



**Public Virtual World Gaming in Asia:  
Preparatory Fieldwork for Site Selection, Protocol Testing and  
Research Instrument Development  
Dates: April 21<sup>st</sup> – May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010**

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**Objective:** To provide an overview of the fieldwork conducted as background for fact-finding, reconnaissance, and refinement of logistics in local contexts for the LAN gaming studies. In line with the mission of our research group, MARVEL (Multimodal Analysis of Real/Virtual Environments Lab) the inclusion of different cultures and peoples in these contacts were designed to provide alternative forms of observation regarding public/private behaviour, according to varying environmental and situational constraints.<sup>1</sup> At its very core, the goal of this study was oriented around tool and protocol development and exploration of conditions, constraints, and best prospects for field sites for VERUS LAN studies.

This field research was conducted in order to further:

- a) **test** the research protocols (tools and methods) for the LAN studies in specific Asian and Middle Eastern media ecologies, giving a rough sketch of what virtual world gaming looks like in various parts of the world
- b) **develop** and hone the field research instruments for the purposes of the VERUS project.
- c) **touch** upon themes encountered in this iteration of fieldwork
- d) **inform** future iterations of this fieldwork (do we want to go more into depth there, how would we do things differently abroad in the field, what can we do differently at home?)

Over the course of five weeks, five distinct countries were the sites of deployment for our field research protocol.

Primary fieldwork sites in this report in chronological order:

- 1) Seoul, South Korea: April 22<sup>nd</sup> to April 28<sup>th</sup>
- 2) Singapore City, Singapore: April 28<sup>th</sup> to May 5<sup>th</sup>
- 3) Bangalore, India: May 5<sup>th</sup> to May 12<sup>th</sup>
- 4) Dubai, United Arab Emirates: May 12<sup>th</sup> to May 19<sup>th</sup>
- 5) Tokyo, Japan: May 20<sup>th</sup> to May 26<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the sensitive/identifying characteristics of individuals have been removed from this report and/or pseudonyms have been used where necessary for narrational purposes.

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### ***Background and rationale:***

I learn more about a person in an hour of play than a lifetime of conversation.  
~ Plato

This technical report (white paper) is a follow up to the post fieldwork meetings and presentation with the VERUS group during the CGSA/Fedcan Congress in Montreal, Canada.

The Asia fieldwork stay was designed to pilot the empirical research protocols for the LAN (Latitudinal Actor-Network) studies in local everyday lived contexts.

Utilizing what we knew from exploration of other field sites (Mexico and Chee's own ongoing ethnographic dissertation work on Korean online gaming culture), we identified five sites of interest in East Asia (Korea, Japan), Southeast Asia (Singapore), South Asia (India), and the Middle East (United Arab Emirates) that would be feasible within a five-week period.

The 5-week field sojourn took place from April 21<sup>st</sup> to May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010, though preparations, correspondence, and administration had been occurring since October 2009 in order to ensure as smooth a journey as possible.

As with any choice of methodology, there are typically many assumptions inherent in the formulation, delivery, and ultimate processing of quantitative data collected through surveys. Thus, the approach of "multiple methods, multiple measures" favoured by qualitative social scientists was a prudent choice that would leave fewer stones unturned in the grand scheme of the project.

The opportunity to observe games and gamers in their 'natural' and 'national' contexts presented a unique and timely opportunity in a rapidly changing and growing global arena of virtual environments. It was therefore important to send members of the MARVEL team abroad to document important aspects of virtual worlds in their native contexts, that would stand to contribute greatly to the overall understanding of these worlds by the VERUS project and provide information about the uses and suitability of these methods, to the conditions in various prospective field sites. What we learned from administering this instrument in each of the field sites was extremely useful in informing us about what a full formal VERUS international LAN study would involve.

### ***Research Design***

The overall fieldwork was designed to accomplish a number of preliminary research objectives, while respecting the integrity of the naturalistic setting in which the

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encounters with local participants would necessitate a level of trust and rapport exceeding that of conventional lab studies.

We developed and used a draft survey, whose structure, delivery method, and content was informed by plans for the VERUS study, so that we could, in as natural a setting as possible, get a good sense of:

- a) Whether and how administering such a survey might be possible
- b) What the potential restrictions are at a local level
- c) What the technological infrastructure would make possible/impossible
- d) What cultural and workplace norms and regulations are required or enabled or prevented
- e) What types of socio economic conditions people would be working under.

In each location, the goal would be to:

1. Source local resources for documentation, preparation, translation (Japan and Korea) and ground assistance. These resources were always changing endogenously and exogenously from site to site.
2. Recruit local participants who qualified for the data collection instruments. Namely, the survey and travelogue package. The general criteria for recruitment was that the local participant be, according to our initial guidelines a) 19 years or older, in order to fulfill the SFU ethics requirements for which this study was approved b) spend time in virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft, Second Life, or other such Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games where participation required the use of an 'avatar' or customizable character c) be willing to participate in the survey/travelogue package.
3. Pilot these methods in the above manner at local sites of play, such as Internet Cafes or other quasi-public networked sites. This involved the ability to communicate the intention of the academic researcher (not sent by industrial competitive intelligence/marketing companies), inconvenience/risk to the participant (which would be minimal), and incentives to the participant for cooperation.
4. Wrap-up the study in a manner that leaves the door open to future formal inquiries in that region, and documentation of events obtained.

While the logistics, timeline, and sequence of events were all challenges to be overcome in the field, it is paramount that this report conveys the "free radical" that the concept of "**culture**" introduces to what might otherwise be construed as a neat and tidy affair. Ultimately, the more cognizant of the interaction between culture, society, and technology we can be, the more we have to gain in the way of knowledge in how to best conduct investigations of sociotechnical phenomena such as virtual environments and real users.

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This preliminary fieldwork constituted an exploration intended to help in understanding how we might focus in on the most significant questions within diverse local sites, how they would be done, and especially to access the different meanings that people made of:

- a) informed consent procedures
- b) the taking of a survey in a public site
- c) how to make contacts and connections
- d) the culturally different conceptions of the level of commitment we were asking subjects for
- e) different notions of (and practices related to) privacy
- f) the effectiveness (and acceptability of) snowball sampling methods in each location
- g) different configurations of LANs which could either enable or preclude our doing the observations and making the contacts which we would want to make

... and other things we would learn during this sojourn for the formal study, based on this initial foray.

### ***Report Guide***

This report is designed to inform the reader about some of the complexities inherent in this type of field research. Firstly, each site has its own contextual narrative, describing the execution of the protocol as events occurred in chronological order. Secondly, the “Takeaway section – bits and bytes from...” section outlines the non-temporally dependent aspects of each site. This includes the most important standout topics of each site, profiling the functions of LAN centres in various locations, including participant recruitment, preliminary findings, and survey/travelogue particulars.

Being ‘fieldwork,’ necessitated that one be flexible and accommodate events not occurring ‘like clockwork’ in the order mentioned above, or sometimes at all. The work was constrained by two significant and often-conflicting challenges: limited time to run the study; and finding the right balance between breadth and depth of encounters with participants.

The plan for this work was ambitious, even for the turnarounds of industry with which I was familiar, which typically included at least one month of prep before each site, plus sourcing local talent, the fieldwork period, and then at least another month after. For this study, I did five.

The workings for this field sojourn had begun months prior to the physical journey that took place during the course of 5 weeks. Everything from the fieldwork plan, countries, sourcing local helpers (“Informants” as they say in anthropological

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parlance), translation, and a baseline of satisfied ethics requirements was determined to the best of my ability before I would land in each country. As anyone knows, however, the necessity of presence and face time makes itself very known in its native context.

The following five sections each focus on the respective sites of Korea, Singapore, India, the UAE, and Japan. After discussing the particularities of each site, I will compare and tease out some of the most pressing findings arising from the research. While this overview will be necessarily crude, I hope that some aspects of what is said here will provoke and pique interest so that we may ultimately move forward on choice items and issues surfacing from this exposition.

## **Korea April 22<sup>nd</sup> – April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2010**

This section describes the series of events and encounters that enabled the tool and protocol development in Korea.

April 21, 2010

Wednesday morning began with an early flight from Vancouver to San Francisco, a 4-hour layover, and then 12-hour flight to Seoul. By the time I got into Seoul, it was late in the evening of the 22<sup>nd</sup>. I rented a cell phone at the airport and made calls to my contacts. As there was no time to waste, I checked into my accommodation and had my first meeting that evening with a key contact, Steve, in order to explain the project, its inherent challenges/constraints, and to figure out the ways in which he would be able to assist me in this endeavour.

During our meeting discussing logistics, he confirmed emphatically that doing as much in Korean as possible would optimize our success rate (minimizing language-related attrition). After bandying about the options, one possible scheme was to:

1. Get the documents translated as originally intended
2. With those, we would not scare away many Koreans with a dauntingly thick English online survey.

Given the timing of my stay, we anticipated Monday/Tuesday would be the best opportunity to gather participants who would be willing to test the protocols. Weekends were going to be relatively quiet, given my previous dissertation fieldwork experience with the way Koreans use PC bangs (Internet Cafes), and the days during the work week presented the best chance to get people together and schedule sessions.

The next days would be crucial. Once I was able to obtain Korean copies of the survey, he would be able to call for participants in his network (the best and sometimes only way to introduce oneself). I got back to the hotel, fired off emails to back home and the translators before some sleep.

Once Friday morning was already upon me, I felt very compelled to get the day started at 730am. Seeing my surroundings by the light of day, I realized just how many 'love hotels' surrounded my apartment building, with relatively few places to eat something quick. I found a general eatery servicing hung over businessmen, and those grabbing a quick rice roll (kim bap) on their way to work. Sitting amongst them in my jet lagged state, I felt right at home and just as challenged in staying upright at my table.

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I went back to the apartment to make further arrangements and appointments, as much in this part of the world is difficult to arrange unless one has presence in the country.

To provide the reader with an idea of how rapidly infrastructure in Korea changes, the subway ticket machines had almost completely automated their system from the previous year that I was in the country. Usually, there would be staff at a ticket counter in addition to automatic card machines. At this point, the staff was gone and touch-screen machines with many more capabilities were in their places. If already familiar with this technology, it was relatively easy to figure out. After I had refilled my card (which still worked in this system) a middle-aged Korean woman came to me and asked me to show her how to use the machine with which she was unfamiliar.

I took the green line to City Hall to meet a couple of academic contacts at an easy to find landmark. The problem was that the surface was largely under construction, so I had to make my way through a maze of underground passages in order to get there. We caught up and discussed the purpose of the research project in Korea in the sprawling underground marketplace frequently patronized by salarymen and politicians alike. It turned out that Daejeon would be a good place to extend my search for participants. I was not certain if I needed to make the trip there, as I wanted to see how the research fared in Seoul before venturing farther afield than intended for this sojourn.



Still slightly overwhelmed from the journey, I concluded the meeting and made my way into the center of town to visit another network in the Itaewon area, which is a common place for expats to live, with close proximity to the Yongsan military base. I was able to meet with people there and get them to ask around and see if I could meet with some people who spent time in virtual

worlds from these networks in the next few days.

Later that night, I met with contacts from the games industry who were located in both Korea and other countries who could possibly get people they knew to participate. It was important to make contact with these people as I only had a very limited amount of time to do so. I talked about the research with some of them who agreed to talk to their co-workers for me as well. Unfortunately, it was a Friday



night, and there was only a slim chance that people would be responsive during the weekend.

The next morning (24<sup>th</sup>) began quietly at 8am, which is typical for weekend mornings in Seoul. I took the relative calm to do some scouting of the neighborhood. As I was walking around snapping pictures of PC bangs, I came



across many shops and services hidden in various nooks and crannies contributing to the density of the area. After spending the morning scouting and taking pictures, I returned to my room to catch up with the international correspondence and fieldnotes.

I got a call from the translator who would be handling the Korean documents. He was in another province doing another

translation job so he could not start in on my job for which I had just received clearance today. He still wanted the job, however, so he could prioritize the survey and ethics form for Sunday. He would also double-check the accuracy with a native Korean friend. The timeline was more delayed than I would like, but given the late turnaround for the authorization, it was the most doable solution to receive the documents in an economical and timely fashion.

That evening, I met with a few different types of contacts in order to efficiently disclose my objectives in Korea and indirectly solicit assistance for this research. This group included a professor at Seoul National University who was able to put me in touch with her contact at KAIST who uses Second Life in order to teach his students, and seemed like a promising lead.

One Korean university student I talked with said that according to her experience, it seems that the people in Internet cafes are the younger elementary/teen set, who could not be interviewed due to informed consent concerns. According to my experience, most of the time they are trying to escape sanctions on play by their parents, or just blowing off some steam in between the grinder of the Korean educational system. Additionally, the games they play at the PC bangs are typically not virtual worlds as those take more time to make one sitting worth the while and is not an attractive way to spend a limited allowance.

As for my own neighbourhood scans, there is a noticeable drop in number of PC bangs around since my last visit less than 2 years ago. The niche for communal spaces seem to be increasingly filled by coffee houses: Dunkin Donuts, Starbucks, Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf, and other brands sporting Korean names like “Gurunaru.”

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These coffee and dessert places typically attempt to impart a cosmopolitan feeling, with burnished wood tables and velvet upholstery seating. They are frequented by courting couples, groups of girls, packs of housewives during the daytime and an



assortment of laptop-wielding patrons coveting the complementary wifi. The increasing patronage of such businesses that offer these spaces are the death knell of the 'golden age of PC bangs' earlier in the decade. In that time period, those PC bangs had to serve many purposes, including courtship, that was signaled by the existence of "couple zones" or "couple chairs" that were designed to provide a couple two

different computers to do their respective activities while technically being together. With the dessert places like "A Twosome Place" consistently taking over multi-level temples to "coffee talk," it is little wonder why the numbers and demand for PC bangs are dwindling.

In discussing this observation, another Korean resident told me he did not notice this phenomenon, but when I brought it up, it made sense. This was the benefit of being an outsider and noticing things to which the locals have become accustomed.

In terms of infrastructure, the PC bangs emerged at a time when the government implemented nationwide broadband and the Asian economic crisis destroyed lifelong careers and created entrepreneurs. These PC bangs not only served to create a baseline of computer literacy in the population when access to computers at home was scarce, but they also provided a de facto community centre in places where such resources were scarce. The consistency with Korea, is that it is always changing.



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On Sunday (25<sup>th</sup>), I was thinking of investigating the centre of Seoul in the north, Myeongdong. So I ventured out and got some breakfast at the local Korean juk (congee) place to have something relatively healthy. I surmised that Sundays are the days that proprietors give non-family staff time off, because I asked the Ajumma<sup>1</sup> for a bowl of juk. Not long after the juk was ready and on the table, the Ajeossi<sup>2</sup>, who was the owner came in, surprised me when he offered me water or tea. When I sputtered my response, he became very interested in this person who looked Korean but spoke broken Korean. He asked me all manners of things like how long I was staying, how much rain is in Vancouver, and a variety of miscellaneous personal questions that are typical when a Korean is trying to figure someone out. It was strange being in the hot seat when this Ajeossi took an interest in me, especially in another language. He was a happy good natured Ajeossi though, so I took it in stride as an ethnographic opportunity. I asked if he had ever been to Canada, and he said he had never been anywhere but Korea, but that a relative of his lives in Vancouver.



He finally left me to finished my breakfast and offered me more side dishes, but I politely refused and went back to my place to get my walking shoes on. I thought I would 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 a subway station, I came across a PC bang that caught my attention. I thought I'd take a look, so I trekked up the stairs to the 3rd floor, and came upon a banner of WoW, and a very nice café with faux wood benches and PCs, leather chairs. I grabbed a card at the front desk and proceeded to find my workstation 29. I went to 29 (in the smoking section) and the Ajeossi at the counter asked if I was a smoker, and I said no. So he told me to use one of the stations on the side closest to him. Frankly, I didn't see a difference because it was all the same air (and the more exciting gamers seemed to be on the other side) but I acquiesced.

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<sup>1</sup> Generic term for "middle aged woman."

<sup>2</sup> Generic term for "middle aged man."

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Perhaps the Ajeossi wanted to keep an eye on me, as women like me were quite the oddity in these places. I went to the relatively boring side, where a couple of youths were playing what looked like casual games. The workstation I was at prompted me for a Korean national ID number, which I did not have. I hit the other button, and the Ajeossi came up behind me and said because I was not a member, I had to go in through the other dialogue box and just enter the number on my card. Given my now obvious foreigner status, I got the same 20 questions from this Ajeossi about my life story.

Once I was in the system, I wanted to observe the surroundings and stay there for at least 2 hours to see what type of environment was naturally occurring on a Sunday. I tried to tap into the productivity software to send myself observations via email, but it was really strange with Ajeossi watching. I tried accessing World of Warcraft, and for the Korean login, it would not accept my Battlenet account. It was even the case where people did not seem to access Internet Explorer very often at all because the software was not updated properly and kept encouraging me to install old patches.



Enough time had passed, and with the Ajeossi milling around and seeming like he was in a chatty mood, I began easing him into some of the manager-oriented questions. I gave him my business card to establish my legitimacy, and we talked about universities and our 'origin stories.' During our talk, I found out he was a very interesting fellow with his own (but all too representative) story in Korea.

By this time, I could tell that most of the research criteria did not apply because he was trying to show me some of the MMORPGs and upon clicking the icons there were patches he needed to install, which showed that quite some time had passed since these games were accessed. . It was still not the type of situation for me to ask any more of what he already felt comfortable sharing with me of his own volition, so I let him lead the discussion. He said the popular games were Aion, WoW, and Call of Duty (an FPS). Looking around, I saw some users playing Starcraft (an RTS), and also Counterstrike (FPS). Ajeossi told me he had an Aion account and happened to be level 25. So he showed me. I asked him if I could take pictures and he permitted me to snap a couple.

When we were just chatting, I asked him what the usual clientele was, elementary or high school, he responded with a guarded, "I don't like them to come... it's not good..." Whether or not he was saying kids were discouraged from coming to the PC bang for my benefit has yet to be seen. I asked him what is the busiest time, and he said Sunday (today) was slow, but on weekdays, the afternoon until 11pm is busier.



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It's a 24 hr PC bang, and the wee hours of the morning 11pm-7am it costs a little more (when alternative activities are more scarce).

We chatted about all sorts of things to do with how he came to this line of work, including the Asian Financial Crisis (IMF period) like many of his contemporaries. He seemed relatively sincere when he let his guard down, but probably would not have been the type to volunteer information if he felt it made his situation look bad. This seemed to be a case of reading between the lines, non-verbal cues, and the importance of being able to interpret silence.

I asked if there were any women who came to this PC bang, and he said, "my wife." She helps run the place mostly in the daytime when it's slower. By then, my 90 minutes cost about 2300 Won<sup>3</sup>, and the silences were getting longer and more awkward. It was approaching his lunch time after all, so I paid, said I might come back when it was busier, and left.

As I left, I wondered if he thought I was a member of a government law enforcement agency monitoring the presence of minors. I wondered if he would be more careful about kids being there during the day. It was uncertain, but this place was somewhere I wanted to hit again, and keep in mind in case I hit a really tough spot in the next two days. Knowing the place never closed (24 hrs) was good for accommodating my schedule for the next few days.

With my mind spinning with more to process of the last few hours than expected, I



ended up at a Starbucks in the early afternoon to top up my caffeine levels so that I could plunk myself down and furiously journal the initially low-key day that turned into an intensely ethnographic moment.

It was interesting to observe the Sunday afternoon traffic at a 'coffee temple' like Starbucks as well. Pulling out my laptop at a corner table, I intermittently sipped my coffee, typed on the computer, and

watched the various people come and go. At first, I was happy that the place now advertised free wireless Internet provided by G-Market. However, when I tried to access it, I was again confronted with the problem of not possessing a Korean National ID number. Working offline was not a problem for such a short time, but it was a stark reminder of how even the simplest things require an ID number in Korea.

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<sup>3</sup> Receipts are not normally given at these places as they are casual and paid for in cash by non-members

Before long, it was approaching the time to meet with another professor, with whom I had arranged an appointment when we could not meet one another on Friday. We caught up on our mutual acquaintances, and chatted about how he would see if he had students who played MMORPGs willing to take the survey. During this time, my translator also called and I simultaneously worked out details of the materials with him. Later that night, I went back “home” and further corresponded with the translator regarding the priority of materials and their particularities for the research, receiving each document one at a time and working out meetings for the next day.

By the time Monday (24<sup>th</sup>) was rolling around and translated materials in hand at last, I was getting quite anxious about whether or not all the seeds I had planted would come to any type of fruition before I had to leave early Wednesday. I awoke in the morning in a calm state of fret, thinking of various schemes by which more participants could be persuaded and recruited.

I called up another contact, who had assisted me during site visits in previous fieldwork endeavours, asking her to meet me for a chat in a coffee shop that morning. She was busy with university exams, but was willing to meet me at breakfast for a quick bite. Though I had initially been reluctant to lean on her because of her lack of availability, I’m glad I did. I laid out the incentivization scheme that I figured would yield more participants. While she could not accompany me, she was kind enough to do me a favour and phone her friend who was studying to be a diplomat! Eventually throughout the day, we were able to schedule a meeting with 3 people for that night in addition to the liaison.

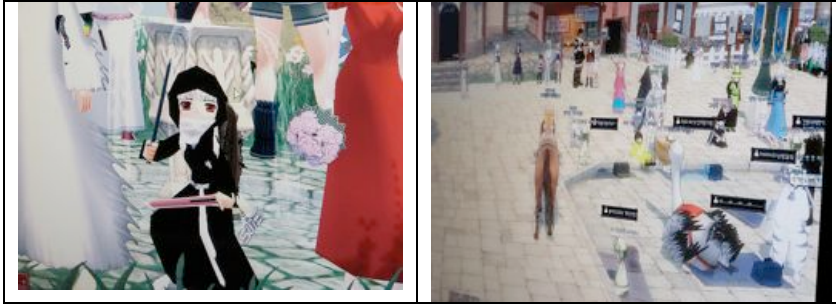
Now that I had distributed the Korean materials to Steve, there was also the industry side of things. It was still to be determined whether or not I would have security clearance to enter the building, given that I was a researcher. As I was about to head out to meet Steve, he texted me and said that due to the security concerns of his building that he needed to be accountable personally and the ‘cold approach’ was definitely not acceptable. Being company people, the participants were not willing to meet outside their building at a PC bang either. He ended up heavily liaising and garnering many participants.

I met with the participants recruited that evening. We met at the subway station, where one of the participants had yet to show up because he was running late after work. We decided to wait at the closest Coffee Bean and during that time I got them refreshments, and their paperwork (ethics) done. It was good to see female participants, given the typical skew of games towards a male majority.

Eventually, the outlying participant showed up and we got him similarly settled. So, with a cluster of participants, we ran through the rain and construction sites to the neighbourhood PC bang with which I was now familiar. An old lady was managing the front counter, and she pointed us to three different workstations. While the

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participants got settled, I cast a glance around at other patrons, and they were all playing either RTS or FPS games.



As the time was ticking, I would first do the travelogue with each person. The process took longer for a couple of them who were “Mabinogi” players.

The PC bang did not have that game installed on their stations, so it was a while for downloading and installing the game client (which amazingly we were able to do).

The first participant was a WoW player, so while the others were downloading I did his travelogue. It was a difficult setup because while roomy for a PC bang, it was cramped for us to stand behind the players to ask questions, make notes, and take pictures. The liaison assisted in language, and also being an extra set of hands!

Then the next two participants played Mabinogi, so while the last participant was finishing installing, I did the travelogue with the male player. Eventually, with the participants taken care of, we had spent so much time there getting sorted out, that the participants by now were quite fatigued, including myself. I was also scheduled to be in Daejeon bright and early the following morning so we decided that the participants would finish the survey on their own time. I did not need to worry about attrition in this case because they were tied by friendship networks and could be considered reliable/trustworthy. It also became apparent that while live translation from the liaison was beneficial, these participants did in fact have the ability to understand my spoken English as well as read and it was a matter of ease and confidence. It was simply the case in Korea where there is little incentive and opportunity to practice English and so participants would not have been able to convey their ideas as quickly in any language other than Korean.

So, I thanked them for their time and they promised to get the online surveys filled out after I assigned them tokens and showed them how to submit them.

My final day in Korea was a full one. I made my way bright and early to the train station in the centre of Seoul and bought a ticket for the high speed KTX train to Daejeon to meet people at KAIST. The journey took approximately an hour, and the taxi driver was not familiar with the campus, but eventually I got there. There, I managed to meet with educationally-minded Second Lifers. The Second Life users were definitely after something different, as they used it for educational purposes as well as flexing their artistic muscles.

Because I was in Daejeon, I could meet with professors at KAIST after all. I was introduced to a group of avid graduate students, one of whom was able to take the

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survey. They were unavailable at that point to do the travelogue, but they took down the details and were willing to ask around. The added complication was that the campus blocked 'games' and monitored web traffic. There was also concern over accounts being hacked in public LANs. This was a common theme I was bumping up against in that virtual world players were mostly playing from their own systems. KAIST is a very promising location however full of enthusiasm, and the offer is open for me to return to attempt recruiting more participants in the future.

That evening, I was perusing the survey answers, I panicked that these people said "no" when prompted with the question of "Do you play video games?" But actually, in Korea "video games" are thought of as distinct from "online games," so it was a reminder of how these questions could be interpreted differently (and more precisely in some cases).

With all the seeds planted at the onset, the frantic data collection in Korea ended up occurring within the last couple of days. Given the timeline with which I was working, I had the feeling the other sites would be mirroring this pace. In the morning (28<sup>th</sup>), it was time to throw my things in the suitcase and make it to the airport for an early morning flight to my next site, Singapore.



### ***Takeaway section – bits and bytes from Korea***

#### **Standout topics:**

- almost 50 million people, with a relatively homogenous native Korean population.
- Living is dense, especially in Seoul with over 10 million people.
- PC bangs came about because of a perfect storm in nationwide broadband policy, and the IMF crisis that ushered in an era of entrepreneurial activity
- PC gaming dominates in this country. One main reason is that Japanese products (including console games) were banned from the country until 1998
- 1998 was also the year Blizzard's StarCraft, came to Korea. It remains a flagship game despite its age.
- There is a real industry of professional gaming in Korea, unlike anywhere else.

#### **Recruitment/Relationships/Rapport**

- Recruitment was done by introduction.
- Rapport is absolutely essential, as approaching potential participants cold is not done.
- This reflects cultural attitudes in everyday interactions.

#### **LANS in Korea**



- In every neighborhood, only varying capacities and amenities
- Most are membership based, but casual user fees are still possible
- Most Korean websites require logging on with one's personal equivalent of a social security number (implications and statistics) though there are fakes and foreigners often have had to get around this in one way or another
- Free wifi at cafes with personal laptop is quickly subsuming the communicative/courtship role of the game room

## Reasons

Just some of the many explanations for the place of the PC bang/online gaming in popular culture are listed here:

- Extant Infrastructure
- English acquisition (educational pressures) (institutionalized or independent)
- Internal and external community
- Military service (Life cycle)
- Hagwons/assorted truancy (educational pressures)
- Courtship (Life cycle) (see also pornography, online dating, privacy from family)
- Unemployment (Economic pressure)
- Socioeconomic factors (Economic pressure – patrons and proprietors)
- Third place (community centre)
- Corporate sponsorship, (sport media play media integration) (Economic pressures, career mobility)

## ***Peak times for play***

As mentioned in the narrative above, the peak times for PC bang patronage typically followed an ‘Asian metropolis pattern,’ with busy weeknights after work. Weekends during the daytime have very low numbers, as people spend time with their families or are recovering at home.

Weekdays are comprised of students of all ages “in between” cram/regular school sessions, and youth university-aged and up. It is a clear majority of males who play in these centres. There are different rates for different times. One can buy ‘bundles’ of 4 or 8 hours for discounted flat rate, or something similarly linked to their membership to that particular PC bang. Different times of the day, low periods (during the workday) will cost less than peak demand times in the evening.

## **Breakdown of participant numbers**

In total, 6 online surveys (lans 1-6 + travelogues for lans 1-5) in English and 24 Word document surveys plus 24 travelogues were collected in Korean.

<b>Language</b>	<b>Survey</b>	<b>Travelogue</b>
English (Online)	Lans 1-6	Lans 1-5
Korean (Word.doc)	24	24
<b>KOREA GRAND TOTAL: 30</b>		

### **Incentivization**

Working with the Korean Won currency, there were the basic incentives where I gave participants 20,000 KRW for completing the survey/travelogue package. Others recruited in Daejeon did it without need for financial incentive due to social capital. I retained the live translator/liaison for 10,000 KRW per participant and paid the document translator 250,000 KRW. During that time, refreshments and sometimes meals were necessary to retain people ensure good relations.

### **Online survey and Web browsers**

In terms of survey back-end development, it is important to note that Korea (and the majority of markets in Asia) are primarily, if not almost completely reliant upon, the use of Internet Explorer for browsing the Web. Though browser choices are becoming more diverse to include others like Firefox, the gains made by PC adoption in the late 90s and early 2000s have created a path dependency that continues to work for and against site developers creating for the Korean market, including websites for government and banking, which still heavily use ActiveX. We would need to find the workaround for potential performance problems if we propose to use the online English survey in its current form. This consideration may result in usability issues and should be noted in the continued testing of the online survey on multiple platforms.

## Singapore April 28<sup>th</sup> – May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010

I landed on a tropically muggy, cloudy, dark, and stormy Wednesday evening (28<sup>th</sup>). The shuttle bus into town stopped at many hotels around the city and provided some orientation to my new surroundings for the coming week.

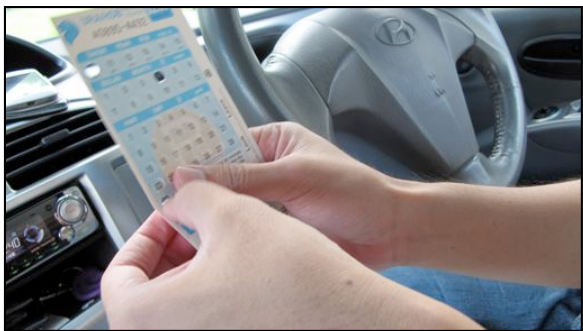
With just enough time to notify my Singaporean contacts that I had landed and proceed to make concrete plans with them, I contented myself with the welcome bag of peanuts that greeted me in the room before falling asleep utterly exhausted.

Emailing, phoning, Skypeing, and MSNing, I caught up with the people who I had mostly ignored in my efforts concerning the Korean fieldsite the past week. So, I had to “close” Korea and “open” the Singapore site.

I managed to catch a Singaporean friend via MSN as he was finishing his day at work. Our conversation touched on a number of topics including the difficulty in approaching people here cold turkey, the internal security department, or general law enforcement of youths in cafes, scoping out the right types of cafes here, getting more people involved if I was here for longer, and the possibility of me going with him to see a board game café.

He tried to help by forwarding some potential places, but many were not the types of cafes with virtual worlds, or had gone under. He felt that LAN play was on the downswing because more people had access to their own machines in the way of home computers or laptops with wifi. We resolved to chat some more and meet on Friday. Corresponding with ground people upon arrival and making appointments, general settling into Singapore communication.

The following morning (29<sup>th</sup>), another contact, John was able to pick me up in his family vehicle. Having already briefed him via Skype the previous night, he had a



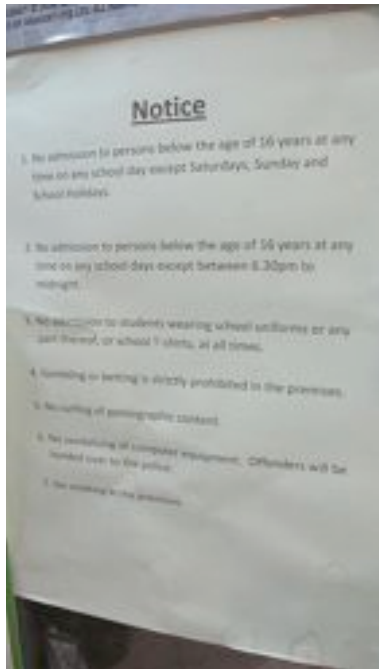
hunch about which places to hit first, given Singapore’s love for large air-conditioned malls.

First, we combed central and multi-level Park Lane mall, where there were many Internet cafes. I began assessing whether or not they were the right type of cafes offering virtual worlds, and took pictures of the fronts as I usually do. At

one of them, an older fellow confronted us and asked us all sorts of questions pertaining to our purpose there. At first John tried to explain our situation but then I interjected and explained as nicely as possible that I was an academic researcher interested in how people play games like World of Warcraft in cafes.



A smile, my university business card, and Canadian identity seemed to soften his initially confrontational demeanor. After he figured out that we were not a threat, he dismissed us by saying there was no one there at the time who would suit our purposes but that there may be later. As we walked away, John muttered that many proprietors are paranoid that we might be working with government or law enforcement organizations to enforce policies against allowing children to play during school days/nights.



During lunch at a Malay cafeteria, we had a chance to talk about his perspective on growing up and living in Singapore. He gave me cultural insight into what Singaporeans typically value and similarly hold in contempt. Of these ideas, the most prominent traits were that Singaporeans are generally very “status oriented,” and “do not talk about politics.” These ideas contributed to my method of approaching people in this relatively new country.<sup>1</sup>

We kept the conversation going as we walked in the broiling heat, strategically finding shady spots to stop while waiting for pedestrian walk signs to turn. It was necessary to stop often and keep hydrated, though if we had relied on my fresh and foreign system to signal break times, it would have been too late and we would have been much worse off. My brain was on work, but I could not ignore the demands of the body in a heat wave that had even local Singaporeans mewling for ice.

Not realizing how far gone my travel shoes were, they finally broke the night before and I bought a pair of shoes at Plaza Singapura, which was a brighter, busier mall than Park Lane. While there did not appear to be Internet cafes at this mall, there



<sup>1</sup> Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965.

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were collectible “geek” shops and a Cineplex.

We then walked around Plaza Singapura to the relatively new Doby Ghaut subway station and bought an MRT card for me to get discounted fares. John had been telling me about this place called “Hackerspace.sg” that he wanted to show me, so we drove to Kampong Glam, the Malay-Arab district of Singapore in which this place existed.



I knew we had arrived when we pulled up to a parking lot beside a huge golden mosque called “Sultan Masjid.” As we got out of the car, the sky got dark and suddenly opened up and we were showered by rain. Typical tropical weather. We ran to the entrance of Hackerspace, indicated by a very small sign on an unassuming white door, and rang the doorbell.

I clomped up a white staircase into a somewhat industrial loft-like atmosphere, filled with half-finished robots, a few desktop computers, newspaper clippings, a sitting area, and a kitchen/bar. I was brought in through the ‘library’ into a communal area of small desks, separated casually with fabric draping. John, a member of this space, introduced me to a few of the other members and invited me to sit down at one of the empty stations to catch up with their wifi on my own laptop. As we all tapped away, we had intermittent conversation about what this space signified and everyone’s stories.

When one of the women there heard what I was doing, she recommended that I join the space’s Google group and attempt to make contact with potential participants that way. Many others, who corresponded through the group list, were sympathetic to the relative lack of creative outlets that Singaporean youth have in contemporary society.

What was interesting about Hackerspace was what its slogan indicated: A Kiasu-free zone.” In the Hokkien language, “Kiasu” literally translated, is “Afraid to lose.” This word is often invoked to describe a prevailing cultural ideology of being somewhat risk-adverse, or going out on a limb, or doing anything in “good faith.” The members here generally have a shared biography of having been somewhat streamed into their ‘previous’ careers, and are now freer to explore ideas in this safe zone. This place was designed to counteract the tendency to “kiasu” in Singapore.

John had to do his own work tomorrow and Saturday, so I would not be seeing him at all. Upon returning to my place, I used the remaining time in the day to journal, correspond with the field sites, organize appointments for the week, and take care of administrative matters before finally falling asleep with the air conditioning cranked.



Friday (30<sup>th</sup>) started with too many things going on. After spending the morning online in teleconferences and emailing, I was fearful of running behind on my appointment at the Institute in order to meet with faculty there to see if we might be able to ultimately scare up some research participants. The taxi driver was a Mandarin speaker from China, and during the ride I managed to find out that he had been in Singapore since 1997, and that he lived on the outskirts of Singapore along with other workers from China. It was a stilted conversation, but still interesting given that from what people tell me, native Singaporeans are anxious about the implications of a rising China flooding the gates of the country and competing with them in the marketplace at an increasing speed. Tampines was also far enough out of the “Central City” of Singapore to be considered what Singaporeans call their “Heartland,” of a less cosmopolitan portion of the population.

Once we met, as one might expect, Charlie and I talked a lot about the research much more effectively in person than we had been able to in correspondence. However, due to the fact that I had come from such a long way and we were still professional colleagues, it was still the case where we formally exchanged business cards to kick off the lunch. I had had a momentary cross-cultural lapse in my stashing his card, while he kept mine out on the table in front of him. Note for next time. We had a good conversation about the ins and outs of institutions and how to get this research in general accomplished.

We went to an electronics store that sold mobiles, and I got the cheapest one available. That way, I would be able to use local SIM cards in Singapore, Bangalore, and Dubai at least. Charlie got me a discount because he had a membership card. We went next door to ask about prepaid SIM cards, and they recommended we go to another mall. Perplexed, we went to the next shop where they did have SIM cards available for purchase and I just showed my passport and bought one. Odd that the other store told us to go to a different mall altogether, but it was likely a competition reason.

Back at the Institute, I sat in on Charlie’s class as he briefed the (all male) multimedia students about their field outing to a board game café. While I was not able to interview them as subjects (they were under 19), I went along with the group to observe the board game café environment.

Due to the sheer number of us, we walked in the muggy heat order to save costs and keep the group together. During the walk, Charlie and I discussed sundry items further. Our conversation turned to the compulsory military service that all males in Singapore must do. The service typically lasts about 2 years after junior college and is then followed by 10 years of intermittent service obligations. This is in contrast to neighbouring Malaysia, which does not require such service.

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At the café, Charlie checked in everyone at the counter. We sat at tables, got board games, and ordered drinks. It is interesting to note that there was a large group of boisterous company workers. Even more interesting was that there was no alcohol on the premises. I observed a significant lack of alcohol consumption in places where

I would have otherwise seen it (in other countries). I believe the proximity to Islamic populations has further de-emphasized the need for alcohol consumption in order to socially network in Singapore. This is in quite stark contrast with North East Asia, where alcohol is quite common and prevalent in everyday social environments.

While at the café, Charlie pulled out his laptop and showed me a service available to all registered Singaporeans called “Wireless SG.” Register, and as long as one is in proximity to the numerous hotspots, access to wifi is available. With the apparent widespread paranoia over hackers in public spaces, using one’s own laptop with access to wifi has become the preferred option if at all possible here. This development presented negative implications for the café studies I was to conduct,



but nonetheless the trend for both Korea and Singapore so far.

During this time, I also made some calls to the links I had obtained so far for Internet cafes. It seemed that turnover was quite common and these places no longer existed.

Once back at the Institute, I met with another contact who walked me around the campus and we chatted about the research. He said that my ethics constraint of recruiting participants aged 19+ would be a problem for recruiting from most of the junior college. Those about to graduate would be 19, however, and accessible when their classes were in session (which at that point they were not) and they use Second Life to do courses in fashion design and the like. This was an opportunity to keep in mind for the future.

On Saturday (May 1<sup>st</sup>), it was Labour Day in Singapore. In corresponding with John, he said that an honorarium might motivate people, but not to worry about paying him for his help. It was kind of him to regard me as a friend, but given his assistance it was only proper.

I made coffee in my room and was busily getting the day’s correspondence done before meeting Pradesh, who is a graduate student... at the National University of Singapore (NUS). I was hoping that he would be able to give me some leads on



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virtual worlders in his neck of the woods. Also, being Tamil in origin, he was going to show me the Indian expat parts of Singapore with which he was the most familiar. This day would be most enlightening for all the wrong reasons, in some ways.

We walked along the street and swarms of male migrant labourers roamed the streets. Some of them were in groups chatting over some food while others just seemed to pass the time. In all cases my presence in the neighbourhood seemed to stop conversation. All the while, I noticed some very basic Internet cafes, but nothing of the virtual world type. Understandable, given that the population would likely need communication services more than virtual worlds!

Pradesh took me to see a Hindu temple, and to do some prayer himself. We entered the compound, where people removed their shoes and washed their feet before entering the main temple area. In the main prayer room, there were people sitting in the middle of the floor absorbed in prayer and I was not quite certain where to step, so I



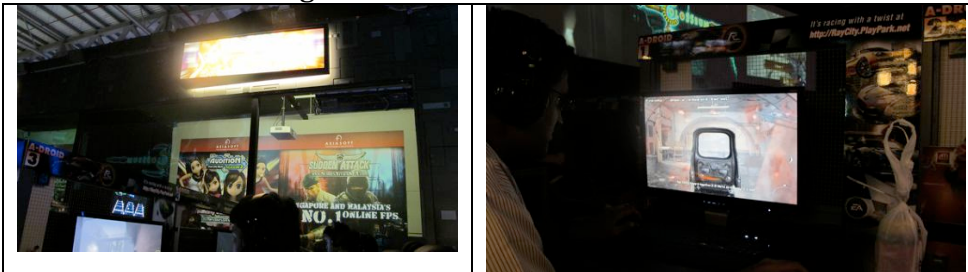
turned to Pradesh and I told him to lead and I would follow. He went to a station with red powder and white powder, used them to put a dot on his forehead, and motioned for me to do the same. Respectfully, I obliged. As we made our way to the different altars, he explained some of the more obscure ones inside and outside the temple. Once back inside, we walked in a circle around Vishnu with other temple goers and exited. With our shoes and game face back on, we walked along the shops with the crowd, and had a coconut break.



Given the holiday, the mall facilities were quite packed, including the coffee shops and movie theatres. While looking at the “Now Playing” marquee, I couldn’t help but notice a sign saying, “SINGAPORE’S BIGGEST LAN GAMING CENTRE.” It was uncanny. We headed up to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of the plaza, where we found Tornado gaming centre, with 200 computers. It was impressive, with 3 large movie sized screens, and an industrial club-like atmosphere. Most people have memberships at

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these places, so it was odd that I would just drop in. However, I asked for a station and got sat near the front unfortunately so I could not see much. I asked Pradesh to play with the computer so I could be freed up to observe what was going on in the centre without being too intrusive. I could make notes and take pictures of Pradesh playing. Looking around, we saw the relationship dynamics and how not one person was playing MMORPGs there. It was mostly first person shooter games or real-time strategy. Given the premium price of this centre, it made sense that virtual worlds were not the genre of choice for this environment.

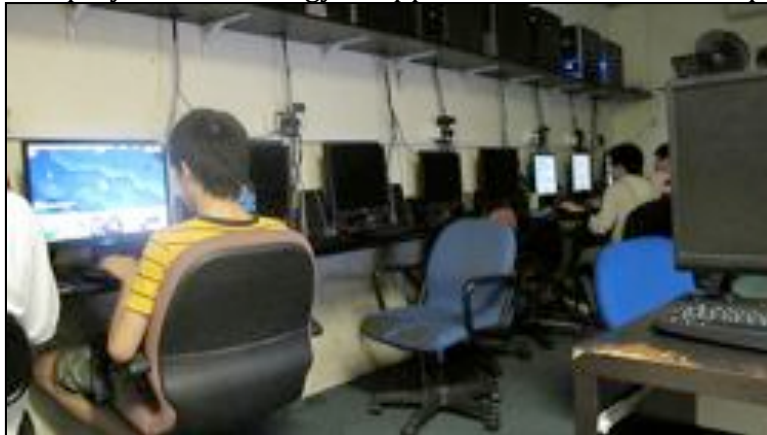


On Sunday (2<sup>nd</sup>), John met me for brunch at a well-known halal chicken rice place near to Park Lane, in order to fuel up and discuss plans for the day ahead. With the scouting and cultural context more or less assessed, it was time to be aggressive in scouting participants in the remaining half of my stay in Singapore.



John and I ventured into Park Lane, and this time I mentioned right away that I was from Canada, and looking for people who played MMORPGs like World of Warcraft. If the café had people playing the game, I asked the manager to point to people he would recommend approaching.

I employed this strategy of approach at a café called AquaRius, and the fellow at the



front counter was receptive. He said to come back when he was off his shift in an hour, so we went to our other prospective café, "Spot On." This café was one of the smallest, darkest, and dingiest, in the entire mall. Naturally, John and I knew that our chances were best for finding

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virtual worlders who spend lots of time here!

We approached the manager at his own little computer station and told him about the research. He pointed out one guy named who would be willing, so we got him to do the survey. After an initial hesitation to sign anything (like the ethics form), when we got him talking about World of Warcraft, he relaxed, and he told us more about himself. One particularity was that he was waiting to get into a dungeon and would not take the survey because that would require either leaving the computer or tabbing out—neither of which he was willing to do. So we did the travelogue with him and gave him the token/URL for the survey so he could fill it out later. He plays every day until midnight, except system maintenance day, which is in the middle of the night in North America, but in Singapore translates to the bulk of a Tuesday night evening, unfortunately!

Pausing for an iced tea, John remarked to me that the participant lit up when I questioned him about achievements during the travelogue.

Going back to the AquaRius café, we got the participant after his shift ended. He filled out the survey and did the travelogue with me, but everyone else in the café was either playing another game like DoTA or were very disinclined to engage me in any conversation.

At another café, I asked if they had World of Warcraft, but most players were occupied with first person shooter games like Left 4 Dead. The manager recommended I talk to an older fellow who was nice about chatting with me, but not at all interested in helping me out with the research.

I ducked back to the hotel to catch up on more correspondence, and dinner was a typical roadside hawker plaza, where one of the owners of a stall is hearing impaired and reads people's lips to figure out what they're ordering.

Then, I would go directly from the centre of town to hackerspace to give my talk and possibly recruit some survey participants. After that, I planned to go back to Park Lane and see if the late night gamers were able to take my survey.



Upon arrival at Hackerspace on Monday (3<sup>rd</sup>), I had the chance to chat with another member there about the common theme of quitting a lucrative job to pursue something more fulfilling. I was also texting back and forth

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with a possible contact locus for surveys to be done tomorrow.

During my talk, I explained my research background, and ultimately why I was in Singapore. A member from industry was sitting in and his coworkers happened to use Second Life. The problem was the short notice, but he emailed them after the talk to see if they would be willing to participate in the research. It did not happen given the timeline, but they are a group to keep in mind for next time.

Following the presentation, I got a few leads on potential participants who, though they may not have been available to meet in the next day or so, be able to in subsequent visits as well. The important thing is that contact was made. It was now time to go back to round up more gamers. John accompanied me by public transit, but once we got to the café, I understood that he had to leave. I would have too if given the choice, as it was not determined how long I would need to stay there. I introduced myself to the shift manager, and he was on the willing side of indifferent about my presence. It was definitely busier this night, with some of the same people I had seen previously. By already knowing people at the café, the other gamers were more relaxed about my presence and willing to help me out. The problem was that they were in the middle of a high level raid in WoW and the online survey would take them away from the instance. Raids involve a lot of concentration when a boss is engaged, but there is also a lot of waiting in the interim. The nature of raiding is to try, fail, wait, and attempt again so I was there making notes and jumping whenever someone was actually willing to talk with me. When my participant pool had been exhausted for the night, I made my way out of the otherwise empty mall in the wee hours of the morning, hailed a cab, and got back to the hotel to fall asleep for only a little while.

A few hours later that Tuesday (4<sup>th</sup>), I went to the hotel front desk to see if I could get some of my consent forms photocopied. The clerk was apologetic about not having a business centre, but because I was in a hurry to my appointments, she used scrap paper to give me the photocopies I needed. She told me it was free of charge for this one time only. It was nice of her, but the scrap paper had hotel patron's names on them, which wasn't the best security move. Oh well!

My first appointment was with Wendy and her boyfriend, who both played WoW. They were going to meet me in a common area at Singapore Management University (SMU) in order to do the survey package. I got to SMU, snarfed down a kaya toast and kopi ping for breakfast in the rising temperature and got to the rendezvous point. The couple showed up and we proceeded to do the survey package on her laptop. She told me that people, including herself, are quite paranoid about using public computers because they don't want to have their accounts compromised by keyloggers or hackers. Even the day before, one of the gamers who chatted at length with me mentioned that he only goes to a trusted internet cafe to play WoW because he doesn't trust other cafes with his account login.

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We completed the packages, though it took longer than necessary due to lag and the speed of the wifi as well. Wendy was able to hook a few more of her friends into meeting me at SMU in the evening to do the survey, so she gave me their numbers and my phone was constantly buzzing with texts attempting to arrange those meetings. I went back to the main cafe to see if anyone else could do the survey, and it was not busy at that point. A couple of the same people were there from the night before and I wondered if they had taken a break at any point?

I had an NUS student come to meet me with his laptop. We did the survey package in the hotel lobby with wifi, during which time things were getting so hectic with arranging the last barrage of participants that my phone was overloading and I ran overtime with this participant.

Taking the taxi back to the SMU part of town, John was thankfully already helping to set people up with their laptops. I got them signed in with the consent forms, and they did the surveys. Wendy's friends also met us, and we managed to do the package with them. However, because it was system maintenance night, a couple of people got cut off with the travelogue session past 8pm. It was a mad rush to get everyone else through. The ones who didn't get through agreed to send me screenshots of their play according to the travelogue.

Breathless, I met Paul at Hackerspace to do the survey package with a Second Life user. Able to pause in-world, he took screenshots as I interviewed my last participant of the night. This was more technically easygoing, because taking screenshots does not seem to disrupt the flow of a session in SL as it might in WoW if one is engaged in battle.

Departure day (5<sup>th</sup>), began at 630am to organize final details online, check out, and have final meetings. I had actually managed to squeeze in yet another participant the day of my departure. I got in a cab to go to NUS, and had an interesting chat with a native Singaporean driver who talked about how gambling is a really big problem in Singapore. I imagine it was fresh on their minds because of a large casino resort that had recently opened making the news.

With that, it was time to make my way to the airport for my evening flight into Bangalore. With little chance to breathe in the last few days, I called and/or texted people to thank them. It was time to say goodbye to Singapore, and hello to Bangalore.



### ***Takeaway section – bits and bytes from Singapore***

#### **Standout topics:**

- A population of 5 million on an island-city nation
- Majority Chinese population, amidst a fusion geopolitical situation
- Infrastructure is modeled after success stories like Japan and Korea
- Climate is prohibitive (tropical) year round and people will try to beat the heat.
- There is a great worry about hacked accounts.
- People are more inclined to have their own systems rather than play in public spaces, making this research more challenging.
- Despite apparent green space available, it is not really used due to heat and insects. So artificial surroundings are the most pragmatic solution for social gatherings.
- The island city is becoming even more densely populated.

#### **Public LANs and concern over hacking**

A current deterrent to public gaming that has become more prevalent has been the concern of getting one's account hacked. With a population that is getting even more sophisticated, there are correspondingly sophisticated hackers.

#### **Times of play**

- Weekends are alive (unlike Korea)
- Alcohol is not common at these spaces.
- The players here who do raid in World of Warcraft are often conversant with Australians and Americans, playing in their time zone preferences
- System maintenance occurs on Tuesday nights (in WoW) so players have to find alternative activities.

### ***Survey/travelogue technical outcome***

Out of all the countries surveyed in this sojourn, participant recruitment worked out the most predictably in Singapore though it was not immune to the periodic workarounds necessary in the field. The specifics shall be discussed in this section.

#### **Breakdown of participant numbers**

In total, 19 online surveys (lans 7-25) in English

<b>Language</b>	<b>Survey</b>	<b>Travelogue</b>
English (Online)	Lans 7-25	Lans 7-25
		Except Lans 23
<b>SINGAPORE GRAND TOTAL: 19</b>		

### **Incentivization**

Working with the Singapore Dollars (SGD), I provided participants with a \$10 SGD incentive for completing the survey/travelogue package. To account for varying levels of input and compliancy, I provided \$20 SGD to “super users” and roughly \$10 SGD to the liaison for each participant obtained with his assistance.

### **Ethics consent forms and cultural protocol**

Rather than obtain signatures on paper to “sign-in,” getting participants to “sign out” is ultimately preferable for fostering a sense of trust in the crucial early moments. By presenting participants with a daunting legal document at the onset is off-putting and creates undue stress on the process of naturalistic ‘leisure’ activities.

The rationale is that if they do not consent, we will agree to destroy the items associated with them. The end result is much better, with people having seen the research, participated and seen that it was indeed quite simple and not harmful at all.

### **Deploying the survey and travelogue**

The speed at which participants were able to go through the online survey from the sites in Singapore was debilitatingly slow at times, causing much participant frustration. It was especially the case where the first page experienced the most lag, which did not bode well for the rest of the survey, though the subsequent pages did click through at a more reasonable pace.

As I have mentioned before, a survey that is offline would not be subject to the inconsistencies of broadband access—an assumption that proved erroneous in the field. It is my understanding that since the execution of this fieldwork and my real-time feedback that the team has formulated a workaround in the form of an offline Word survey that is designed for loading into the back end. This is a heartening development. We have also discussed the possibility of having the survey on an iPad to make the process smoother and provide a novel experience for the participant. My word of caution in this case would be to ensure the environment was relatively secure if in a public LAN, and make the judgment call as to whether or not the iPad would unwittingly make the researcher a target for theft or robbery, in which case the use of a less novel or stock device would be more recommended.

### **Travelogue specifics**

To make cataloguing easier in future iterations, one should include a stack of index cards in the field kit. This card could have the user’s token number on it (assigned in the moment) and pre-printed stickers listing the permanent (shorter) URL of the survey for online participants.

When beginning the travelogue, the researcher would be able to take a picture of the person holding the card first, or similarly perched beside the PC monitor. This would imply that the photos following that one belong with the user pictured. When managing a large archive of these multi-sited photos, this strategy would be less reliant on memory. This is also good for working around how the researcher might need to jump around out of sequence depending on participant real-time availability (as occurred at various points during this trip). Maybe have some index cards with travelogue numbers in picture to make cataloguing easier afterwards. Other times, the primary researcher will simply have to remember and document when things went out of sequence!

### **Recruitment/Relationship/Rapport**

- Cold approaching and incentive actually worked, though it was important that the researcher was "Canadian" in this case so as to allay any sense of paranoia from owners/managers of LANs (recall incident at Park Lane) about government agencies
- The liaison was good for accompanying and recruiting students. During cold approach/LAN research I went it alone because they were more suspicious of his intentions. This has implications of the pros/cons of gender types and situatedness.
- Offering \$10 SGD was good for younger student types (and they are students for a long time due to compulsory military service). Enough of an incentive, but should up it to \$20 SGD next time so it is more attractive.
- Ended up staying late at cafes and watching avatars die online and at their convenience people came to take the survey. Difficult because users had to tab out or come to another computer (which the manager of the cafe let me commandeer, for no extra fee). This was a time intensive part, due to naturalistic surroundings.
- That said, getting people in the moment is good, but retention and life circumstance contributes to more attrition. Each subject successfully recruited is a remarkable achievement here.



## **Bangalore, India: May 5 – 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010**

Arriving at the Bangalore International Airport in the dark of night, things probably seemed more confusing and chaotic than they already were compared to the orderliness of Singapore.

My local informant, with whom I had been in correspondence for months, assured me I would be fine taking the taxi alone from the airport to the hotel (about 45 minutes). While true, my apparent solitude seemed to elicit perplexed looks. I was hurriedly ushered to the prepay taxi kiosk in the Arrivals area where a man in a suit barked my destination to another man in a suit behind the counter, who took my money and printed me a receipt with all the information on it. The first man in the suit then barked orders at a younger man in a light blue golf shirt, who took my bags and led me out to the parking lot of men in white sailor-like uniforms waiting by their taxis. The one handling my bags put them in the trunk, and got in the passenger side of the taxi, I got in the back seat, and the taxi driver confirmed my destination. We drove about 10 minutes away from the airport, and dropped off the baggage handler, who bobbed his head in acknowledgement. The journey continued, through the well-developed highway leading away from the airport, into the centre of town, passing by very dimly lit streets, Hindu temples, and military compounds.

Pulling up to a grey cement wall topped with barbed wire, the taxi driver signaled to the hotel guard at the gate to let us in. Another guard opened my door and the bellhop took my bag. I was probably the last guest to arrive that night, and everyone was downright fascinated with this oddity. I did not even need to check in, as they already knew who I was and all they were interested in was getting a photocopy of my passport. The manager did however give me a special letter geared towards my femaleness—that if I needed to talk to any females about female matters, there were two available during the day.

I was thankful to make it into my room and turn in for the night. It would be a big day tomorrow, of meeting more of India.

The next morning (6<sup>th</sup>), I made contact with Amit in the morning over Skype to arrange a meeting that day. Truth be told, it was quite difficult to understand him over the phone, as the non-verbal cues were not present. There always something loud going on at the other end, and the ubiquitous Hindi/English combination also took some getting used to for me. I asked him where we should meet, and he told me “CCD on Brigade Road. You will find it, not a problem...” and was pretty confident. I did not have a usable mobile on me, so I wanted to make sure we pinned down the exact place. After I hung up with Amit, I contacted another friend of mine from Bangalore who was studying in the US in order to confirm the situation. She told me that CCD was India’s version of Starbucks coffee, and that

making sense of the cacophony was indeed a matter of immersion and acclimation rather than specific intelligence. For example, it was not until I was inside an auto (auto rickshaw) feeling the precarity of the vehicle along with its contents, that I would truly understand what it was.

Heading out to meet Amit, one of the hotel guards asked where I was headed. I told him CCD on Brigade Road. So he relayed that to an auto driver outside “the wall.” I



got into the little three-wheel green vehicle with a bright yellow roof. Being an open-air vehicle, it was like being on a moped with a roof. The driver stopped across a 3-way intersection and asked for 30 rupees. I gave him a 100 rupee note (the smallest I had) and he had trouble making change for me. When it became obvious I was not going to leave the whole note with him, he

got some change from some random male walking the street, as the shopkeepers did not seem to have anything.

Crossing the multi-staged intersection was quite the adventure. There are lights and white lines indicating a pedestrian crossing, but nothing to which something so orderly adhered. Amidst the honking, beeping, and running, I essentially used other people crossing the street as indicators, walking beside them only when they walked (or ran). It was quite easy to get trapped by the flashing lights and staring down a sea of buses, cars, and motorcycles especially took getting used to a certain rhythm.

Breathless, I entered the CCD on the corner—a bright, red and pink logo, with a casual diner type of ambience. When I didn’t see Amit, I asked one of the attendants sweeping the floor if this was, “CCD on Brigade Road.” He simply said, “Yes, Ma’am. But there are two more locations on Brigade Road up the street.” I promptly thanked him and left this one. Trying not to get run over, I proceeded up the street of sidewalk and semi-sidewalk, with shops and motorcycles, along with a sobering encounter with a child amputee begging for money.

At the second CCD, I entered, and again did not see Amit. I asked the attendant where another location was and got pointed up the street yet again. The third CCD was closest to MG Road, so there was a good chance that this was the correct one. At least I wanted it to be the correct one because I was already overheated and

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somewhat frazzled by now. Pushing my way through yet more throngs of men with seemingly nothing to do, I entered a multi-level location promising a “cyber café,” which was a section of the shop with a few computers. I combed the shop, with no Amit, but decided to plunk myself down and cool off. This little boy, who could not have been any older than 14, greeted me with a polite, “Hello Ma’am. What would you like?” and I chose from a very colourful menu. Eventually, Amit showed up and I was very relieved to see him. He said, “Oh. I should have told you to come to the one across from the Levi’s store.” Ah yes, I thought to myself, we are in the land of landmark navigation.

When I asked about how to get a SIM card in Bangalore, he said that I need only to get myself to an outlet and it would be a relatively simple process from there. We went to discuss things further over some lentil curry that he was not very interested in, saying he typically didn’t eat much for lunch and instead opted for a drink instead. In discussing plans, he said that while it was necessary to leave me to my own devices most of the time (as he had a job), he would be free on the weekend to help me meet the people I needed.



In order to get back to my home base of operations (the hotel), we walked up to MG Road and to the sea of available auto drivers. He negotiated the fare of 20 rupees and sent me on my way. Overall, it was an overwhelming environment to find myself navigating, and contending with these surroundings in addition to the research objectives.



Knowing I would not be able to exclusively rely on Amit for most things, I set up meetings with some of my other contacts in the Bangalore tech scene with whom I was less familiar but expanding the network quickly was essential. I set up one meeting later that day with a developer who was very active in the social networking and mobile phones, along with sending out feelers to the Centre for Internet and Society (CIS), located in Bangalore.

The next order of business was to obtain a local SIM card, without which I would be limited in ability. I asked the hotel front desk staff if there was a place I could get one, and they told me to go to the shops down the street. I trekked down and asked many shops, but none would sell me one because they said only those with Indian passports were eligible to buy from small vendors like these. I asked where big vendors were, and they told me Garuda Mall.

I trekked back out to the front of the hotel gate, where an older auto driver was parked. I asked him how much to get to Garuda Mall, and he told me 30 rupees if I went one way. During our chat, my reason for going came up and I told him about the cell phone debacle. He thought about it for a second, and then he insisted on getting it with me close to the hotel. So, parking his auto, he said walking was better and we walked back to the shops where he asked the vendors about my situation.

Eventually, we came to the conclusion at one vendor that I needed a letter of certification from my hotel, photocopies of my passport/Indian entry visa, and a photo. Yikes. So, by this time “Rafi” the auto driver and I walked back to the hotel where he explained my situation to the front desk. We would need to return in a while as they prepared the letter, so during that time we walked back to the shops and got photocopies done, which Rafi paid the



couple rupees for, and we filled out paperwork at the actual shop. Went back to the hotel, got the official letter, and submitted the whole package to the shopkeeper’s son who proceeded to get my Airtel card activated. Many signatures and head bobbles later, I had a SIM card that would be active in an hour. Thankful, I paid Rafi the 30 rupees it would have cost to get me to Garuda Mall, and he gave me his “business card” with a graphic of an auto, his cell phone number, and location of where he parked his auto. This was one special auto driver who seemed to privilege sustained relationships, given the way he greeted another happy client in the street during my dealings with him.

I had scheduled my next meeting with Paul at the same CCD where I met Amit, since that was relatively central and seemed to be preferred. My phone, a couple of hours later, was still not working. Perturbed, I set out to see if I could walk to the CCD on Brigade road without resorting to an auto ride for what seemed to be a relatively short distance on the map. The streets were not well lit at all, and I ended up getting quite lost on the way because there were many dead end streets that kept changing names. After asking a couple of shopkeepers for some rough directions I finally made it to the main drag of Brigade road and was actually on time for the meeting. The boy who served me earlier recognized me as he took my order, saying, “Hello Ma’am. Second time.” I suppose I was easy to recognize!

Though not a gaming guru like Amit, Paul was actually quite helpful and upon hearing my plight gave me a spare SIM card he had in his wallet. He said I could use it in the meantime while I sorted my own out. He also told me that he had many friends in India get onto Facebook in order to play Farmville, but not virtual worlds in the World of Warcraft/Second Life sense.

It was getting late and neither of us had eaten yet, so we shared some curry dishes. He told me he was more comfortable eating with his hands, whereas I preferred cutlery. So, we used our hands. Instead of autoing back, Paul used his Nokia GPS and walked me back to the hotel. He promptly stopped at that impenetrable gate, I thanked him, and retired for the night. It was a lot to sort out for a first day.

By the next day (7<sup>th</sup>), I had already experienced a few of the power outages that are a part of one's everyday existence in Bangalore. My communications would be cut out periodically during the day or night, and I would rely on my laptop battery until power was restored. In fact, I would say that having a laptop with good battery life, in addition to backing up often, is the optimal way to ensure that one does not lose important work at any given moment. Being in the centre of "downtown" however, meant that I did not go for terribly long without power unlike other parts of Bangalore where it could be half a day. That morning, I had been woken up by one of Paul's friends calling his spare SIM card number. Both ends of the line were confused. My own SIM card was still not working.

I headed out of my hotel to find Rafi, and saw him camped out in his auto in front of the wall. He beckoned me to follow and we walked over to the shop again where he expressed grievance. We waited until the shopkeeper's son called it in again and stayed at the shop until we were able to make calls with phones. I found it remarkable that he was willing to advocate for me in this manner, but in the context, it was not surprising given that his labour was flexible if it meant keeping a good customer.

Again, I thanked Rafi. Going on what a Finnish fellow told me at the hotel, these auto drivers make money by taking people to shops. One does not have to buy anything at those shops, but the additional client traffic helps. By the time I had gotten my communication sorted out, the typical opportunities for tourist activities on air-conditioned buses had already passed, and those were roughly 300 rupees. Rafi's personal shuttling would definitely cost less and the schedule fit, so given that today was by default an "off piste" day, I asked him to take me to the various marketplaces of his choice. This ranged from expensive fixed price places, to more sketchy bargaining environments, along with his own neighbourhood where the auto deftly navigated around the lounging cows in the middle of the roads. It was a good orientation, as the auto could not go that fast, nor seal out the sights and smells like a car or bus would.



Everything thus far had been figuring this environment out, along with all aspects of transactions. The random power outages take getting used to but I began to internalize and adjust to the cacophony and understand the lay of the land.

After Rafi dropped me back to the hotel, I found a much closer coffee shop with the promise of free wifi. The wifi didn't work, but I had the chance to catch up on notes and finances.

On Saturday (8<sup>th</sup>) morning, I met with Amit to head to a gaming café in another district that he knew about. We rallied outside the hotel, and got Rafi to drive us to the café. It was quite the distance—at least it seemed to be in the auto. We traversed through main roads, and came to a mixture of residential and factory buildings, mostly focused on the marble flooring and tile industry. There did not seem to be anything around, when we rounded a corner and came across a building with bright orange lettering saying ZAPAK gaming centre.



Rafi asked when he should return for us, and Balu told him about three hours, meaning Rafi had to go somewhere and hang out for that amount of time and come back. It was less time than I would have liked knowing the nature of raids, but it was enough time to see what was going on and perhaps get some surveys done. When we arrived, it was almost as if the ambient

“music” stopped, and everyone momentarily stared. Amit and I introduced ourselves and told the LAN manager why we were there and he gave us permission to observe the gamers but not disturb them too much. He even assembled ones on a smoke break to do a briefing with me in an adjacent room on what the research was about. The guys were apparently willing, but were scheduled to go on a raid at that very moment. There was nothing more to be said because I needed to work around their



timing, so I assigned them the tokens to do on their own time, along with the URL. Any noises I made about honoraria fell on deaf ears, so that did not help with motivation in this case.

They said I could come back late Monday night and see what the situation was if I was still in need. In essence, everything was a yes, but really a no, so the rest of the time there was spent observing gamers going about their business, which was not completely fruitless.

Instead of going to another café, it was the weekend for Amit so he wanted to spend it with his friends, understandably. He assured me that they wanted to meet with me, and it was an opportunity to engage with people in a more relaxed setting so I was alright with that. When Rafi came back for us, we drove even farther away from central Bangalore where Amit shared a flat with his girlfriend, and two other guys—all journalist types. Rafi dropped us off and asked again when he should return, but was disappointed when Amit said he would drop me off later. Amit then remarked to his girlfriend that how extraordinary this auto driver was, and that he wasn't sketchy or grasping like others.

She said she needed a good auto driver as well and was glad Amit had gotten another one of Rafi's business cards. It's all about relationships and word of mouth.

Taking in their neighbourhood, which was mostly residential, there were the familiar purpose-oriented Internet cafes.

Florence: "Not for games?"

Amit: "haha... no...."



At the apartment, I met Amit's pals and was given the ten-second tour of the flat. We sat in the living area, where we chatted, and I watched Amit and his friend play XBOX 360 Cricket. Meanwhile, I was getting bitten by mosquitoes and wasn't quite sure what to make of it all.

All ready to head out on Sunday morning (9<sup>th</sup>), I got a text from Amit saying that he was running late and we would not meet until lunch time. So I continued to work at my desk until he came to meet me around 1pm. Rafi was off having lunch, so we walked to MG road to get a metered auto driver. I paid 100 rupees to get to this café through cows and chickens that were grazing on piles of garbage, temple compounds, and into a residential area near a school.

We introduced ourselves to the father of our contact, who happened to be manning the front counter in a business shirt and slacks. I gave him my card, which was useful for immediate identification. He was very welcoming after finding out I was an academic researcher. In fact, he was tickled pink that a researcher from Canada was interested in his establishment. So much so, that he documented the stay with pictures. As we entered the main gaming area of the café, his son (our contact) Tj comes down the stairs and apologizes for the power being out. Initially, I hadn't noticed because there were still boys playing on the computers. Tj chuckled and said proudly, "We use backup generators for the computers." This explained why the place was dark, sweltering, and the computers were still humming along!

We were invited upstairs to their living quarters to discuss the research plan because it was cooler and more comfortable. Amit was in slight awe of all the XBOX games Tj brought out of his bedroom to show us. Each game cost about 3000 rupees, a figure to which Amit let out a whistle. Tj told me he had packed up his XBOX in order to not be tempted during exam period.

When Tj got a better idea of what I hoped to accomplish, he was very willing to help, but expressed regret at the fact that exams were going on in addition to the ICGC (Indian Cyber Games Championship) event. This meant that our numbers would be substantially lower than anticipated because many participants would be out of town or busy studying. We wanted to gather what we could in my short time here though, so we ventured back downstairs into the hot dark basement.

I proceeded to go through the survey package with the first recruit. The short URLs didn't seem to work from India, and we got ONE online survey through while the other two hung. So I was able to do 2 proper travelogues, and the workaround that we decided was just to get people the paper version document to edit so they wouldn't have to print it, and then the manager would just forward them to me. They were willing to do this because they felt as an emerging market, they should be helpful. Wow. People, though generally willing to help, were really unsettled by the consent form though, which seemed gratuitously legal.

The rest of the time was spent finding out about all their 'private servers' and reasons for using them. One factor was indeed the prohibitive cost of a proper monthly subscription to a game like World of Warcraft, but more of a factor, as they told me, was convenience and customization to Indians. For example, players get special benefits from GMs like special items. There are telltale signs of difference on a private server, like Christmas scenes in Orgrimmar, and Easter in Darnassus during early May. Also, if a server gets shut down, players must simply start over again on a new server. One can imagine the time investment for multiple level 80 characters taken away in a second being somewhat frustrating.

All the while the power was out and it was sweltering in the room full of PCs. Finally midway through our time there, the power came back on and we were bathed in light once again. Reliable access to electricity is a key example of the developmental challenges that the West simply does not typically think about. And yet, how do we resist the reification of these populations in the tendency to propagate what some Indians and development scholars call "Poverty Porn?"<sup>1</sup> The picture is more complex as I am hoping these sketches show.

When we had exhausted the possibilities downstairs, we were invited upstairs yet again, only this time the mother and sister materialized. They then offered us refreshments despite protests and insisted that we stay for longer. Amit and Tj watched Shanghai Noon on the television, while the mother and daughter team

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<sup>1</sup> The glamourization or beautification of extreme poverty.



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doted on all three of us. The back story to the café was that they started it at the son's urging (business + hobby) and they are now the neighbourhood hub for such activities and with a college nearby, people come from all over to blow off steam here. They normally have 2 staff but they were off because it was Sunday.

What an amazing experience. When the mother came to talk to us she said in her 43 years she's seen so many changes in Bangalore and she recounted making a real effort to see Indira Gandhi. After, in order to signal our departure, we took some parting photos with the family and shook hands (and heads) goodbye.

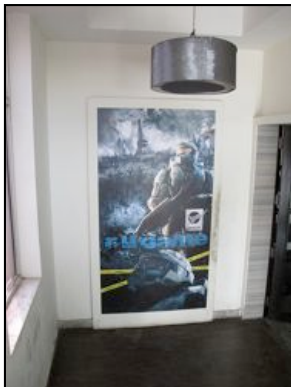
In the auto ride, and saw a protest going on about chopping down trees for development. Amit had to make an appearance at his office, so I dropped him off and continued on to the hotel. I saw Rafi out front, who apologized for being at lunch and I said it was ok.... And then I came back to my quarters and required an hour of quiet time before I was even able to contemplate writing notes!

On Monday (10<sup>th</sup>), I met with Arun, who was affiliated with the Centre for Internet and Society based in Bangalore. I found Arun on the Association of Internet Research list and he is interested in games and virtual currencies. As a student at the beginning of his Master's program, he was available to meet with me that day.



We met at Gloria Jean's coffee shop where I asked him about his research and told him about the project. He was also curious so we decided to go together in search of these cafes.

1. In Koramagala Oova was a coffee/hookah/PC game room. Playing Crysis. With very good equipment (32 inch monitors) meant for first person shooter games. We were not permitted to take any pictures inside, but we chatted with the game manager and were later ushered by the finance manager to another room where we chatted about the gaming. After talking about the state of gaming and that there was maybe one woman who he's seen gaming, the power went out. We went downstairs to the coffee bar for parting words. He kindly gave us a couple of bottles of Kingfisher water, and he himself drank tap water.



2. We walked more and did not find much, took the auto to a place near St Joseph's college, where there was a subsistence based Internet café.

3. Took one last trip to brigade road area where there was a nice place called “Living Room” but it was a console based gaming centre. Then we took a break at the CCD nearby.

By this time, I had breathed in enough carbon monoxide and pollution to kill a horse. Probably why I felt so drained. It made me rethink the auto thing and consider just taking a cab.

For my last night in India, I met with Amit and his



girlfriend for dinner. I gave her the Whistler t-shirt I had with me as a gift, which she really appreciated. She drove me back to the hotel and we said our farewells. It was a nice note on which to end the stay.

Next morning, on the 12<sup>th</sup> I didn't have time for breakfast. So, I paid for everything at the front desk and took the taxi to the airport. It was chaos at the airport, with security lineups to even enter the airport outside and there was a long queue. The security guard asked me my name. The check-in guy at the counter was also curious about this great sojourn and commented upon it. Two more sites to go however: Dubai and Tokyo.



### ***Takeaway section – bits and bytes from India***

#### **Standout topics:**

- Developmental context
- Emerging market
- Caste and class demarcations
- High level of economic, educational polarization

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- Poverty/luxury (available labour enables luxury for elites)
- Consistent supply of electricity was a challenge! Regardless of where one was.
- One cafe in the basement of someone's home had backup generators for computers. Essential when batteries aren't involved.
- Sliding scale of transit. Buses are for workers, autos are somewhat more private though exposed to the elements, taxis are pricier and generally air conditioned, and labour is plentiful so it is common to have a personal driver or "company car"

### **Recruitment/Relationship/Rapport**

- Communicating through social media for months prior to fieldwork
- Snowball sampling is common: "People who know people who know people."
- Finding cafes with the capability was a challenge. Even finding cafes period.
- Social capital enabled by my encounter were valued
- The games journalist liked going around with me because we were mutually curious about games in India
- two key places: Zapak (chain) and Tek gaming centre in a community.
- various types of motivations: meeting someone foreign, access that transcends typical barriers.
- Guys more interested in playing than taking time out. Even for money.

### **Socioeconomic factors**

- online gaming is still an elite activity, especially virtual worlds of a sustained nature
- private servers
- with these games, the US time zone still has gravitational pull: the case of eating and sleeping according to US time zones
- "indian preferences" with certain private servers – not just about 'free to play' (but still a factor!)
- The feeling of progress, but being less happy.
- lots of aborted leads
- agrarian life intermingles with urban in this developmental context
- ambitious in capabilities and make do with little (googling, and other strategies to obtain free information/things)
- intense subsidization/sponsoring by multinational firms (e.g. Alienware cafes)
- brain drain is in the public consciousness and pop culture (ambivalence about technological progress/mobility)
- time is viewed differently. western style "urgency" is frequently waved off as everything can be intense/urgent.

### **Reasons for gaming at LANs**

- community formation/social
- amenities like food, drink, air conditioning
- internet may not be present in house (and have backup generators to boot!)

- the oova café was FPS oriented. Manager interviewed us to make sure we were not competitive intelligence. Not allowed to take photos inside.
- English binds the vernacular languages in India (with many regionally distinct languages, subtitles in domestic DVDs). Hindi is the main binding language of business.

### ***Survey/travelogue technical outcome***

The India case, as recounted earlier, was a particularly odd set of circumstances and by far the most developmental context of all the field sites. With generally very basic infrastructure, there were numerous power outages every day.

India: May 5 - May 12th. This is where things went a little awry. Lan 34 got filled out, and then 12 other guys did the offline word survey in English. Ethics forms were obtained for Lans 34, (Lans 35/36 aborted the online survey).

### **Breakdown of participant numbers**

In total, 13 online surveys were collected from the Bangalore site.

<b>Language</b>	<b>Survey</b>	<b>Travelogue</b>
English (Online)	Lans 34	Lans 34-36
English (Word.doc)	12	12 minus pictures
<b>INDIA GRAND TOTAL: 13</b>		

### **Incentivization**

Gifts in the form of shared meals were the only things accepted, or an increase in involvement/relationship could be possible. People were very willing to help, so surveys were filled out in the first version of printable word survey. Would recommend this approach in general to streamline future fieldwork endeavours. Surveys were taken out of genuine curiosity.

### ***Future opportunities***

- knowing specific cafes/events/people
- taking into account power outages and other developmental challenges
- weekends are more popular for gaming centres.
- during school breaks
- weeknights

## Dubai, United Arab Emirates: May 12 – 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010

“Everybody’s gotta be somewhere.” ~ Bob

Coming off the plane in Dubai, the customs officers were seated in rows and dressed in the traditional kandura for the UAE. One of the officers simply made eye contact with me, and I wasn’t quite sure if he was beckoning. A cue to the subtlety here, especially after the explicitness in honking and yelling to which I had become accustomed in India. The officer gruffly asked where I was staying, and for my friend’s phone number. Brushed aside as my welcome into the Emirate of Dubai, the unease signaled my arrival.



After the abrupt sobering encounter with the customs officer, my hosts, who had come to the airport to greet me, were a welcome sight indeed. We flagged a ‘normal’ taxi, but women-only taxis were available—indicated by the pink rooftops and women drivers. The taxi ride from the airport into the central apartment where we were staying was a mere 20 minutes away.

Dubai promised somewhat of a different experience, as I had the opportunity to stay with friends who happened to be residents working there. There would be more to consider in the way of schedules, but also the added benefit of more security, escorts, and help readily available. Unlike India, here I could be relatively assured of being more on the same wavelength as that of my assistant in our approach to achieving the research objectives. We got to the apartment and then basically I got an orientation. We went to Spinney’s, which is a 24 hr expat-friendly market

(indicated with a separate pork section akin to how one would segregate the adult movies from a video rental shop). Everyone service oriented seemed to be from the Indian subcontinent or the Philippines. Indeed, the local Emiratis only make up about 20 percent of the population with the remaining 80 percent working in various capacities. I got my mobile SIM card for 75 dirhams, which included a 25-dirham credit from





Etisalat, the sole provider of telecommunication services in the Emirate. The representative at Spinney's required that I get a photocopy of my passport photo page and UAE entry visa stamp in my passport, along with my host's phone number in order to make the transaction. This necessitated going over to the next kiosk and paying 2 dirhams for photocopies and returning with the package to fill out the forms. The card was activated and the representative told me it would be ready for use in 1-4 hours. Overall, it was a much easier process than I had experienced in India but comparatively more expensive. Back at the apartment, there was the chance to unpack, do a load of laundry<sup>1</sup> and do a briefing with my helper on the research to be conducted over the next 6 days.

The next day we started scouting within the immediate surroundings. Closest to our home base in Bur Dubai was the Karama area, which is typically populated by migrant labourers working in the service industries. Walking amongst the apartment blocks, it was interesting to note the prevalence of satellite dishes, alluding to a sense of belonging to another place.



Walking in the scorching heat outside on sun-bleached sidewalks was intermittently punctuated by ducking into the welcomingly air conditioned Internet cafes. While quite common, the cafes we scouted here were oriented towards basic tasks such as word processing, email, and perhaps YouTube. Due to the type of expat population in this area, common services were photocopying visas, wiring money back to wherever home was, or communication by instant messenger or web cam. They were run of the mill diaspora-oriented services.



We then went to another one that looked gaming oriented, and they also had a World of Warcraft poster that said, "GAME CARD SOLD HERE." So it looked like an interesting prospect. Upon our entry, everyone's eyes grew wide with curiosity. There were about 4 Indian kids playing a cricket game on the PC, and other simple casual games. We asked the manager, who was quite nice, if people played World of Warcraft

<sup>1</sup> The 'cold' water felt hot to the touch upon removal from the washer, and hanging the clothes outside to dry was the equivalent of a dryer due to the heat and lack of humidity.

here. He said DOTA (Defense of the Ancients). There was confusion because DOTA is a mod of Warcraft 3, but not World of Warcraft the MMORPG. The kids corrected him and said, “No one plays WoW here.” We asked them if they knew of any place with WoW players. And they said “Professional Billiards, near Snooker point,” but that was all they knew. We thanked them and left.

In the unforgiving desert heat, we hailed cab after cab, with no one knowing where this place was. So after a few cabbies proved unhelpful, we walked around to the



Karama souk and asked one of the younger Indian merchants if he knew. He seemed to understand and said “Lamcy Mall” which was relatively close by (well, by Dubai standards it was a short cab ride). We found the place quite easily, as it was adjacent to the mall property (Lamcy Plaza) and adjacent to a Chili’s restaurant. It looked like the first good prospect we had, and it was a gold mine.

Upon entering, we noticed many rooms flanking an unattended central counter where a shift manager would sit. There was a billiards room where a handful of men were playing. In a large area of games oriented PCs there were a couple of level 16 WoW players engaged in an online task while a tall fellow in a black robe stood

behind them watching. I opened by asking them if there were WoW players here, and they said yes. They seemed very open after I introduced myself as from Canada doing research. It’s a good quality to have. They often don’t have women coming in at all and it was good I had my helper with me as a silent presence. While they were not interested in taking the survey at the moment (which I had to respect), they told me the best time to come to the café is typically in the evenings, after 6-7pm and there would be many guys raiding in a separate room that they pointed out. I asked them if the players were 19+ and the oldest one laughed and said, “yes yes... of course.” Upon looking around it was really obvious this was not a kid-oriented place anyway with its lacquered wood and relatively pricey membership fee. It was quite high end, servicing the Arab population mostly, and by then, the Filipino fellow running the counter had returned and told us the manager might return later and





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we could meet with him if we wished. Until then, I would continue my scouting and scan of the cultural context.

The Friday (14<sup>th</sup>) caught me off guard, as I somehow still expected it to be a workday, but it was a Sabbath for Islamic countries, and taken quite seriously by the looks of it. Businesses opened late, if at all, and they were mostly services to work around people going to Mosque and engaging in large family-style brunches.

I learned that Thursday nights are the equivalent of Friday nights for North Americans, and Saturday was still a weekend day. However, Sunday is back to work for most people and the equivalent of Monday. This was somewhat jarring and my personal schedule was shaken up a bit to accommodate.

In anticipation of currency exchange rates, I wanted to figure out what I would offer to participants given their socioeconomic statuses. I had to best predict what would be attractive enough of an incentive and be prepared to offer it while approaching people in these centres.

I came up with the following offering:

Going on the basic \$20 CAD exchange, a top incentive would be around 70 dirhams, and a base incentive would be \$10 at 35 dirhams. So, I figured that a middle ground of 50 dirhams would be reasonable.

I finished the day in conference calls with the ground team in Japan, including my first helper along with the translator, organizing logistics for the next visit. It was always the case where before I was even halfway done my current site, the next (or next NEXT) site would be beckoning and the wrapping up from the previous sites needed administering as well. Luckily there was only one remaining after this one.

On Saturday (15<sup>th</sup>), a librarian from the Sharjah campus at Zayed University came over to visit and accompany me to explore the Dubai cultural area. We took the 1 dirham abra (ferry) across the creek to the souks (marketplace). It was so easy to get tired and dehydrated in the head and I found myself walking slower, and taking longer to recover from otherwise simple tasks.



In the evening, we did some more research at home base and the plan for Sunday was to head to Zayed University as a visitor and meet with the faculty, and then spend the afternoon searching for data sites in Deira that we

staked out on the Web. As previous sites showed, the Web is a good place to narrow down sites and become aware but the turnover is so quick that they may either not exist or be the wrong type of café for this research so we needed to check it out in person.

Bright and early Sunday morning (16<sup>th</sup>), we headed over at 7:20am with a regular driver also hired by another Zayed University staff member in the same building.<sup>2</sup> When we arrived at the university at 8am, I had to gain clearance as a university affiliated visitor in order to receive a badge. My assistant got his pass through me, as random males with no affiliation would not be allowed to roam the grounds of a female university.

Once inside, I was taken on a personal tour to meet Zayed's faculty, hailing from places like Australia, Canada, and the United States. I met two Deans, one of whom gave a talk about his recent experience in North Korea for the "Mass Games." I also had a prospective chat with another faculty member who had previously taught at



SFU using Second Life, but unfortunately did not continue doing so in Dubai because it was not sustainable due to low bandwidth.

It was apparent that I would not be able to find female students using virtual worlds for their studies here easily, so any I managed to obtain would be due to their activities in their spare time. I met with the Communications Coordinator, who was very excited to have a

researcher willing to give a talk about games and ethnography at the university. We figured that he would send out my abstract and publish it university-wide and if the students attending were interested, chances were they would agree to take my survey. This was a 'soft incentive' I was very willing to provide if it meant that



interested girls would come if they were interested, and that I would be able to access to otherwise reclusive populations. We agreed that I would come back on Tuesday to give the talk and that would allow for preparation time.

After we had accomplished our objectives at the university for that day, we took the taxi to Festival City, which is a big mall that possessed a few amusement facilities. The mall was large,

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<sup>2</sup> There is no public transit going to the university. Like many development contexts, the maps highlight a future route as if it currently exists.

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with an indoor water amusement park, an adjacent IKEA, and bridges linking various sections of luxury shops over constructed bodies of water. When we arrived at the bowling alley/café, we talked to the shift manager about the facilities, which included computers, karaoke rooms, and console games like Singstar Pop and Guitar Hero. The computers were laid out on the bench and were only hospitable to the real-time strategy (RTS) genre of games. It was apparent that this centre was not what we were looking for either.

The next place we were looking for was in the Deira city centre. After making our way through yet another Emirati mall, we popped out on the other end of a supermarket, walked around a couple of empty plazas, asked around, and found a cyber café! We entered the dark café, and encountered billiards and foosball tables in the front along with older PCs with webcams and cubicles. I introduced myself to the manager and asked



him if they had World of Warcraft, and he they did. He welcomed me and pointed to an even darker back room where there were more gaming PCs. We approached the game players and while skeptical at first, came away with three recruits. The third recruit was from Singapore and had problems logging on with his avatar and was busy looking up how to log on to his oceanic server so we did not do a travelogue with him. According to the recruits of differing ethnic origins, there is an “international city” where Chinese gold farmers work in World of Warcraft and are supposedly capped at level 70 (out of a possible 80). The Arab fellow I interviewed talked about a district where there are cafes with all ‘locals’ i.e. Emiratis, but he was



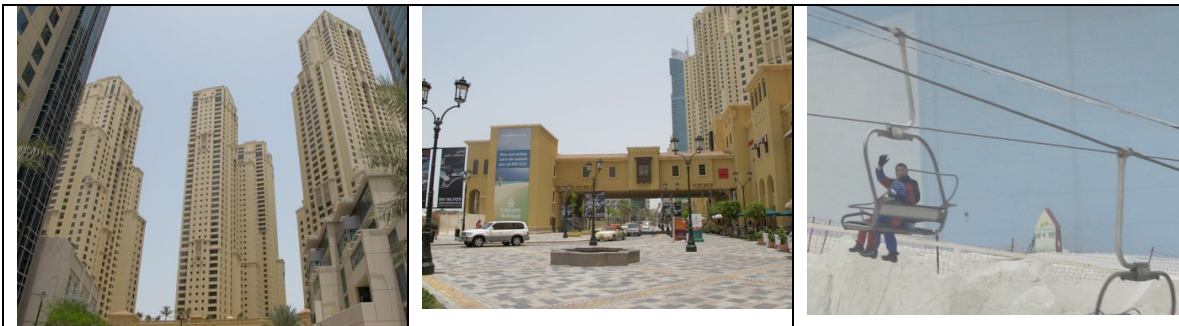
somewhat worried they would not be “nice” to me. He also buys online gold with real money when he does not have enough to buy items. The Singaporean, who was sent here by his company for training told me about a café in ‘secret lane’ in Singapore near where I recruited my participants. There, he plays WoW and the café apparently has regular female clientele. He’s been playing there for 5 years. In the end, they all turned down my incentive, because they had a bulk rate with

prepaid memberships.

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This café was relatively close to the subway line, so I got a card and took the subway back to the apartment. Two security guards dressed in kandura checked our cards on the train. Toward evening, a sandstorm started up and clouded over the sun. walking back I could see why there was even a practical reason to cover up. I was getting sand in my face, mouth, and some managed to get around my sunglasses as well. In sum, it was a good day. The plan for the rest of the time would be to scan more areas during the day on Monday, and go to QUE to harvest try and find people by night when it was more populated. Then on Tuesday, do my talk at Zayed, and have one last attempt to talk with as many people as possible until the wee hours of my departure day on Wednesday (19<sup>th</sup>).

On Monday (17<sup>th</sup>), we took the Dubai metro to the Jumeirah area, full of cafes (the sort that serves mediocre pretentious coffee), in order to lend a counterpoint to the less economically advantaged areas I had been observing thus far. We walked around Medinah Jumeirah, and then to the Mall of the Emirates in order to look around and observe people partaking in leisure activities like Ski Dubai, which is an indoor ski run that allows desert-dwellers to experience snow (along with vividly illustrate that money can buy almost anything). Amidst Emiratis with designer accessories and other diaspora, we patronized the food court and watched the large plasma screens make public announcements about mall hours and the virtues of dressing modestly (covering one's knees).



After dinner, I went back to the QUE Club at Lamcy Plaza in order to encounter more participants. Once there, I was finally able to meet the General Manager of the Club in person. He was quite gracious once it became apparent I was an academic researcher and not a business competitor. He personally walked us over to gamers in the “hardcore” section and he recommended some gamers who would probably be willing to do the survey/travelogue.

Some were friendly, and others pointedly ignored us and understandably concentrated on their game. We had to walk the line carefully between being a temporary inconvenience and being an outright nuisance. We ended up successfully doing the survey and travelogue with about 6 participants. The online survey, in this environment, was very laggy, and caused some attrition.



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On my last full day in Dubai (18<sup>th</sup>), I headed to Zayed to give my talk and see if I could get some Emirati girls to do the survey. Given the pronounced nature of sex segregation here, I felt it was important to at least try to get an idea of this very inaccessible population. After the university wide announcement, faculty showed up, along with one Emirati girl showed up who played MMORPGs. We traded information, she emailed me directly, and filled out the survey/travelogue information from her connection at home.



We went back to the Deira city centre café in an attempt to find more gamers, but unfortunately their entire network was down. The boys inside were playing foosball instead. We recruited one gamer hanging around and he filled out a paper version of the survey.

That night we worked into the next day doing one last attempt, and after hitting about 4 different cafes ended up collecting a few more yet. This was despite entire rooms being ripped apart for maintenance at one and the unfriendliness I was previously warned about from locals was not so unfriendly after all. A very tired Florence left Dubai, stamped out in a slightly less aloof manner than she was stamped in, with sights now set on the last fieldsite: Japan.

### ***Takeaway section – bits and bytes from Dubai***

#### **Standout topics:**

- Dubai is dry and desert hot (104 degrees Fahrenheit). People drive everywhere in this sprawling spread-out city and everything must come from somewhere else. Water is desalinated.
- Middle Eastern Islamic context (85% Sunni, 15% Shia)
- 80% population is expat, 20% Emiratis (more exactly, fewer than 1 million native Emirati people last year making up 16.5% of the total UAE population).
- Some PC bangs afford more local/foreigner interaction
- Unabashedly buying gold from Chinese gold farmers
- "International village" had actual Chinese gold farmers who lived in Dubai?!
- Weekend begins on Thursday night (equivalent to Friday night in N. America) because of Friday being the holy day (as opposed to Sunday, which is a normal

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working day). So, it would have been good to hit up the cafes on Thursday night and aggressively collect from the cafes during that 'weekend'

### **Recruitment/Relationship/Rapport**

- Internet research and highlighting potentially viable cafes with virtual world capability
- Neighbourhood environmental scans of low-config "INTERNET" cafes
- Cold approaching: cleared with counter manager first, very welcoming once intentions were clear and research was "academic" as opposed to competitive.
- Managers were generally helpful "oh ya, those guys over there play all the time, etc"
- When visited during off peak, I usually returned at different times to gather different people. Sometimes the same people were there and had not left!
- Zayed University was a good contact for access to female Emeratis

### **Incentivization**

- Emerati respondents tended to buy virtual gold in order to bypass the inconveniences of grinding for money to buy virtual items.
- I was the visitor and they were very gracious and hospitable.
- Though I was a female, my foreigner status of one on official business with an escort (assistant) made it so that I was not held to the same standard of segregation that an Emerati female would be.
- Emirati females were nowhere to be found in the cafes.
- Usually the local males are not able to talk to local females, nor do they interact at any appreciable length with other foreigners (who are in the service/construction industries and serve as a sort of underclass).
- Various types of motivations: meeting someone, access that transcends typical barriers.
- Have to orient self to see what people generally respond to, and how to present myself.
- The money I had wouldn't have been enough and insulting to insist upon anyway.

### **Position of cafes**

- near other amenities (mall, grocery)
- nascent public transit. Not all stops work
- spending time in malls
- no real addresses! Even printed receipts have, where an address would be, "near blah blah"
- act as a mixer centre
- cafeteria
- communication media centre
- - people come from different emirates to QUE club (like Abu Dhabi) for the community social aspect
- Need constant AC like a developing Las Vegas. Lots of desert.



### ***Socioeconomic factors***

- still elite activity
- and also expat outreach areas
- tourist foreigners vs labouring foreigners
- cafes are a challenge to maintain.
- locals sell business permits to expats. (indians, or filipino managers, local owner)...
- Sliding scale of transit. Buses are for workers, autos are somewhat more private though exposed to the elements, taxis are pricier and generally air conditioned, and labour is plentiful so it is common to have a personal driver or "company car" here as well
- taxis are cheap, and surface public transit is unpleasant
- taken out of necessity (whether by religion (ladies only section) or economic reasons.
- climate is prohibitive (heat, dust) (bus shelters are glass and enclosed. can sometimes approach 50 degrees.) best time of year is december/january
- network can be down... and was at the Deira cafe

### ***Reasons***

- multi-family doctrine (many wives and siblings)
- need to get away from house
- Mosques involvement, prayer time... "I have to get back in time for prayer"
- no alcohol, but can smoke Dokha (which is an Emirati tobacco mixed with leaves, bark and herbs, generally smoked in a pipe called a midwakh. )
- people typically meet online in the sprawling emirate. Difficult to connect with other people through non-mosque or family arrangements otherwise. The PC café serves this purpose in a secular manner.

### ***Times of play***

Weekends are alive! (weekend means something different in Dubai, holy day Friday)

- Nothing is really within walking distance. Difficult to walk outside so typically drivers (implying older players)
- When I asked if they're 'old enough' I just got a snort and an 'of course' implying that QUE and others like it were not typically kid places.
- Kids may be doing other activities or playing games from home instead of these cafes

### ***Survey/travelogue technical outcome***

Despite both anticipated and unanticipated difficulties inherent in approaching random people at cafes in Dubai, I would have to say that in terms of data being collected according to plan, the site ultimately worked out well and only second to Singapore in compliancy.

Next time:

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- bringing own survey in e-form would be good. Online survey still lagged.
- be mindful of the layout of the PC cafe: separate sections with different fees and memberships. It was really inconvenient

Layout:

- 1) just internet browsing/productivity oriented stuff
- 2) a combination of low-config games and a bit of browsing (youtube)
- 3) high performance games only.
- 4) uber-elite (typically emirates and 'in' locals) high performance games and internet capability (everything)

### **Breakdown of participant numbers**

Dubai: May 12 - 19th. When collecting here, I went back to the ones I allocated for India and got Lans 27-33, 37-43 filled out online. There was one girl, who was a word version because Emirati girls don't go to the cafes, as well as Lan 39 in your paper package who filled it out by hand when the network was down.

I wasn't sure if there would be more after coming in, so I allocated Lan 44 - 49 to any additional Dubai ones (which didn't end up getting filled).

<b>Language</b>	<b>Survey</b>	<b>Travelogue</b>
English (Online)	Lans 26-33,37-43	Lans 26-27, 29-33 37-43
English (Word.doc)	2 one female, and one lan 39)	2 (Lans 39 without pics)
<b>DUBAI GRAND TOTAL: 16</b>		

### **Incentivization**

No incentivization was paid out in cash. The locals expected no monetary incentive and treated their agreement to participate as a friendly gesture.

### **Survey drop-down menus and representation**

It was somewhat embarrassing to the study that two field sites in this sojourn (Singapore and UAE) were not represented in the survey drop down menus when users were prompted for demographic information. Participants have had to select "other" for their nationality and fill in the blank in those cases.

### **Online survey lag and attrition**

- The first page is really slow because of all the interactivity in the online survey. Again, with the developmental contexts (encountered in Mexico, India, UAE) a high-bandwidth survey on a Canadian server would be slow at the best of times even when we take it at home, nevermind a bazillion miles away. Perhaps considering a

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"survey lite" edition akin to the paper version (but online) might be something for future implementation. So far the paper one has sufficed for workarounds in this case, but they are editing it in the doc form and things like the online matrices are of course not really the same as the online survey.

***Future opportunities***

- knowing specific cafes/events/people
- taking into account local culture/timings and other developmental challenges
- weekends (Friday/Saturday) are more popular for gaming centres and evenings
- during school breaks
- weeknights
- There is lots here worth investigating further though. For a future iteration I would focus more on the holy weekends.

## Tokyo, Japan: May 20 – 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010

After leaving Dubai on Wednesday the 19<sup>th</sup>, with a layover in Changi Airport (Singapore), I made it into a rainy Tokyo late Thursday evening of the 20<sup>th</sup>. Narita International Airport is about 60 km away from downtown Tokyo, so I rented a cell phone from the airport, a got on one of the many “airport limousine buses” that run into town. The bus dropped off at a major hotel, and I took a taxi the rest of the way to a smaller hotel where I was staying. I made contact with my first local informant, Charles<sup>1</sup>, and arranged to meet the next morning at the hotel.

On Friday the 21<sup>st</sup>, I met with my helper to go over arrangements we had only been able to correspond remotely about and take care of errands. First, we walked to the neighbourhood post office to settle payment for the translator of the Japanese documents. I took in the number of services available in a Japanese post office, noting them for later, such as a cash machine and parcel wrapping shipping facilities. Because post offices in Japan serve many of the same functions as a bank, I was able to send cash directly and securely to the translator through a special service called “Genkin Kakitome.” Secondly, in order to get around the large city (approx. 13 million people) quickly and economically, I purchased a subway system “PASMO” card that is refillable. The sprawling subway/rail system is necessarily the way most people are able to get around Tokyo and surrounding areas. Third, we made our way to Keio University to meet with a professor who would potentially have students interested in the research. I gave his students a talk, while he and my helper traded off translating, which was really nice of them. There was a lively discussion period and while there even were a couple of people potentially interested in helping, it ultimately ended up fizzling out because of school conflicts, papers due, and slight embarrassment with potential language barriers regardless of actual skill. Most of all, it was simply too much to demand of a new relationship in too little time. There might be opportunities for engagement in the future given that there is at least a baseline of familiarity now. However, as we will see in the continuation of this section, obligation (or avoidance of) becomes a recurring concept through this stay.



<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms used to protect identities

Saturday morning (22<sup>nd</sup>), Charles and I met for breakfast at 830am and discussed the “battle plan” for the day. Today would be a type of reconnaissance mission to head to the best areas for Internet cafes and see if we could wrangle some survey participants.

We headed on the subway to Shibuya, which is a district famous for its availability of amusement centres of all sorts, the now-infamous love hotels (thematic rooms rented by the hour/night), strip clubs, sex shops, and pachinko



parlours. Being a Saturday morning, there would be people left over from Friday, or just leaving from a Friday night, and we thought it might be good to scout these centres in the light of day for many reasons, not the least of which being how my presence might be construed by these proprietors (given that many are rumoured to be owned by Yakuza.<sup>2</sup> Upon doing a walkabout of the district, we found all sorts of different cafes with manga comics, PCs, showers, beds, soft serve ice cream, and even a nail salon in one of them. By this time, it was approaching our appointment with Charles’s friend, Tatsuya, who he hoped would take a liking to me and show us his view of things as a Tokyo resident.

<sup>2</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yakuza>



We took the subway to another stop with a Parisian-themed café in the transfer area. Amidst 'streetlights' indoors, I followed behind Charles to meet Tatsuya, who was a little unsure of my presence to begin with, and we exchanged pleasantries. I tried to be an unobtrusive presence while Charles and Tatsuya got reacquainted. Charles broached the subject of my purpose in Tokyo, asking if Tatsuya had any recommendations for cafes suited to this research. After the coffee was over, we went back a couple of subway stops to Shibuya to visit the insides of the ones we had mapped out earlier.

Together, we went back to one of the major cyber cafes we scouted earlier in the HMV building, to which Tatsuya already belonged as a member. He introduced the three of us at the counter, and (to my chagrin) was as open as possible about our purpose in the café, which served only to startle and intimidate the hapless girl at the service counter who promptly said no to any requests. I had not briefed him about how to approach these 'counter managers' but did not feel it was my place to do so given his seniority and local knowhow. Eventually everyone agreed that it was best for me to go into the user areas alone to document it while he and Charles stayed in the lobby. I was given a plastic sheet with pictures of different available layouts and prices. I chose a "pair flat" because I had not seen a PC cubicle with a flat bed in any of the other countries.





I was given a card and told to go to the area with similar cubicles. I passed a floor-to-ceiling wall of manga books, ice cream dispenser, vending machines, and a washroom to find myself in the middle of black wood cubicles, some with slippers/shoes outside indicating the occupancy of the cubicles. I stepped into one to find a desk, PC system, and a bed. Even if there were other people around me, I had almost no indication of their existence due to the nature of that café. Even if it was not culturally odd to strike up a conversation with a patron, the situation simply did not enable it. After having my fill of private time, I decided to join the guys in the lobby as there was no use in paying more to be alone. Tatsuya pulled out some member coupons and got a discount for me. Having used the place for 20 minutes, it still cost 250 Yen.



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We walked around to different prospects, and through pachinko parlours, which had video game screens on some of the fancier machines.



Sunday was a dreary rainy day spent catching up further, corresponding with people on the ground, but coming up short with available people. As was the case with Korea, people seemed to use this day to hide at home in preparation for the coming intense days of the workweek, including my industry contacts who would help me out.



On Monday morning, I set out to the post office with materials accumulated throughout the research journey to ship back to Vancouver. This included country-specific items such as plug adapters for electronics and map books, which would have only contributed to much more unreasonable overage costs on the flights back.

Later in the day, I met with Josh from the local online games industry to explain the research in greater depth and see if he could help leverage some of his contacts. He contacted a prominent games journalist as a potential hub for survey recruitment. I had also planned to meet with his colleague the next day during his lunch break to talk about the survey I had sent him via email.

While Josh and I were hashing out details at dinner, Yuya popped into the restaurant on his way to some other plans. While there however, he called his contacts on my behalf to see if they could help, including the aforementioned games journalist. The journalist on the phone was asking about the “merit” of participation and sending the call out to approximately 2000 Japanese members online from their homes. It was obvious he wanted more ~~money~~ “merit” than I was able to offer at the time, not to mention the problems inherent in recruiting survey takers in this way, in terms of how to do this a) language wise b) consent wise c) Confidentiality wise. Besides, this

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type of recruitment strategy would not really require my presence in the field anyway nor satisfy the ultimate purpose to observe naturalistic settings. So we decided that could be achieved if the project was heading in that direction after my departure from Tokyo.

We continued to brainstorm about possible settings, given what I had observed of the scene in Tokyo and the basic lack of compatibility between “cold approaching” in cafes and the types of gaming occurring in public environments. Both Josh and Yuya, residents of Tokyo, were quite stumped.

***Excerpt from dialogue:***

Yuya: “How about cafes in Roppongi?”

Josh: “You don’t want to be peeking over those cubicle walls to see what’s going on...”

Yuya: “Oh. Right.”

The plan was that the next evening, I would meet with Yuya after he got off work, have dinner, then meet with some of the virtual world users he knows about and at least get a few people to take the survey. Then to see if we could ask one of the PC café owners to ask his regular clientele, but this was really uncertain for the following night and we resolved to be in touch throughout the following day about developments.

On Tuesday (25<sup>th</sup>), my last full day in Tokyo was indeed so full it would spill over into the following day. As with the other sites, the last days were the culmination of everything scheduled and worked upon and I would end up going for one last all-out effort. Throughout the day, I was communicating with people on the ground who may (not) have had leads. In the process, I was attempting to make sense of it all in my field notes. I reflected on the relative shyness of people (gamers) in Tokyo, the relative inaccessibility of Internet café layouts, and the myriad of other activities besides gaming available in cafés. Really, it was quite the metaphor for how the world of games and gamers, geekdom and space is navigated by Japanese geek (otaku)<sup>3</sup> culture. People here have told me that even the professional gamers do not hang out in person and instead typically meet online. Even if the data collection this night had not worked out, this stay pointed to many sociologically interesting aspects of the sociotechnical landscape here for future inquiries.

For this night, Yuya sent me the details of the Akihabara i-café we would be visiting. He cleared the visit with the owner of the café.<sup>4</sup> Judging from the website, this café looked much more like the ones I visited in the other countries, with games-oriented events. I felt more optimistic about this prospect compared to what I had encountered thus far in Tokyo. The plan was to meet Yuya at the Akihabara subway station for dinner after he finished work, then head to the café. Unfortunately, as in

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<sup>3</sup> Japanese for “obsessive fan”

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.i-cafe.ne.jp/akiba/18battle\\_inakibaplace.php](http://www.i-cafe.ne.jp/akiba/18battle_inakibaplace.php)



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many software jobs, he got busy at the end of the business day and we were delayed. I was already at the station beforehand to soak up the environment, so I had some time to walk around the area and see what was so infamous about the district and its fascination with all things electronic.



Amidst the hustle and bustle of salaryman rush hour, the bright neon lights flashed and the welcoming fronts of the pachinko parlours beckoned passersby. Stairs led up or down to countless manga book cafes, and the fluorescent garish lighting for electronic accessories cast a luminescent blue tinge on the squeaky clean white linoleum floors of these centres. Adding to this lived promise of modernity, girls dressed in maid uniforms handed out pamphlets describing the amenities of many “maid cafes” in the area. Co-workers lined up outside a popular sushi bar for dinner, while lone younger men hurriedly patronized an onigiri (rice ball) stand and just as quickly whisked away their packages. Outside the electronics shop, I observed a group of people standing in a perimeter defined by pylons using their portable devices. They can trade various things like maps by peer to peer, but they don’t know one another most of the time and according to some, don’t care to get to know one another. The only concern is that there’s maybe a map or some other benefit to sharing and it does not appear to be a social gathering.

I finally met Yuya at Akihabara, busy hammering out plans on his mobile phone. He was on the line with the owner of iCafe, who said we needed to appear as soon as possible, because there were people available at the café for the survey because of an event. We ended up skipping dinner to take advantage of the people being at the café.

Yuya navigated by a picture map, and I spotted a pea green sign indicating the cafe’s existence a few stories up on a grey building. We took the elevator up, past the maid café in the same building, and entered an open-concept internet café that would not look out of place in Seoul, save for the ubiquitous rows of manga that I had by now grown accustomed to seeing in these environments. We were promptly greeted by the owner, who was friendly and spoke a smattering of English, but there was no time to waste. Yuya quickly explained the state of affairs with my intermittent nods, reassurances, and paperwork. The owner was kind enough to give us photocopies of ethics forms and assembled the gamers in the café, who were busy wrapping up their event involving a video camera. I briefed them on my purpose there, and a

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couple were enthusiastic while others seemed somewhat reticent. The older fellows in the café did not even flinch while they continued going about their business.

We ended up having 8 people do the Japanese offline version of the survey. Yoshi helped to elaborate on the questions as I got people set up, or vice versa, and also helped simultaneously translate with the travelogue portion. It was painstaking and we were both sweating as we moved from station to station. If we had used the online version in this case, there would have been even more delays and general frustration.



Yuya was a big help translating everything on the fly. And there were some interesting concepts that emerged as well. It turns out the gamers actually stated that they did not want to be social. In the free to play MMORPGs by Hangame, the typical pattern would be

to go from game to game trying not to build ties that are too strong. There are even some games that allow alumni networks to link, about which the participants were ambivalent. This was definitely the converse of what the other field sites seemed to imply, about gaming facilitating a social venue for those who craved interpersonal contact with a community.

As we were wrapping up the last few participants, Yuya's friends showed up, waited around and observed everything going on. It was interesting to them because they were in the games industry, and as many people now have told me, they, as Japanese usually cannot do this kind of research and it is difficult to find the opportunity to just see what everyday gamers like this are doing. They told me that there would be too many obligations and cultural intricacies to navigate for them, but because I'm a foreigner, I can access these communities relatively quickly, without the accompanying expectations that I adhere to cultural protocols, as they would have to.





In the end, I paid for 2 hours each person, and the owner gave me a discount, and even then it was not cheap at 7850 yen or so. Unlike other cafes at previous field sites, Japan was good for issuing receipts. The owner chatted with us about the purposeful layout, restaurant, and free soft serve ice cream. He said he made sure the café was female friendly (brighter, no cubicles), and no membership required. However, I still did not see any women around.

With all five of us not having had any food this evening, we were all starving. The guys asked for the sushi place around the corner, so we went to the “sushizama” which is a 24 hour sushi restaurant. In varying levels of English and Japanese, we had a debrief of how the intense session went and it was almost an informal focus group of sorts, which was really beneficial for me to bounce ideas off them about the interaction between Japanese society/technology, along with confirm what I had seen in the last little while. Because the subway had stopped running past midnight, it was simply easier to remain in this place and wait until dawn. When 5am rolled around, the McDonald’s across the street opened and Yuya bought coffee and we all caught our first trains back to our respective homes. I ended up going back to the hotel, showering, napping for 45 minutes, and throwing my things into a bag because I had to be out by 11am. Exhausted, I welcomed the long trip out to the airport and looked forward to getting some sleep on the long journey back Canada via LAX.

### ***Takeaway section – bits and bytes from Tokyo***

#### **Standout topics:**

- The exception to the rule of the other sites: gamers are indeed 'anti social?'
- Mobile and wifi devices are much more popular than PC gaming
- PC gamer prominence is eclipsed by the original console players
- There is a different model of using virtual worlds here
- Instead of a monthly subscription, games are either cheap or even free to play, making money from Real Money Trade (RMT) business models that are common in Asia and getting more common in other emerging markets.



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- Players do NOT want to get in too deep with these worlds because it would increase their social obligation
- Everyday life is heavy with obligation as it is.<sup>5</sup>
- Stand-offish proxemics (cubicle capsule culture). So, people are paying for privacy in these public spaces.

### **Recruitment/Relationship/Rapport**

- I had the constant feeling: where will I find anyone?
- Membership to cafes are encouraged
- Cubicles at the “manga kissatens” discourage interaction
- The only way I could do the research was through quasi-formal introduction.
- The only way these friends in industry could find out what gamers were doing in any systematic fashion was because of my foreign presence.

### **Infrastructure**

- Cubicles provide respite in a big dense city.
- Nothing is cheap in general, and taxis especially are quite expensive (710 yen minimum flag down)
- Subways and public modes of transport have prohibitive hours considering Tokyo is a 24 hr city
- Cafes enable people to stay in one place at all hours, mostly the night.
- As mentioned, the population of Tokyo is currently at about 13 million residents. This number goes up by another 3 million people during the day who most likely work in the city. In an already densely populated city, the infrastructure must accommodate these day labourers and non-residents who must spend extended periods of time there. This is why there must often be a ‘Pied-a-Terre’ (second ‘home’) solution for many of those who have jobs in Tokyo.

### **Position**

- As a community centre
- Cafeteria (sometimes they have restaurants or bar service)
- Communication media centre
- Library
- Hotel centrality of Tokyo, but people come from everywhere and property is unaffordable. So when work is done downtown or people are just downtown in general, a place to hang one's hat is especially important.
- Showers are available
- Cheaper than love hotels because they are less private

### **Locations**

- Usually found in the places where youth hang out and dense high rent areas
- Around businesses, restaurants, entertainment

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<sup>5</sup> Giri [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giri\\_%28Japanese%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giri_%28Japanese%29)

Part 6 of Asia white paper.

### **Socioeconomic factors**

- Migration, to deal with internal diaspora
- As mentioned (density), expensive living
- Company life: people spending time late at the office who don't want to go all the way home before starting at work again.

### **Reasons**

- Less about sociality (seems opposite of other centres)
- Encountering people in person is much worse because more involvement means more obligation.
- There were MMORPGS installed at the cafes, but they went largely unused.
- Amenities (showers, sleep)
- Sometimes infrastructure at home less amenable to gaming
- Need to get away from house (privacy)
- Multiple activities including manga (can be pornographic in nature), serve as catchall centres
- PC cafe visited more amenable to females (less seedy, tidier, more open) but females are a definite minority
- Red light districts, porn censored differently from North America and Europe.
- Because of the work week, times of play are weekday evenings and into night.
- Weekends (Saturdays/Sundays) are dead.
- The case is similar to Korean PC bangs (probably for same reasons (big city, weekends have to be spent with families))

### ***Survey/travelogue technical outcome***

Tokyo: May 20 - 26th. People were really unapproachable here because of the weird cubicle privacy layouts. Managed to get to a pure gaming LAN where it was unusual but could get them to fill out word versions of the Japanese language survey. According to their Japanese ethics forms, I named them Lans 50 - 57, but they were not collected online.

This approach worked in the Tokyo site, because these Internet cafe machines were completely enabled with word processors and web surfing etc unlike in the case of Dubai where there were separate rooms with differently-enabled machines according to membership tiers.

Once the ice was broken (half the battle), people were very willing to help, so surveys were filled out in first version of printable word survey.

Some differences from other sites:

- real time translation, recording of dialogue
- brought own Japanese word editable version on a USB stick.
- helper did on the fly translation because he found it interesting

Part 6 of Asia white paper.

English presence is a real issue and barrier with which to contend.

Enabled by style of Internet café found in Korea and Singapore (open bench concept, with all capabilities including gaming (some needed installation), Web browsing and Word processing).

### **Breakdown of participant numbers**

In total, 8 Word document surveys plus 8 travelogues were collected in Japanese.

<b>Language</b>	<b>Survey</b>	<b>Travelogue</b>
English (Online)		
Japanese (Word.doc)	8 (Lans 50-57)	8 (Lans 50-57)
<b>JAPAN GRAND TOTAL: 8</b>		

### **Incentives**

- Culture/motivation
- Interested in having foreigner chat up locals (even industry cant do that)
- Introduced by cafe owner
- Would pay for Internet time. 2 hours per person total.

### **Ethics protocol considerations**

- There was a fellow who blocked his eyes with the headphones when I was taking his personal picture. He appears in other photos unselfconsciously
- They did not allow the tick-boxes upon first signing the ethics form. However, once all the research was done they saw that they just did not understand at the onset how minimally risky the process was.

***Epilogue:***

I hope that this field report allows to reader to feel somewhat as though s/he was there in Korea, Singapore, India, the UAE, and Japan with me. Through detailed descriptions, pictures, and preliminary analysis, I attempted to provide a Zeitgeist of the field activity and point to some of the particularities found in these sites, which will set the foundation for moving forward in future iterations of the protocols in different contexts.

In each respective site, I included a journalistic diary of the events taking place. I then touched upon the takeaway points alluded to in the ethnographic journal with special attention to how objectives were achieved.

Working the 24 hr, multi-time zone demands was an intriguing challenge. Much had to be recounted from memory after the fact. As the old joke goes:

"How long does it take a team of anthropologists to screw in a lightbulb? 20 seconds, plus 3 years to complete their fieldnotes on the event."

So many times I had to remind myself to be patient--that these (often exceedingly gracious) people were not here for my agenda. I was the one who had to work around them and their lives, and THEIR culture, and THEIR expectations. Sometimes that involved being a team player by "hanging out" and "having fun" even though at times I might have been screaming inside (for various reasons, that might have been related to the previous, current, or next fieldsite, or North America).

At the heart of it, I needed to get something accomplished in a really short period of time. But again, I had to remind myself that I was getting 'it' done already and spending time with my informants in these cultures was indeed part of it, with the mental tape recorder always on, eating, sleeping, and breathing the lived environment. Showing me their culture was in fact the best way to get insight into the why and how of gaming here, despite the fact that sometimes it was not readily apparent in direct outcome.

Indeed, the cultural and sensory richness of these different environments were at times a hindrance to what would have otherwise been enough of a challenge in a lab environment. Factors like weather, power outages, or farm animals for that matter, rarely become apparent in a controlled environment. But gaming in these spaces is rarely if ever occurring in such controlled circumstances. However, I hope to have shown with this report just how much there is left to probe and make sense of in an inquiry that had just begun to reveal layers of nuance in virtual environments, and real users, in their everyday lives.