

Cultural Affordances and Changing Social Dynamics in Asian and European Contexts

Florence Chee

Abstract

It_ This paper is designed to provoke discussion on possible reasons why online games have become a mainstream cultural activity in some sites, yet remains a subculture in others. Through ethnographic fieldwork I had carried out in Asia, I examine culture, social structure, and infrastructure as they pertain to online game usage. My objective during this relatively brief foray into the European context was to probe for possible thematic differences in the Asian and European sites through cultural immersion, experience, and observations. I will anchor the discussion in my findings derived from the Asian study with which I am most familiar, and highlight the potential comparisons with the European context.

Introduction

This paper is designed to provoke discussion on possible reasons why online games have become a mainstream cultural activity in some sites, yet remains a subculture in others. More specifically, I wanted to examine how online games fit into different cultures, the roles that they may or may not fulfill in people's everyday lives, and suggest possible contextual factors that may play a part in the prominence of online games in specific sites of inquiry in Asia and Europe. My three-month stay at the Institute for Advanced Study of Science, Technology, and Society in Graz, Austria coincided with a total six-month European sojourn, where I was able to complement ethnographic fieldwork I had carried out in Asia looking at culture, social structure, and infrastructure as they pertain to online game usage. My objective during this relatively brief foray into the European context was to probe for possible thematic differences in the Asian and European sites through cultural immersion, experience, and observations. I will anchor the discussion in my findings derived from the Asian study

with which I am most familiar, and highlight the situational and contextual comparisons with my European observations.

My ethnographic research on gaming culture has focused primarily on the fieldsite of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and its globally infamous online game culture, which has been simultaneously lauded and derided in local and international media. The swift growth of online gaming in the global public consciousness has served to point out the economic miracle that modern Korean society represents (P. Kim 2011) – one of sophisticated hardware, commercial and consumerist lifestyles. In the years since the Korean War (1950-1953), the southern half of the “world’s last divided country” has managed to transform from a feudal agrarian society, into a flagship knowledge/information society.

My research has sought out a sociocultural explanation for the oft-celebrated success of South Korea’s gaming industry and correspondingly frenetic mainstream online gaming culture. Governmental, medical and legal communities have also, in varying quantities of fervour, used events in South Korea to inspire, defend, or initiate decisions regarding how they want games or gamers to be treated (Clark & Scott 2009) (in every sense-biomedically or otherwise). The extended study I discuss here has been informed by my prior inquiries into North American cases of online game addiction, as well as shorter contextual investigations into gamer cultures including Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East (F. Chee, de Castell & Taylor 2011). Though beyond the immediate scope of this specific inquiry, I believe that having conducted research in these multiple sites implicitly serve in a comparative capacity, buttressing the discussion of Korean media ecologies and lending a richer tone to the assertions herein.

Purpose

As the title of this paper suggests, it is fitting to examine the affordances of communications infrastructures and how they act in tandem with social dynamics. All too often, games and gamers have been misunderstood and briskly dismissed as “addicts” or something deviating from the norm,

thus reducing it to a deceptively simple term like “addiction,” which implies a need to regulate and, worse, medicate. Thus, the driving force behind my research has been to make a case for a nuanced understanding of the place of online games in everyday life by looking at the intersection of such a communication technology and culture. Primarily, the three main questions driving my inquiry have been:

1. What factors have contributed to the prominence of online gaming culture in certain places like contemporary Korea?
2. What are the social consequences of rapid technological adoption?
3. How does the local culture interact with the global?

Examining Korean society has been fascinating, as it is a culture that has internalized online gaming as part of everyday life more than any other country. There are, however, particular reasons for why gaming has become so popular in this national context as opposed to others. An ethnographic look into the nuances and complexities of this dynamic nation serves as a look at how people create meaning with their technologies and everyday circumstances.

In order to act as a counterweight to the dominant media discourses of helpless gamers, (Asian) technology addicts/Techno-Orientalism, and numerous other scenarios of reification, I wished to personally engage with the stories of actual people being involved (which seems to be an increasingly less common strategy in the age of global journalism, especially where stories from large agencies propagate themselves instantaneously with little if any fact-checking). It is an attempt to lend a sober perspective to the body of mythology increasingly surrounding online games, gamers, and what meaning can be derived from the supposedly cold, scientific world of information and communication technologies (ICTs). A strong theoretical influence I have drawn upon is the work of the Canadian Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, and I have structured my thinking along the lines of online games being a medium of communication.

Games as Communication

"In the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin"

Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (1988, 47)

This perspective espouses an understanding of media in McLuhan's terms: as an extension of the self. This is especially the case as technological and social change is being analyzed hand-in-hand around the world. The debate regarding the various positive and negative effects associated with media use very much precedes online gaming. Indeed, one may find panics associated with reading novels (silently) as the end of decent society in the annals of communication studies. Additionally, much harm has been done since McLuhan's time in the promotion of a specific brand of media research that either focused too much on the specifics of the content or its dystopian effects with little or no regard for the role played by the user except as a helplessly passive consumer of media. Evidence of this can be found especially in the body of scholarship scarred by the television era, which includes Neil Postman's *Amusing ourselves to death* (1985), and Joshua Meyrowitz's *No sense of place* (1985). Moving into the Internet era, media seems to experience a further divorcing from oneself, as exemplified by Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen* (1995), which discusses the user's identity as fragmented and multitudinous as a mere result of being online and able to role play, and more recently the appropriately titled, *Alone Together* (2011), which has gotten much attention as its assertions contradict the increasingly public and social nature of media. While it shall not be disputed that these contributions increase public dialogue to the benefit of media communication research as a whole, there nonetheless seems to be an academic amnesia regarding the centrality of the user and media as an extension of the self as mapped out by theories surrounding the user and his or her experience with technology, such as McLuhan's.

McLuhan's concept of figure and ground as found in *Laws of Media* (1988) was the guiding principle of his famous statement, "The medium is the message." He used the figure/ground dichotomy to look at communication technology (figure) and explain its function in a particular context (ground). He believed that in order to adequately assess the impact

of a new technology, one had to examine the figure and ground (medium and context) together. To look at one or the other independently, isolated from its historical context, was more or less pointless. McLuhan saw the splitting and dividing of figure and ground as an obfuscation of true and accurate technological assessment and a means of control. "In fact, it is the technique of insight, and as such as necessary for media study, since no medium has its meaning or existence alone, but only in constant interplay with other media" (M. McLuhan 1994, 26). Three reasons why the medium is the message to be considered:

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

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

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

The above stanza is appropriately used in this case to represent a gap in media scholarship looking at figure (scratch) and ground (itch). For the purposes of this work, McLuhan's perspective acts as a counterweight to the many lopsided studies that simplistically interpret a high amount of media use as a pathological condition.

The tendency towards biomedical discourses (and treatments) being cut and pasted into the diagnosis of online gaming as a problem has been

troubling, as has its ability to garner widespread blame as the root of social pathology in the public imagination. Journalistic linkages between the tragic high-school shootings in Columbine (1999), or at the post-secondary level at Virginia Tech (2007) and the perpetrators' video game activities are a key example of the sensationalist coverage informing the public about the entirety of games and gamers as a seriously troubled population. Even more troubling has been the trend towards these discussions going so far as to influence attitudes which then become public policy, serving to (in most cases wrongfully) sanction the activities of an inert majority.

Bringing the discussion back to a technology in contextual perspective, the media theories of Marshall McLuhan's continue to have salience in the understanding of contemporary technologies of media, arguably to a greater extent in this present Internet age than at the time of their conception in the time of the telegraph in the mid twentieth century. Not only do his theories have new relevance for the current forms of media we have at our disposal, but I argue that the combination of available media and cultural variation in their use, as exemplified in Korea, bring his theories to a new level of relevance for the field of communication.

The Rise of Korean Gaming

Through documenting the factors that contributed to the rise of online gaming in Korea to its current state of prominence, I wish to illustrate how evaluating games and their platforms is only a partial explanatory measure. The popularity of online gaming in Korea especially can be attributed to key technological policy decisions and events, however rarely discussed in games literature. Also, deliberate choices in trade relations and restriction have influenced the path dependency of online gaming.

Certainly more than I am able to merely hint at here, Korea has participated in an extraordinary moment in global communication history, as well as in its own right. Subject to what Nancy Abelman (2003) calls a "Compressed Modernity," the nation has propelled itself into becoming the bona fide networked Information Society that many countries aspiring to be such, find elusive. The question with other countries as well, is

whether or not such an outcome is a priority. Notions of Modernity (Feenberg, 1995; P. Kim 2011) were adopted and reworked to the geopolitical and social realities on the peninsula through a discussion of Japanese colonization, the Cold War, Korean War, and subsequent political/economic ramifications that framed the workings of Korean life on the peninsula, thus setting the stage for the institutions that emerged from those times of creative destruction. Significantly, Korea's disproportionately large investments in education, compared with other OECD countries, and emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) fields, along with (to a lesser extent) military exemption policies have facilitated the nationwide growth of the now-pervasive online gaming.

As gaming grew in prominence, government and industry alike began to see it as an economic panacea for Korea. However, one cannot underestimate the role that the corporate entities, the Chaebol (like Samsung, LG, Hyundai, etc.), play in almost all the affairs of Korea along with its sense of nationalism/nationhood. Therefore, it is imperative to mention the nature of the Chaebol, government science and technology initiatives, in how these served to shape the landscape of Korean communications (Larson 1995) in turn gaming, and continue to do so at present.

I argue that the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 was a catalytic moment that created a perfect storm of conditions for the online games scene in Korea to flourish. At the time, Korea had just realized the implementation of a nationwide broadband policy, thereby enabling high-speed Internet access throughout the country to its 50 million inhabitants. As Stewart (2004) points out, there were various educational obstacles to achieving a sophisticated level of literacy in these technologies for the average person, even if the infrastructure was a positive step. The financial crisis, termed the "IMF Crisis", domestically in Korea served to upend much of the extant wealth and power structures that had asserted themselves over the nation's affairs until that point. With international auditors throwing open the books and reforming the Chaebols, there were many casualties in job loss. This new unemployment rocked the nation to its core, but gave rise to a slough of new entrepreneurial activity by some business savvy individuals. This series of events turned entrepreneurs towards many start-up activities, including running Internet cafes or, as they are termed in Korea, the PC Bang.

As I have asserted in Chee (2006) that the PC Bang was a cornerstone of social interaction, thus serving as de facto community centres all over the country, they are the flashpoint of social interaction, especially for youth, in the hyper-urban capital city of Seoul, where more than 10% of the Korean population resides. The creation of these gaming centres, to the number and extent that they now occur, would not have happened were it not for the particular reverberations of the Asian economic crisis of 1997. There were many soft aspects in the economic downturn as well. PC Bangs have provided a refuge for the jobless, youth were able to earn money through games, and sometimes that sum could amount to more than a part-time job.

Moreover, games that took advantage of broadband access were also on the rise, such as the originally North American real-time strategy game made by Blizzard, StarCraft – the playing and professionalization of which I will explain in the chapter on the subject of gaming as mainstream culture. It is this confluence of factors that are part and parcel with the prominence of gaming in Korea, as it currently exists as a communication medium.

Online Games as Mainstream Culture

This paper is primarily based upon ethnographic insights that I have collected, to provide evidence of how online games have manifested as mainstream culture in Korea as opposed to other places. I have been collecting narratives during my Korean research stays in 2004, 2008/2009 and 2010. It touches upon the ethnographic fieldwork I have done on these few occasions, analyzing the intricate relation between the socio-cultural factors at work in Korean game communities and the context in which games have become integrated into everyday life in South Korea. The online gaming culture that has evolved in the last decade has been a fascinating one in which to be a participant observer. Korea has especially been a rich and dynamic site for this research.

Through the narratives I collected and in the process of reckoning with my own reality of living in Korea for an extended period of time, I

became sensitized to three main themes that became apparent over and over again:

- 1) Culture
- 2) Social Structure
- 3) Infrastructure.

These three themes encompassed what I wish to state about the occurrence of gaming figures on ground, as McLuhan would have put it.

Culture

Why has gaming been the object of derision much like other forms of media controversies? In the end, is the distinction (à la Bourdieu) between what is a real and important communication medium and what is not merely a subjective judgment based upon high/low culture and ideology? Unlike North America and places in Europe with which I have become familiar through this research stay, in Korea games are not merely the province of a stereotypically marginal community. Rather than a subculture, online games shine in the spectacle of Korean mainstream mass culture.

First, in the space between online and offline, youth were found to be ultimately concerned with meeting social obligations and expectations. Playing games was often the activity of choice for nurturing social networks. Presently, the PC Bang is a gathering place where youth meet friends, date, blow off steam from a demanding school day, and negotiate aspects of their identities. This way of structuring activities intrigued me, as they resemble the pub and coffee house culture that is widely accepted in European socialization practices.

Second, there is an unprecedented celebrity culture surrounding professional online gamers, who make millions of dollars in televised game competitions akin to racecar drivers in Formula One exhibitions. This activity is often referred to as Pro-gaming or eSports (Jin 2010). These events straddle the spheres of online and offline communities, and it is quite easy to draw parallels where they might exist for professional

sports. A common passion in Europe is football, where there are indeed some negative outcomes through overzealous participation, but has become accepted and integrated into the culture.

Third, Korean youth heavily rely upon nurturing the interpersonal dynamics afforded by the role technology plays in their technocultural landscape. In his book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1994), McLuhan employs the Greek myth of Narcissus as a metaphor to describe what happens to someone experiencing the extension of themselves afforded by a particular medium. According to McLuhan, the myth is powerful for how it illustrates the fascination men feel, “by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves” (M. McLuhan 1994, 41). This is exemplified in Korean media ecology by the notorious frequency of which youth can be found communicating by way of online gaming avatars, their Cyworld minihompys, Facebook, and doing any variety of activities on their mobile phones, which are increasing in prominence through smartphone usage.

The name Narcissus is derived from the Greek word ‘narcosis,’ which McLuhan takes to reflect numbness. The myth of Narcissus explains that the youth was so captivated by his own reflection in the water because he thought it to be another person. He stayed there so long he grew roots, and that gave us the Narcissus flower that grows beside water in present day. McLuhan connects this myth with his own media theory in that this extension of himself by this mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the “servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image” (M. McLuhan 1994, 41). Once he adapted to the extension of himself, he became a closed system. With such a myth directly concerned with a fact of human experience, the metaphor of Narcissus seems the beginning of a more reasonable explanation for the pathological use of media than its typical dismissal as a medical “addiction.” Contemporary youth in both Korea and North America have been criticized for their “Narcissism,” and exhibitionism in their use of online media. Yet, it would be unfortunate to accept this branding without an understanding of possible theories of media use.

The ‘numbness’ of Narcissus that McLuhan alludes to presents an alternative understanding for media use that places the user at the heart of a type of social ‘shock.’

“For if Narcissus is numbed by his self-amputated image, there is a very good reason for the numbness... a person suddenly deprived of loved ones and a person who drops a few feet unexpectedly will both register shock”

(M. McLuhan 1994, 44).

He maintains that shock induces a generalized numbness or an increased threshold to all types of perception, and, as a result the “victim” of this shock seems immune to pain or sense.

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

When a person extends oneself, there is a resultant amplification in the sense of that extension. The Narcissus myth accounts for the numbness of blocking of perception as a type of self-defense mechanism to allow the nervous system to bear such amplification and extension. McLuhan argues that Narcissus’ image is a self-amputation or extension induced by “irritating pressures.” However, as a counter-irritant, the image in turn produces a generalized numbness or shock unrecognizable to Narcissus. “Self-amputation forbids self-recognition” (M. McLuhan 1994, 43). McLuhan then attempts to draw further parallels between the nervous system and media use. He posits that the body, as a group of sustaining and protective organs for the central nervous system, serves as a buffer against sudden variations of stimulus in one’s environment. He goes on to say that sudden social failure or shame is a shock that some may “take to heart” or that may cause muscular disturbance in general, signaling for the person to withdraw from the threatening situation (M. McLuhan 1994). As pseudo-scientific as this line of reasoning may seem, it does pose a reasonable metaphor for the social reasons as to why people may ‘retreat’ into unhealthy or destructive forms of media use.

Social Structure

In thinking about social structure, I ask the question of whether or not Neo-Confucianism affects the Korean Techno-Cultural environment, and

if so, how. In a Confucian society such as Korea's, age is privileged. The games industry is somewhere that Korean youth can, and have, thrived. This implicates notions of age and class mobility.

Firstly, family home dynamics necessitate that the majority of socialization occurs outside the home in Korea, where it is not commonplace to invite friends and casual acquaintances over to one's home. Space, along with privacy, is a premium. This condition has given rise to the 'bang culture' (room culture), which facilitates activities away from the home, and away from the possible critical gaze of the family.

Secondly, online games as a medium of communication serve as a hierarchy leveler. This is akin to playing a round of golf with the boss, but in most cases being allowed to beat the boss. Cases as found in Feenberg's (1999) study of an instance of Japanese gaming and social structure are an interesting parallel in this case and in the Korean context, present implications for age and class mobility.

Thirdly, gaming has provided an economically convenient activity for Korean youth, for whom there is a limited set of affordable leisure activities. Due to economies of scale PC Bangs cost about \$1 an hour, and work well with student budgets. These activities have also given rise to young people's literacy in computer games, technological literacy, and resultant careers in the domestic games industry including realizing dreams of professional gaming. Though efforts are being made to grow the games industry around the globe, these opportunities are much more concentrated in Korea than any other country in the world.

Infrastructure/Policy

This section discusses findings associated with the infrastructural affordances of online gaming in Korea, and potential policy implications arising from the investigation.

South Korea has achieved the highest broadband penetration in the world through deliberate investment initiatives. It is one of the most densely populated nations in the world, with 12 million living in Seoul, out of a 50 million-person country. Much of the terrain is hyper-urban, and green space is scarce as is general public space. Internet cafes, malls,

and other commodified meeting places compensate for the scarcity of community space. In particular, Internet cafes (PC Bangs) emerged as a popular entrepreneurial activity in Korea and are a prominent factor in the rise of online games in Korea.

There were many contributing factors that created the current information infrastructure in contemporary Korea. However, it is not only the information infrastructure that is of note, but how people navigate the everyday instances of this infrastructure as it intertwines with the previous sections of culture and social structure. These spatial factors found in modern urbanity and domestic social upheaval have been leveraged in ways that are not readily apparent to a cursory analysis of online gaming in Korea. Family, economic, and geopolitical pressures (to name a few) all conspire to provide insight into the function of gaming vis-à-vis a type of McLuhanesque retribalization by way of the various strategies and patterns of youth as they move through these technoscapes.

McLuhan's discourse on media studies helps to add a scalable dimension of understanding to the global phenomenon of technological adoption. This examination is relevant to everyday users, non-users, and policy makers. To speak of policy implications in communication is to concern the international state of affairs in doing so. Firstly, the nuanced understanding of media use that the application of McLuhan's theories offer, serves to provide a more balanced look at the regulation of use worldwide. Is it possible to evaluate the medium independently of its use context? McLuhan would argue that this would be indeed impossible and unjust to attempt to sanction media use in an arbitrary manner. The hours PC game rooms allowed to open are different all over the world due to differing classification and perception of value to citizens. Secondly, related to regulation is the issue of censure and labeling of media as possibly 'addictive' or worse. As the US Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) consumer alert has warned, "The anonymity that avatars provide can encourage people to 'act out' behaviors that may be considered inappropriate, particularly for tweens and teens. Indeed, visitors may find the online equivalent of a red-light district, with simulated sexual activity or violence" (Federal Trade Commission Consumer Alert 38). Accordingly, this pervasive rhetoric exists in direct tension with those of gamer communities, whose every-

day lived situations tell a much less sensational story. Thirdly, arising from the above are implications for development and funding of 'leisure' and what might count as such.

Why Korea as a field site

During 2004, I conducted ethnography on online games culture in Korea for the first time. True to both my background in the disciplinary backgrounds of Communication and Anthropology (each with its own respective identity crises), I set out to examine the cultural milieu in which ICTs were being used. Some main questions included, "Why would the same online game like StarCraft be more popular for years longer in Korea than in North America?" or "Why does almost everyone here favour the PC platform for game playing and not the console?" or "What is so different about Korean culture that online games occupy such a vastly different role in popular culture from North America?"

This ethnographic inquiry began as a response to my frustration with how games and gamers were being portrayed in mainstream media as mindless drones, helpless children, or social outcasts, who were enslaved by the powers of digital games. This mode of simple entertainment, should we (the public) allow it to continue, would herald the end of productive civilization as we knew it. To be certain, media panics of this nature are nothing new (Debord 1983), with ample evidence of other forms of media over the centuries that have since been folded into the normalized media ecologies of the cultures in which they reside. At present, however, public concern surrounds online gaming at varying levels, with a key flashpoint being Korea.

In my research of game communities, I have found a number of what I can only call panicked articles describing the pathological level at which Korean youth in particular were playing games (the strongest examples of them being Gluck 2002; Ho 2005; J. H. Kim, Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2006; T. Kim 2005). These perspectives pointed to a broader journalistic trend that indicated gamers were both troubled, and in trouble. After having interviewed people who had told me about their complex reasons

for online gaming in other ethnographic studies (Chee, Florence, M. Vieta, & R. Smith 2005; F. Chee & Smith 2005), I was still dissatisfied with the research I was reading that took for granted the diagnosis of games addiction in psychological terms because they seemed to address a limited number of variables and controls without considering the sociocultural nuances of player motivations (van Schie, E.G.M. & Wiegman 1997; Whang 2003). I wanted to see what was happening in Korea at the grassroots level. That is, was there something more underneath the surface of panic as mass media (and some in established academe) would have its readers believe of youth on a runaway train towards a dismal future in a nation of online game addicts? After all, according to Ursula Franklin in *The Real World of Technology*, technologies are developed and used within a particular social, economic, and political context (Franklin 1999, 51). I wanted to use ethnography in order to look at the micro as they interacted with the macro forces (Padgett 2003). The meta-message I wanted to convey from this analysis is that Korea is not the “mysterious other,” to be exoticized and feared amidst what others have charged with Techno-Orientalist discourse (Hjorth 2006; Hjorth 2011). With so many sociocultural and historical factors to consider, an analysis without those contextual elements is gravely at a deficit – yet, that is what most analyses on new media tend to entail. I wanted my ethnographic text to represent another truth other than the ‘Truth’ circulating in greater numbers in the popular and academic communities already. The academic research concerned with games, hailing from social and natural sciences alike, seemed to echo the (moral) panic that news agencies were all too eager to celebrate at that point. Dangerous precedents were being set with cases like Sean Wooley (F. Chee & Smith 2005), whose mother was suing Sony Online Entertainment because she attributed her son’s suicide to his exposure to the MMORPG *EverQuest*.

The trend towards blaming the games and gamers was a troubling one indeed, and I felt that I needed to be a part of ameliorating this state of affairs. There had to be a counterweight to these arguments. My search for nuanced understandings of the motivations of gamers brought me to the works of an ever-growing cadre of scholars who are cornerstones of the global conversation on games and gamers (Boellstorff 2008; Castronova

2005; Consalvo 2007; Dibbell 1998; Ito 2009; Malaby 2006; Nakamura 2008; Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006).

Indeed, a bit of biographical background would contribute to understanding my motivation. Having played games since the early 1980s, I knew from my own lived experience that gaming could be a very social activity. Further, there were also many different types of games out there, but everything was being painted (or rather tarred) with the same brush whether or not it specifically games or gamers merited that type of treatment. Critiques surrounding whether or not gamers should be treated for their disorder psychologically or even physiologically is a perennial debate (Clark & Scott 2009; Young & de Abreu 2011). In my work, I throw into question what constitutes disorders and if they can even be explained as simply as an “addiction to games.” Because the extant literature on online gaming tended to proceed with research on addiction as a foregone conclusion, I decided to problematize the term itself and urge people to re-evaluate the phenomenon of online gaming in popular culture. While the question of addiction has touched numerous activities such as heroin, alcohol, sex, ad nauseum, my inquiry necessarily focuses on games. That is not to say that the activities are mutually exclusive, but I would be reluctant at this point to make claims about these other aspects when others have spent their lives doing it much more thoroughly than I am able to here and are still wrangling with the debates themselves (Alexander 2008; Peele 1989; Rapping 2000; Schaler 2000). These inquiries, along with my own, sought to lend personal perspectives of those who spend time in virtual worlds and online games of many genres. It became clear that this debate would not go away anytime soon, but rather manifest in a slightly altered way the next time another form of emergent media became popular enough to warrant public attention.

After exploring the construction of addiction and pursuing the activity of online games as more of an attempt at community formation, I was increasingly sensitized to the discourses and representations of gamer culture, to which I belong myself. In the North American arena of debate, there was another thread that was emerging, which was that of the South Korean online game addict. This archetypical representation of the hapless game addict as discussed above was compounded further

by Techno-Orientalist discourses, where an entire nation, ethnicity, or continent could be reified as hopeless techno-fetishists or completely dismissed altogether as “Other.” This was the time when my research trajectory turned towards looking at South Korea as an instance of how online gaming as a communication medium has played an instrumental role in sociotechnical transformation of a populous. Explaining my work in this light has been a topic of discussion in my dissertation work.

Exploratory work in Europe

During my research stay at the Institute for Advanced Studies on Science, Technology and Society (IAS-STs) in Graz, Austria, I examined the use of information communication technologies (ICTs) and the changing social dynamics amidst the impacts of transnationality in Asian and European contexts. A theme of the study has been to compare the relationship between the spaces in which media use occurs and how social choices are influenced by local culture.

Having spent a significant amount of time immersed in the Korean technocultural landscape during my fieldwork research stays, I found a number of sentiments towards technology particularly remarkable. Commensurate with the aforementioned overlap in government and industry people and practices, Korea has a significant history of active promotion of a technologically oriented lifestyle across all sectors. This concerted effort in conspicuous consumption, often couched in nationalistic and modernist sentiments have successfully contributed to the inertia in technological neophilism. Some of these sentiments lend themselves to promoting more of a gaming culture than in other countries. Korea appears to have a captive, and simultaneously demanding use culture. For example, during my time as a Visiting Researcher in the Department of Communication at Seoul National University, I had the opportunity to provide input on the research of graduate students. I found some of their projects interesting, primarily because it allowed me insight into what Korean graduate students found interesting about technology, culture, and the human condition in Korea as they perceived it to be. A research

question that was particularly telling of the prevalent attitude towards technological adoption was whether or not mobile phone usage should be viewed as a human right, and how to make moves towards ensuring that the less than ten percent of those left in Korea without access to mobile phones be given access.

There are a number of cultural factors to tease out in the following pages. The narratives explicated here in the ethnographic present work in tandem with social history and contextual circumstance to provide a comprehensive picture of how online gaming rose to prominence in Korea.

Domination of PC gaming in Korea as opposed to Europe

Due to Korea's colonization by Japan in the early 20th century, as well as its longstanding concern with Japanese cultural invasion, the Korean government had banned Japanese cultural products until 1998, which included console games, films and music. With the ban lifted, Korea gradually opened the market to Japanese culture, phasing in previously black market products, with console games from Japan making their public appearance in the Korean marketplace by 2002 (Lee 2002).

As explicated in my work with Dal Yong Jin (Hjorth & Chan 2009; Jin & Chee 2008), the historical tension between the two countries has proven persistent and difficult to surmount, as those who anticipated large profits through access to the Korean game market found the endeavour generated a disappointing and negligible amount of revenue for Japanese companies. With Japanese console makers such as Sony, Nintendo and Sega experiencing such difficulties in penetrating the Korean game market, Korea utilized the opportunity to develop its own domestic online game industry.

While this line of reasoning for the lack of console popularity in Korea is completely illogical in terms of the specific merit of the medium, it was the cultural and historical context that determined the technology of choice for gaming in Korea. Many modes of media research simply do not have the 'room' to include socio-historical background even though

it might be pertinent as in this case it most certainly was. However, it is just these types of insights that are the primary reason for gaining insights through immersion in a cultural context.

Europe, on the other hand, is very much skewed towards being console-centric in its digital game play. While there are pockets of broadband ubiquitous access in larger city centres, there has not been as unified and concerted effort as in the Korean case, if for only the absence of unilateral decision-making and prioritization of an ICT infrastructure, which has been the foundation of online gaming. Thus, digital games have remained a subculture in Western context.

My initial analyses pointed to differing ideas with respect to the perception of online games and gamers, including what has typically motivated people to play and congregate in spaces such as the Internet café, the home, and other hybrid public/private environments. My goal has been to build an increased understanding of cultural factors in the evaluation and implementation of technology and their associated societal consequences. Indeed, the examination of the cultural, political, and economic path dependencies of other environments is imperative as studies in science, technology, and society move towards greater global understandings.

To date, the primary field research I have conducted concerning the media ecologies in Asia (most prominently my dissertation work on South Korea) find that these relationships have appeared to be very much shaped by local culture, social structure and infrastructural factors. I have argued that government policy initiatives, industrial relationships, and social history have indeed been instrumental in driving the differing pace of technology use-culture in places like contemporary South Korea. Having now added preliminary observations and informal discussion in European contexts, I discussed some initial findings and suppositions at the IAS-STS, my host institution in Graz, Austria. Moving forward from this initial phase would involve devising a formal interview protocol tailored to the local terrain, and implementing a research plan that is centered on online gaming habits in home environments.

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