann (2003) have presented arguments both accordant and discordant with the Korean tendency to view things in dichotomous relations. The diasporic conditions in which contemporary Koreans find themselves, along with their neo-Confucian hierarchical social structure, also played a part in my investigation.

Through the limited amount of evidence I presented here, I wished to act as a curator, letting the qualitative data provide evocative imagery and easing some clarity out from under the cacophony of situated fieldwork. Ultimately, the aim of conducting my dissertation research on this topic was to question whether or not the aforementioned types of questions are appropriate in this particularly complex situation that brings together media and user-related issues, but also the implementation of the policies and visions of key players from the

government and industrial sectors in addressing the prevalence of online gaming culture in Korea.

To date, much of the discussion about online games addiction has centered on psychological models of diagnosis (N. S. Miller, 1995; Skinner, 1974) to the 'addictiveness' or persuasion of the game or in-game elements in and of itself (Turkle, 1995). If there has been discussion of social/offline consequences of gameplay, it has primarily been framed within studies concerned with negative media-effects that paint users as passive consumers, or the media as existing in isolation of a cultural milieu (Poole, 2000; M. J. P. Wolf, 2001). I have referenced numerous studies on new media use that take our current understanding of media use and addiction for granted, with little or no critique of the foundations of that understanding, a problematic aspect which I attempt to highlight in my work. On the bright side, there is an increasing body of literature that does address various externalities to the relations users have with particular media, though they continue to be on the margins compared to the dominant paradigms of understanding of media use in these fields.

It was my intention to throw meanings of diagnosis, regulation, and cultural value of excessive game playing into question by doing an in-depth examination into the context of Korean online game culture. My analysis of cultural determinants of online game use in Korea brought together a number of disciplinary lenses in order to lift restrictions on aspects of events that clarify and lend context to assertions that have been made in other studies of games and their addicted players. Meyrowitz hailed from studies in microsociology. Scholars

like Erving Goffman (1959) emphasized dramaturgy and viewed the world as a stage. McLuhan's project has been similar to Goffman's, except his theoretical treatment focused on the human as opposed to theatre. Though it would not have been possible forty years ago, we are at an academic moment in time that necessitates the merging of traditions and perspectives to understand new forms of media like online games. As we work to understand how technologies interact with society, it is all the more important to realize how new media might not be that new after all.

Some social phenomena simply require someone to draw attention to what everyday actors in a situation have, in McLuhan's terms, become too numb to see for themselves or even think their actions to be culturally significant at all. He refers to Werner Heisenberg, in *The Physicist's Conception of Nature*, who points out that "...technical change alters not only habits of life, but patterns of thought and valuation" (M. McLuhan, 1994 p.63). As culture becomes retribalized, "tribal cultures cannot entertain the possibility of the individual or of the separate citizen. Their ideas of spaces and times are neither continuous nor uniform, but compassionate and compressional in their intensity" (M. McLuhan, 1994 p.84). Indeed, implicit in McLuhan's rumination is the re-emergence of a necessity to assess kinship and interdependence as cornerstones of communication.

The way games have manifested in Korean culture is very much a McLuhanesque picture in how this medium has extended the self, and as a result extended people's possibilities. In McLuhan's discussion of retribalization, he

notes a marked difference in speed of actions in the mechanical age with the actions in the present (at the time) electric age. “Slow movement insured that the reactions were delayed for considerable periods of time. Today the action and the reaction occur almost at the same time. We actually live mythically and integrally, as it were, but we continue to think in the old, fragmented space and time patterns of the pre-electric age” (M. McLuhan, 1994 p.4). With the instantaneous speed at which those with access to high-speed networks can conduct their everyday lives, we are seeing a simultaneous ‘warming’ of hot and cool media, which has implications for how we examine in media studies, and with which methodological paradigms.

## **6.2 The contribution**

The original contribution of this dissertation to scholarship in the area regarding the motivations of online gamers might very well be the deliberate choice to avoid discussing certain topics in the body of this thesis. It might be apparent to the reader that this dissertation did not explicitly discuss addiction to games in the conventional sense. As noted in the introduction, the concept of addiction has been problematic and my approach to this area, to look at the everyday life around games, has been a way to show just how much more there is to consider beyond Korea being a “nation of game addicts” warranting sanctions on gameplay. Though I have chosen to focus on a few select moments here that have to do with online game culture in Korea, there is much that has informed the process that I have deliberately excluded in the interests of creating a tighter, simpler, thesis.

During my residence in Korea, I conducted a vast number of interviews and conducted studies on topics such as the Korean wireless industry (Hira et al., 2012), the educational environments of children and the role played by games and other technologies, and Korean notions of domesticity, all of which did not explicitly make it into this dissertation, but for better or worse, served to greatly enrich and complicate my perspectives on gaming culture. Through being physically present and engaging in a variety of different activities, I was exposed to Korean culture, values, and emergent practices in an intense and holistic manner that strangely begged me to connect the dots.

Further muddying the waters of an already messy endeavour, I conducted a multi-national study of online game culture and the spaces in which gaming takes place. Beyond Korea, this research took me into the lived realities of gamers in various countries, including Mexico, Japan, Singapore, India, and the United Arab Emirates. The findings and experiences from that study at times aligned with my understanding of Korean gaming culture, and at other times it was completely turned on its head. I was very conflicted about whether or not to include insights from other countries or even other data gathered while in Korea. Though this study occupied me for more than a year during my PhD candidacy period, I am ultimately pleased with the choice to focus my efforts on a comprehensive examination of Korea at a depth of which I am satisfied for the purposes of this dissertation.

Also creating some confusion is that while I have, at times, been called a games researcher, I did not discuss specific game content or in-game

interactions in this thesis. To do so would have been limiting in that it would have taken away from the examination of the transient actions between users and their environments, which is more the topic in which I have always been interested. Indeed, my McLuhanesque preoccupation has always been more with the form than the content.

### **6.3 Current research agenda**

Still connecting the dots, my current research is focused upon examining the sociocultural contexts of technological engagement and experience, with a particular emphasis on games and social media. Drawing upon my training in applied social science methods and especially anthropological approaches, I have designed and conducted numerous international ethnographic fieldwork studies. Throughout my academic career, my scholarship has centred on the questions surrounding how and why people may be compelled to play games at varying levels and modes of engagement.

My graduate studies have been driven by an overarching interest in the place and meaning of online games in everyday life. Given that this dissertation has explored what games mean in the lives of Korean youth according to the ethnographic data, I examined the factors through which games, as a medium of communication can be understood within a cultural context. My research agenda stems from a dissatisfaction with conventional explanations for engagement with technology that oversimplify relationships, leaving social aspects woefully underrepresented. Sometimes it is not appropriate to reduce a question concerning society and technology to a simple variable.

In addressing the question of how gaming became mainstream culture in South Korea, the research findings pointed to the country's particular national circumstances, including the porous boundaries between its culture, social structure, infrastructure, and policy factors within an environment of massive sociotechnical upheaval. I am still digesting the ethnographic insights I collected, and given how mobility and transition have been knit into the fabric of Seoul's development, examining the rate of development over the last twenty years continues to capture the imagination of nations in different positions along the developmental scale.

Gaming in the ubiquitous PC bangs has been central to the experience of urban movement, and an examination of the Korean technoscape implicates a counterversion of publicness in the context of global modernities in the North, South, East, and West. In this sense, technologies have been embedded in the development of nations, and accordingly our understanding of culture and technology must evolve. I am continuing to reach out to other disciplinary persuasions in order to combine and confront the ideas of how digital technologies undermine public space along with the everyday life of youth and their relationship with modernity.

Beyond the work carried out directly for my program of study, I have an active research agenda unified by the common thread of ethnographic explorations of how local cultural contexts interact with global technology, including online games, mobile devices, and social media. To lend more context to the limitations of this dissertation that I indicated earlier, within half a year of



returning from my doctoral fieldwork in Korea, I designed and conducted the ethnographic fieldwork component for a multi-institutional and collaborative investigation into local gamer culture. This entailed the intensive field stays in Asia (Japan, South Korea, Singapore, India), Latin America (Mexico), and the Middle East (United Arab Emirates). As Senior Researcher on the project, I also recruited and managed local research assistants, translators, and participants. The preliminary insights from this study served as a heuristic indicating the cultural variants, challenges, and circumstances surrounding online games and the broader implications of technology engagement and experience.

Shortly after completing this international fieldwork, I accepted an Erasmus Mundus Visiting Scholarship normally accorded to university faculty to spend three months in the Faculty of Technology Management and Policy at the Delft University of Technology (TU Delft) in the Netherlands. Immediately following this stay, I spent an additional three months at the Institute for the Advanced Study of Science Technology and Society (IAS-STs) in Graz, Austria, supported by an Ernst Mach Grant Worldwide from the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research. These appointments allowed me yet another chance to do a preliminary cross-cultural investigation into the nature of gaming in the European context for a total of six months while interacting and planning future collaborations with resident faculty and graduate students.

## **6.4 Future research trajectories**

My continuing research endeavours in the near future include work on which I have already begun the initial pilot stages, including 1) Social games and

the role of data in design 2) Cross-cultural examinations of gender and gaming in international contexts and 3) Assessing user motivations amidst cultural, social structural, and infrastructural constraints in mobile carbon-friendly applications.

For an ongoing examination regarding the social implications of big data, business analytics, and social games, I recently conducted a series of in-depth interviews with executives and industry stakeholders, along with informal interviews and observations at industry events in Vancouver. The insights derived from this study fuelled a paper presented at the 2011 Oxford Internet Institute Symposium “A Decade in Internet Time.” I am in the process of delving further into this work by expanding the theoretical examination of big data and socially networked games by interviewing more industry stakeholders based in a greater variety of locations worldwide. The shifting nature of social gaming has meant that the nature of the business has been shaken to the core and I have been documenting this process of flux in the industry.

In an attempt to forward a more nuanced look at the social dynamics of gender and gaming, my work concerning the lived environments of game players includes consideration of the cultural context within which gaming takes place. The additional factor of culture and geography is a fascinating avenue of inquiry that implicates deeply embedded systems of power and agency that require more treatment in future studies of gaming and sociality. Ultimately, I am aiming to include the theoretical foundations of gender and gaming while also drawing attention to frequently marginalized voices in the examination of games as a social phenomenon through the use of ethnographic insight.

For what some may call a "serious games" project, I am a consulting partner on a European transportation infrastructure project with the goal of informing the design of a specific mobile application that takes into account user motivations. This study is indicative of a welcome trend in the European Commission's funding of large-scale projects to include multidisciplinary projects that would otherwise have typically relied exclusively upon engineering/computing science paradigms for the design of applications.

This dissertation illuminated some of the darker, underexamined corners of international games culture by providing one exceptional case, amongst the many exceptional cases worldwide. The ethnographic insights conveyed during the course of this discussion pointed largely to how online games as a medium of communication allowed for the formation and maintenance of community, along with upward mobility and social change in the Korean context. Some nights, it might also just be about students finding ways to stay out all night until the subway starts up again.

In this contribution to the global conversation on games, I hope to have provided enough compelling evidence to cause someone to ponder the inherent good or evil of games a little longer.

Insight becomes the light by which we banish the shadows of fear.

Now, onto bigger and badder monsters in the next quest.

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## **APPENDIX – FORMAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS**

Protocols to be used by Florence Chee in South Korea according to participant profile:

### **Games Industry stakeholder protocol.**

1. Please describe your role in your organization.
2. Think of an average day: who do you generally communicate with the most at work?
3. In your opinion, what are some key factors that have brought the Korean games industry to its current state?
4. Have you observed or been affected in a positive or negative way by a specific Korean business/technology policy?
5. Have certain government agencies played a role in the shaping of your company (or the industry)? If yes, how so?
6. What movements in government or industry need to occur in order for the domestic games industry to survive?
7. What has gone right in the games industry? Was it a coincidence, or accident? Deliberate?
8. What would you have liked to change?
9. In your opinion, what are some struggles faced by the games industry?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add to the questions that I have asked you today?
11. Do you have anyone else you can recommend who would have good insights into this area?

## **Government policy stakeholder protocol.**

1. Please describe your role in your organization.
2. Think of an average day: who do you generally communicate with the most at work?
3. In your opinion, what are some key factors that have brought the Korean information society to its current state?
4. Have you observed or been affected in a positive or negative way by a specific Korean business/technology policy?
5. Have certain government agencies played a role in the shaping of the IT industry? If yes, how so?
6. What movements in government or industry need to occur in order for the industry to survive?
7. What has gone right in the industry? Was it a coincidence, or accident? Deliberate?
8. What would you have liked to change?
9. In your opinion, what are some struggles faced by the industry?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add to the questions that I have asked you today?
11. Do you have anyone else you can recommend who would have good insights into this area?

## **Parent protocol.**

1. Please tell me about yourself.
2. What do you do in an average day? What is your routine?
3. How many children do you have? What are their ages?
4. What kind of technologies do you have in the home?
5. Do you use them?
6. Do your kids use them? Is their level of use according to your expectation?
7. How do you feel about (each) technology mentioned?
8. When did the household get their first PC?
9. What types of technologies do you think your child has access to outside the home?
10. Is there anything about the use of technology (of yourself or family members) that you would change?

## **Transitions protocol**

1. Please tell me about yourself. (if this is follow-up, ask what has developed in the person's life since 2004).
2. What is your main occupation now?
3. What do you do as a hobby?
4. What is your home situation? Family members?
5. Think of an average day: what technologies do you use, at what times, and for what purpose? Please describe.
6. Who do you communicate with the most?
7. What are your future plans and goals? How do you hope to accomplish them?



## Young adults protocol

1. Please tell me about yourself.
2. What do you do in an average day? What is your routine?
3. What's your favourite activity? Is it different from your friends?
4. What kind of technologies do you have in your home?
5. Do you use them?
6. Do your parents use them? Is their level of use according to your expectation?
7. How do you feel about (each) technology mentioned?
8. When did your household get their first PC? Where was it located (your room, or family room?)
9. What types of technologies do you use outside the home?
10. How much time do you spend doing each activity during your day?
11. Is there anything about the use of technology (of yourself or family members) that you would change?

## **Educator protocol**

1. Please tell me about yourself.
2. What do you do in an average day? What is your routine/schedule?
3. How many children do you teach? What are their ages?
4. What kind of technologies do you have in your home? At your school?
5. Do your kids use technology in your presence? What do they typically do?
6. How do you think their parents factor into the use patterns of their children?
7. How do you feel about (each) technology mentioned?
8. What do the kids generally talk about as their everyday activities? Do you notice certain trends or peculiarities?
9. Is there behaviour you find particularly troubling regarding those you teach? Do you think any of that behaviour is related to their technology use?
10. Is there anything about the use of technology in Korea that you would change?

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