



Article Title: Korea – A Gamer’s Paradise or a New Unwanted Culture?

Author: Paul Robertson

Bio: The author is the founder & CEO of the Asian EFL Journal. He may be contacted at publisher@asian-e-fl-journal.com.

INTRODUCTION

South Korea entered the internet age like no other country – at full speed – a country of some 48 million now sees over 30 million connected to the internet via high speed connections.

Over 75% of Koreans claim to have online gaming experience (Korea Herald), Korea is obviously a country that not only enjoys, but is addicted to online gaming. Koreans tread the fine line between fantasy and reality – for their lifestyle dictates they must escape from the polluted over populated conditions that they endure daily. Gaming it seems, is the way to do it.

It’s 5.00 a.m. in downtown Seoul, and my colleague and I have spent the night going from PC Bang (internet café) to PC Bang. Where ever we look in Seoul, we see the neon PC signs brilliantly lit up. The world of online gaming is only seconds away from any where you stop in the streets.

The Internet is an integral part of Koreans’ daily life. There is hardly any activity that Koreans’ can’t, and don’t take part in online – from shopping and socializing to mass activism, not to mention the seedier but highly popular sex industry that Koreans partake in online. In one sweep, the

Internet has lifted the lid on Korean society previously inhibited by Confucianism in all walks of life, and has opened up a realm where time and space are meaningless and Confucianist norms are out the window.

The next PC Bang we enter at 5.10 a.m. on Tuesday morning is packed – smoke filled and noisy. Blood curdling sounds fill the air and wails of trolls, goblins and other assorted monsters' strange sounds emanate from the hundreds of cubicles. Games like *Diablo* and *Lineage* seem very popular. The PC Bang manager, a girl looking about 16, cigarette hanging from mouth, fixed and almost dilated pupils, fake tattoos covering her body, rings hanging from every corner of her face, looks at us a like a scene from *Dusk to Dawn*. She tells us there are no seats – her cash register open and displaying over what is, at a glance in excess of 5 million Won – a nights takings. We slip her W10,000 and she lets us enter.

We find a spot being vacated by a youth who tells us he is 12 years old – cigarette in hand – empty bottles of Soju (hopefully from a previous user) next to his computer. We sit down in the corner, at the end of a row of 20 gamers all engrossed in their machines. We boot up *Star Craft*, the game that got it all started in Korea only a few years back. PC Bangs, with their unique social atmosphere, low prices, are the very center of Korea's on-line revolution. A PC Bang does not look like an Internet café in the west. The atmosphere is far from bland – rather it's a vibrant place where people gather for a Styrofoam bowlful of noodles and chain smoking rampage through cyber space. Whilst alcohol is technically forbidden, and non smoking zones exist in the PC Bangs, you would never know it.

The PC Bang has become the nucleus of the modern Korean youth culture. Spiked hair, nose rings, drugs, abandonment of education and family, are part of parcel of this culture. Drugs and prostitution go hand in hand with PC bangs.

The Korean gaming scene is unique – there is no other country worldwide to come close. Not only do groups gather in the real world to play games, they do so in the virtual one as well. The most popular game in Korea is the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (*MMORPG*) which brings together thousands of people in one game and allows them to operate as if in a real world society: they can even make friends, get married, attain power and wealth, and even become super criminals on-line. The negative aspect of gaming is that thousands of students are dropping out of school to play

games 24 hours a day. A young gamer was found dead at his console only late last year. He had been playing non stop for three days with out food or water. (Korean Herald 2005)

In a *MMORPG*, the game does not stop when an individual player does, but continues to be molded by the collective group, which gives it history, tradition and culture. Why do Koreans find these games so luring? The reasons are obvious to ‘outsiders.’ Korea is considered one of the most ‘wired’ countries in the world, making mass participation in games easy. Secondly, by making games available on-line, allows the distributors to counter problems of copying. Instead of releasing a product that would be promptly pirate in this land of championing pirates, game companies charge for the space and time used to play the game online. Thirdly, it has been noted (Kim, 2006) that over a million Koreans apply to leave Korea each year to live in other countries to escape the poor education system and mass corruption, and thus gaming provides an ‘artificial escape’ for those who can’t leave Korea.

Some psychologists have mentioned that the teamwork psychology of a game is favored over the individual rpgs. This conforms to traditional Confucian thinking in Korea that, at times, prevents Koreans from thinking for themselves – rather by hiding behind a group, decisions can be made with no fear of failure. Chang (2006) is wrong when he says Koreans “...*want to be in a group in which they can compare their abilities with those of other gamers and in which their abilities can be recognized.*” The fact is quite the opposite, but Koreans will not admit to outsiders that they cannot play RPGs single handedly, for the fear of defeat and loss of face is paramount.

From a business aspect, Korea leads the world in this industry. According to Chang, “*Outside of Korea, there are few online game software companies with such an exceptional knowledge. The ability to use the Net is becoming more important, and the so this generations of Koreans will pave the way for bigger and bolder ventures in the coming decades.*” Game companies have taken note of this trend and are preparing games for the following decades. The Korean gaming industry is in its early days. Within two years the tourist will see PC Bangs blossom everywhere. Manufacturers are quickly trying to develop new games for the anticipated new generation of gamers that will come on-line in the next 2-3 years.



Professional gaming is potentially lucrative carrier in Korea. Almost 8000 players from Korea attended the Grand Final of the World Sports Games in Beijing last year. Hundreds of thousands from around the world watched the live event on their computers. In Korea recently, one pro gamer signed a five year contract with a mobile carrier worth U.S. \$5 million. The Beijing Championship saw a top prize of \$20,000 go to the winning team of War Craft 3, whilst the team who dominated Counter Strike took home \$20,000. Go to any shopping mall on a Saturday afternoon, and you will see pro-gamers signing autographs, reflecting their 'star' position in Korean society. The revolution has just begun. The future (the next 3 years) will more than likely see remarkable advances in online gaming, combined with the destruction of a centuries standing Korean tradition based on Confucianism.

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