THE DIGITAL ERA: AN ESSAY ON INTERCULTURALITY AND TECHNOLOGY

João Azuaga

Centro de Estudos Interculturais

Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto

Portugal

joao.azuaga@gmail.com

Abstract

That the future has come there is no doubt. But there are some countries which have embraced the digital era more than others. South Korea has been well on the vanguard of technology for the last fifteen years. From the latest cell-phone technology to megalomaniac futuristic "U-cities", South Korea is looking to establish itself as the world leader in technology and science. Being a "new" country, still in search for its place in the world, Korea has come a long way since World War II and the Korean War. Overcoming war, anarchy, dictatorship and deep economic crisis, Korea has been slowly crawling into the international spotlight.

But not only technology and science make the core of Korea's success. The strong will of its people and the visionary political and social stances adopted by the governments of the Sixth Republic[1] also helped to shape Korean society into a role-model for the modern Western world.

With well-defined goals for the future, Korea should be looked at as an example of the integration of the latest technologies into day-to-day life. This short reflection aims to

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[1]AA.VV. "Sixth Republic of South Korea." *Wikipedia.*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sixth_Republic_of_South_Korea (Last accessed 29/08/2013).

unveil the secrets of the success of the Asian advent of technologyand its long-lasting relationship with videogames, and to give a glimpse into the future of Western societies.

Resumo

Não há dúvida de que o futuro chegou. Mas certos países acolheram a era digital melhor do que outros. A Coreia do Sul está na vanguarda da tecnologia há quinze anos e, com um portefólio que abrange desde o último grito dos telemóveis às futuristas e megalomaníacas "U-cities", está no bom caminho para se afirmar como o líder mundial em tecnologia e ciência. Sendo um país "novo", ainda sem lugar definido no mundo, a Coreia evoluiu muito desde a Segunda Guerra Mundial e a Guerra da Coreia. Após ultrapassar a guerra, a anarquia, a ditadura e uma dura crise económica, a Coreia vem caminhando lentamente em direcção à ribalta.

Mas não só de tecnologia e ciência se faz o sucesso da Coreia. Também a vontade do seu povo e as medidas políticas e sociais visionárias adoptadas pelos governos da Sexta República ajudaram a Coreia a tornar-se um exemplo para o mundo Ocidental moderno.

Com objectivos traçados para o futuro, a Coreia deve ser vista como um exemplo de integração das últimas tecnologias no dia-a-dia. Esta curta reflexão almeja revelar alguns dos segredos do sucesso da revolução tecnológica asiática e da sua duradoura relação com os videojogos, e propor um vislumbre do futuro das sociedades Ocidentais.

Keywords: culture, Asia, intercultural, history of Korea, technology in South Korea, integration of technology, videogames, professional gamers, Asia *versus* Europe

Palavras-chave:cultura, Ásia, intercultural, história da Coreia, tecnologia na Coreia do Sul, integração da tecnologia, videojogos, jogadores profissionais, Ásia *versus* Europa

South Korea: How it all started

The high-tech modern-day Korea can be characterized solely in a post-war sense. Owing to the policies introduced at the beginning of the Sixth Republic of South Korea,

with President Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993)[2], the country quickly evolved from a desolate, crime-driven country, in much similar to North Korea, to a wealthy and prosperous one. After World War II, Korea, formerly a single country, was split in half, the South being controlled by the Allies and the North by the USSR, in the same way Germany was. This gave way to immediate tension between North and South, and not unlike anywhere else in the world where the cold war could be sensed, Russia and the US kept their arms ready. In 1950, Russia offered China economic and military aid if they agreed to invade South Korea. Desperately in need due to the on-going civil war, China accepted, and under claims that the South attacked first, the invasion of South Korea began on 25 June 1950. Soon after, the UN intervened, and a full-scale war began. This not only further divided the two nations, but also drove them into deep economic recession and social chaos, even after the war ended[3].

In the post-war decades, North Korea lived under the influence of China, with hereditary dictatorships, while South Korea saw a series of (not so) democratic republics. Up until the Sixth Republic, most Presidents were military officers, and government changes usually happened by means of coups or assassinations. So, despite growing economically starting from the 60's, Korean society was still an oppressed and fearful one. Without a solid domestic market, and no neighbour commercial partners (relations with Japan were still cold), Korea invested heavily in industry and exporting. This catapulted the economy into one of the fastest growing in the world. By 1989, the GDP was almost a hundred times that of the early 60's, mostly helped by the Chaebol, a form of business conglomerate that encourages entrepreneurship and exportation, decreasing the need for imports and allowing small family businesses to grow like never before[4].

We can pin-point the start of the economic avalanche in these post-war decades. But the real avalanche, the technological one, would come out of the blue when, in 1998,

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[2]AA.VV. "Roh Tae-woo." *Wikipedia.* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roh_Tae-woo (Last accessed 29/08/2013).
[3]AA.VV. "South Korea-The Postwar Economy." Mongabay.
http://www.mongabay.com/history/south_korea/south_korea-the_postwar_economy.html (Last accessed 03/09/2013).
[4]AA.VV. "Chaebol." *Wikipedia.*http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaebol (Last accessed 29/08/2013).

during the hardest-hitting economic crisis Asia had seen[5], South Korean President Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003)[6] brought Korean economy back to life with innovative labour and financial politics. With a solid industrial background, great trading partnerships and a newly-found impetus, Korea gained just the momentum to take the lead in the technological world.

Afterwards, the Korean government started investing seriously in broadband internet, creating a network that would cover about 71% of the country by 2004, and over 86% by the end of 2012, more than half of it being high-speed broadband connections (>10 Mbps). South Korea also lead the average connection speed and placed second on the average peak speed, just behind Hong Kong[7], another of the so-called "Asian Tigers"[8]. The "Asian Tigers" are a group of four countries that stand as some of the fastest growing, most advanced and economically-thriving countries in the world, encompassing South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.

In comparison to the rest of the so-called developed world, these statistics double the average speed in the US and almost double the top average speed in Europe (Latvia). It is also far ahead of North America and Europe in peak speed.

Moreover, the desire to be put on the map made South Korean companies like Samsung Electronics and LG Electronics invest in research and development to surpass existing technologic limits[9].

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[5]AA.VV. "1997 Asian financial crisis: South Korea." *Wikipedia.* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asian_financial_crisis#South_Korea (Last accessed 29/08/2013).
[6]AA.VV. "Kim Dae-jung." *Wikipedia.* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim_Dae-jung (Last accessed 29/08/2013).
[7]AKAMAI. *The State of the Internet Report.* http://www.akamai.com/dl/akamai/q4_2012_soti_infographic.pdf, 2013 (Last accessed 29/08/2013).
[8]AA.VV. "Four Asian Tigers." *Wikipedia.* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Asian_Tigers (Last accessed 29/08/2013).
[9]AA.VV. "Samsung." *Wikipedia* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samsung (Last accessed 03/09/2013).

The boom of *Starcraft*

In this technological avalanche of madness, there was one unsuspecting intervenient. With the booming internet phenomenon in Korea, a new form of entertainment appeared: online gaming. The major culprit: PC Bangs. This form of internet café first appeared in South Korea during the construction of the broadband network in the late 90's. Its cheap prices and favourable conditions for hard-working Koreans who sought relaxing moments after work made them extremely popular even during a time of intense recession. After the crisis, both PC Bangs, broadband internet and games were well established, and not only online games, but all games in general were becoming increasingly popular among the younger generation. But one game would come to take over the scene in an unforeseen fashion, and put South Korea not only in the map of online gaming, but straight to the lead. Released in 1998, *Starcraft*[10] was Blizzard Entertainment's take on a sci-fi themed strategy game, diverging from the company's earlier *Warcraft*, set in a classic fantasy world. The game would become an instant hit amongst young Koreans, a PC Bang-addiction-inducing drug and the first electronic-sport in history[11].

Firstly, we need to understand what made *Starcraft* so popular. Apart from being one of the finest RTS (Real-Time Strategy[12]) games ever made, being widely played even to this day, fifteen years after its release, SC, for short, brought many appealing factors to the table. A compelling, immersive story, actually a common factor among Blizzard's games, a good online gaming network, but most of all, what has made SC popular is its very competitive aspect. One of the biggest innovations it presented was a three-faction system. Unlike previous RTS games, which only had two factions, or teams one could choose, both usually providing the same gameplay with slight variations, SC had three very balanced factions that played absolutely differently from one another, diverging even in the slightest details. This made it possible for a single player to play the game in an infinite number of

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[10]AA.VV. "StarCraft." *Wikipedia.* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/StarCraft (Last accessed 29/08/2013).

[11]"KOREAN, The" (username). "Why is StarCraft Popular in Korea?" *Ask a Korean.* http://askakorean.blogspot.com/2010/02/why-is-starcraft-popular-in-korea.html, 2010 (Last accessed 29/08/2013).

[12]AA.VV. "Real-time strategy." *Wikipedia.* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Real-time_strategy (Last accessed 29/08/2013).

ways, changing not only the faction he/she played with, but also the play style within that particular faction.

In addition, Blizzard launched a ground-breaking online gaming network with SC, called *Battle.Net*. This platform came with the game for no additional fee, and allowed players to play the game online *versus* any other player in the world. This system proved so good that it is still in use today for all of Blizzard's games, including *Starcraft II.*

A quick search on Blizzard's forum can give us some insight on the way Korean player "iRLEstancia" views the success of SC in South Korea and why it is still popular today, even after the release of SC2:

I am Korean and your post made me think quite a while.

I think this is because of the competitive nature of Koreans.

In my opinion Koreans like to be very competitive, especially in education (you should see how much pressure students face in schools in Korea). Because of that, Koreans prefer hardcore games which require lots of skill and are fast paced. And that made SC: BW [Starcraft: Broodwar] *very popular in Korea when it was released.*

It was a fast-paced hardcore game where lots of skill and APM [Actions Per Minute] *were required, and that definitely made SC: BW popular in South Korea. Also, SC: BW allowed people to execute insane micros* [unit control] *which allowed them to turn the game completely to their favour (example: mine daebak, Carrier kiting, reaver drop control, marine control vslurkers, etc), which made the game even more exciting, which eventually led to this:*

"KeSPA was founded in 2000 after the approval of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. Its official goal is to make e-Sports an official sporting event and to solidify the commercial position of e-Sports in all sectors"

Apparently, there are plenty of Koreans (including my friends) who still don't play SC2 and keep on playing SC: BW because they say SC2 is noob[new player] *friendly.*

Also, the SC: BW tournaments haven't lost their popularity despite the release of SC2 and the removal of SC: BW from the WCG, but I'm not sure how long it will last.

"iRLEstancia"[13]

Indeed, Koreans and Asians in general are very competitive. Due to its background of constant struggle, South Korea is very competitive and disciplined. Although most people attending PC Bangs in the early 2000's worked or studied, the complexity of the game made it more compelling than "real life", in many cases leading to addiction. This massive gaming community gave way to the first tournaments, held in 1999, and the first major tournament, the World Cyber Games (to this date one of the major multi-game tournaments) in 2000. By 2002 the scene was so big that teams started being sponsored by big companies such as Samsung, KT and computer manufacturers. Around this time, MBCGame and Ongamenet, two major cable channels subsidiaries started broadcasting matches and tournaments with commentary, as well as game analysis, interviews and news of the gaming world. These two channels would play a major role in the popularization of SC, the organization of teams and events and start the trend of live, stadium matches that would much later be adopted in the West[14].

Starcraft was established as the first real e-sport, with teams and individual professional players being sponsored by major companies, having strict training programmes, living in sponsor-owned houses and making five to six-figure earnings yearly, salaries and tournament prizes combined. With all this fuss around the online gaming scene, more and more companies wanted a piece of the pie. Today, gaming as a whole is the biggest entertainment industry, far surpassing that of cinema and music. The online gaming

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[13]"iRLEstancia" (username). "Why is Starcraft so popular in Korea?" *StarCraft II forums*. http://sea.battle.net/sc2/en/forum/topic/184958546#11, 2011 (Last accessed 29/08/2013). My translation. For further information on KeSPA see: AA.VV. "Korean e-Sports Association." *Wikipedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_e-Sports_Association (Last accessed 29/08/2013); and Korean e-Sports Association – KeSPA (organization website). http://www.e-sports.or.kr/(Last accessed 29/08/2013).

[14]AA.VV. "StarCraft: Brood War professional competition." *Wikipedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/StarCraft:_Brood_War_professional_competition (Last accessed 29/08/2013).

scene has grown to unimagined proportions, with games such as *Starcraft II*, *League of Legends*, *Dota 2*, *World of Tanks* and *Counter-Strike* hosting dozens of tournaments and leagues with huge prize pools monthly. Attendance to major events such as *Dreamhack*, *Major League Gaming* and the *Global Starcraft II League* amounts to around 20.000 in recent years, with live stream viewer counts reaching hundreds of thousands simultaneously, which surpass many "real" sport events[15].

A new career in electronic-sports

It is certain that e-sports still have a long way to go before they can be properly compared and accepted by other sports. They are still viewed as inferior and unworthy of the title of "sport", with the main argument being that they do not involve physical activity. One could argue though, that chess, archery and shooting do not involve physical activity (in most cases), and should therefore not be considered as "sports". The fact of the matter is that e-sports involve mental activity, strategy, training, in most cases teamwork and most of all, competitiveness.

Comparing to sports, there are many revealing factors as to why e-sports are growing immensely, while traditional sports are mostly struggling or stagnated. The advent of the internet made it possible to broadcast events for free, and for more people all over the world to watch them simultaneously. Live streaming sites like *Twitch* have created a huge network of gaming companies, players and event organizers to broadcast their matches for free, which in comparison to traditional sports represent a logistic, as well as a financial advantage to having to cut million dollar deals with multiple broadcasting channels all over the world. Another advantage that makes online gaming snowball into huge proportions is the mutual backup relationship with the games industry. While the sports industry helps the

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[15]The biggest Dota 2 tournament achieved over one million concurrent viewers in 2013. See: BROOKS, Michael. "'Dota 2' championship grabs 1 million concurrent viewers." *Examiner*. http://www.examiner.com/article/dota-2-championship-grabs-1-million-concurrent-viewers, 2013 (Last accessed 04/09/2013).League of Legends holds the record with 1.1million. See: BRESLAU, Rod. "League of Legends Season 2 Championships most watched eSports event of all time". *Gamespot*. http://www.gamespot.com/news/league-of-legends-season-2-championships-most-watched-esports-event-of-all-time-6398663, 2012 (Last accessed 04/09/2013).

construction, clothing and sports accessories sectors, e-sports also helps with construction, merchandise and accessories (computers and peripherals). In addition, it helps the games industry grow, by bringing more attention to videogames, drawing more game companies into the e-sports business, and incentivising them to expand and invest more time, money and work hours in e-sports. This strong double relationship strengthens both industries, which are becoming ever more complementary, with more and more games having online multiplayer features and more and more games trying to break into the competitive e-sports scene.

As with traditional sports, every player has a favourite sport, or genre, or game. Just like some people prefer team sports, or water sports, or specifically football, hockey, etc., videogame spectators also have their preferences: 'RTS' games, 'RPG' games, 'FPS' games, or specific games within the genres. Since major videogame tournaments occur in the same place and live streams can be accessed by the same website, this draws in a larger and larger crowd, mixing audiences from various games and creating a global e-sports community.

Equally, professional gamers are also undervalued, compared to traditional athletes. They still get treated as nerds and geeks, who sit all day in front of the computer or console and eat too many snacks and soda. While this may be, in some cases, true for more casual gamers, it is a horrible stereotype when applied to professional gamers. These gamers are serious about their job. They train hard, they study their games thoroughly and they have strict discipline. Due to how old some of these games are, and how long videogames have been around, many professional gamers are parents, most of them study and have other jobs (although there are huge prizes up for grabs, only the top players can live off professional gaming), and for your surprise, most of them are actually very fit. The famous quote "A sound mind in a healthy body" really does apply here. Most professional gamers have workout programmes or play sports in addition to their gaming programmes. This not only diverges from the image most people on the West have of professional gamers, but also indicates that e-sports are more than just playing all day. It involves a lot more thought and skill than what one might attribute to the average gamer.

However, this kind of comparison and stereotyping only applies in the West, where although videogames are widely played, even by older adults, they are still seen by many as

children's toys and are not taken seriously even in a casual environment, let alone as a profession. In Asia, and especially in South Korea and China, videogames are seen as legitimate businesses and professions. Although in different ways, these two countries have developed strong bonds with the online gaming world.

In China, it is common for young people living in the big cities to work part- or full-time as "gold farmers". This term refers to spending time in a game doing repetitive tasks in order to gain gold, or currency within the game. They then sell this virtual currency for real money. Furthermore, the e-sports scene is growing immensely in China, despite all the foreign policy problems game publishers have to go through to make their games available there. In the future, with the inevitable opening up of China's online market, the country is sure to become one of the most prominent gaming markets in the world.

And in South Korea, both traditional sports and e-sports are positively seen. There are no stereotypes about gamers, because everyone is a gamer. There is no segregation of gamers, casual or pro. In fact, professional gamers are treated like super-stars, much like any top athlete, singer, film or TV star. They have their own fan clubs with thousands or millions of members, they have their own merchandise, they give televised interviews, they appear on the news, etc[16]. Many Koreans, especially the younger generations, who grew up with *Starcraft*, consider it to be one of the national sports. Its audiences, both *in-loco*, on TV and over the Internet surpass those of many traditional sports.

Another forum user, by the name of "Anon", makes this difference clear by comparing South Korea with Australia and New Zealand:

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[16]"KOREAN, The" (username). "Why is StarCraft Popular in Korea?" *Ask a Korean.* http://askakorean.blogspot.pt/2010/02/why-is-starcraft-popular-in-korea.html, 2010 (Last accessed 29/08/2013).

I imagine that part of why Starcraft continues to be so popular in Korea is that it's already established as a legitimate sport. Most people in Australia or New Zealand would consider the idea of being a professional Starcraft player to be weird, but not in Korea.

"Anon"[17]

This situation is, however, changing with each passing day. On July 2013, the United States Government offered work visas normally reserved for professional athletes to at least two professional gamers[18]. The recognition of professional gamers as athletes leads to the future recognition of e-sports as a professional sport.

A peek into the future

As we have seen, e-sports are an increasingly important sector of the videogame industry. Also, this is a common activity in South Korea, mostly due to their competitive nature.

This reality culminates in South Korea being overwhelmed by videogame-related activities, making their society and habits intricately connected to online life and gaming. And since Korea is such a great example of a country which is already stepping into the future, Western countries should start studying and analysing their transition into the technologic world.

It is my belief that technology is the future, and that we should learn to be more technological in order to improve our society. There is no use in trying to avoid or deny that technology makes life easier on us and that humankind is evolving towards it; and we should learn to deal with it. As we see, Korea has learned and keeps learning how to deal with technology. Not by making big budget projects and putting them in the hands of the

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[17]"Anon" (username). "Why is Starcraft so popular in Korea?" *StarCraft II forums*. http://sea.battle.net/sc2/en/forum/topic/184958546#14, 2011 (Last accessed 29/08/2013).

[18]SUBRAMANIAN, Courtney. "Pro Gamers Get U.S. Work Visas, Thanks to Industry Lobbyists." *Time*. http://newsfeed.time.com/2013/07/16/gamers-are-the-new-athletes/, 2013 (Last accessed 03/09/2013).

wealthy elite, but by making cheap and easy-to-use devices, with amazing quality, available to everyone, effectively making Korean people connected to the internet, to each other, and to the world.

To further analyse how this affects society, we must first find out how Koreans feel about this subject. One thing is clear: Koreans do not fret about technology. As new and alien as some concepts might seem to a Western person, most "new" technologies are accepted very naturally by Eastern Asian societies. Digital life has become the everyday life of Koreans (and Japanese). Regarding e-sports, they also view it as natural; they pair it up with traditional sports and its players. But they also realise it is not all sunshine and roses; as promising of a career e-sports might seem to young people, it is important to keep in mind that although there are players who win thousands of dollars every month, there are ten times more players trying to do it and failing. It is a hard business to get into and to stay in. Only a very tiny percentage of "high level" players earn any money at all. Nonetheless, there are other ways which players, both Western and Eastern, have been exploring as a profession. I have talked about gold farmers in China, but there are also "powerlevelers", which play the boring and tedious part of the game, leaving the fun up to the main player, who acts as a costumer. There are professional "youtubers" and streamers, who make a living just off making videos of or streaming their game sessions live on streaming sites like *Twitch* or *UStream*. Others, especially in e-sports, dedicate to casting (or commentating) games. Instead of playing the game, they download a replay and record themselves commentating over the match, or do it live, when the game so permits. Others still, make news sites, blogs, forums, video logs, and podcasts about games, create communities and share their experiences about the games and the industry. This free and do-it-yourself nature of the Internet has allowed a whole world of free expression by users, expanding not only what can be done, but also people's concept of professional gaming. In Korea and mostly Japan, game developers too are praised and some even worshipped, and being a game developer or working in some way in the games industry is a very honourable profession.

While it seems that most game theorists and scholars are actually in the United States and Europe, where it is not rare to find University degrees in game design or game programming, and there are whole departments dedicated to studying games, it is equally

known that Asians have a very peculiar way to treat video game theory and development. It is here that we really see the cultural aspect of games. They are entertainment, but also tools to express one's creativity and to explore and enhance mental and physical skills. It has always intrigued me why Korean and Japanese studios often employ young people without any experience. Well, games are part of the life-style of modern Korean and Japanese societies. Coupling this immersion in videogames with a very pragmatic and hardworking mind-set, even young programming students can make successful games, more so than Westerners.

In many ways, it is apparent that games are embedded in Asian culture. Even small countries without a big impact over the industry, like Singapore and Malaysia, seem to have a natural affinity to gaming. Moreover, games can also *create* culture, not only by providing frames of reference for people to share, but also by creating content, which is absorbed, modified, adapted and often transformed into something else. The content is recycled, so to speak.

But what can we learn from this? We can learn that videogames are not a toy for children or a mere entertainment tool anymore. They are also a way of life, a powerful means to work on one's skills, to enhance creativity and spark imagination. We can learn that children who are encouraged to play (the right) games are often more creative and think about things from a different perspective than others. People who are encouraged to make games also tend to solve problems in innovative ways, often thinking outside the box.

There are currently initiatives in the United States to build live-action "video" games, where people play as if in a videogame, but in real life. Some independent and small game companies and individuals are also working on new ways to approach videogames and to involve the player more and more, creating a different type of interactivity. The MIT Game Lab[19] is a major part in modern game research in the West. Arguably, these individuals as a whole are blazing the path for future games more than their Asian counterparts, by creating original concepts and prototypes.

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[19]Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Game Lab – MIT (organization website). http://gamelab.mit.edu/ (Last accessed 29/08/2013).

The 2011 book *Ready Player One*[20] by Ernest Cline addresses a dystopic, although very possible future, where society has grown immersed into the Internet and gaming life to the point of addiction, leaving the "real world" in ruins. It is a grim although realistic scenario, and one towards which our society could very well be moving. It is true that we have the technology to create huge virtual worlds, and the number of players worldwide, as well as the addiction, is growing. Could we really become slaves to the Internet, lost in virtual worlds, forsaking the real sense of society? In any case, we should be prepared to face such problems in the near future. South Korea has had a dramatic increase in clinical addiction cases, depression and suicide caused by gaming. They are thus pioneers in the treating of such cases. This is sure to become a major concern in the years to come.

So what is to become of the games industry? Is there really just this one option to make gaming more and more comprehensive so as to plunge Humanity into a Matrix-like world doomed to addiction? Not by a long shot. It is my opinion that the way we think about and play games will change very soon, just as it changed in the past when we moved from arcade to home consoles, and from offline to online. We do not know exactly what the next boom in gaming will be, but we can expect games to adapt to life, and not the other way around. We can see that already, with the boom of mobile gaming, not only on portable consoles, but also on cell-phones. Games are a mere expression of human, technological, and more comprehensive areas of knowledge, like psychology, artificial intelligence and robotics. Videogames are thus also a sandbox for people to develop and experiment with new technologies. With the knowledge and new paths for exploration provided by videogame research, other areas of science can be developed. They are an easy way to get people involved and study areas of human psychology, education and development. Games should then accompany humanity, remaining as entertainment, but also serving as tools for everyday life. The digital era encompasses not only the advent of gaming and online gaming, but also augmented reality, robotics and the possibility of physical augmentations. Videogames spur technology forward. New computers are made with videogames in mind, new electronic components are invented to aid gamers or to make new things possible inside the computer.

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[20]CLINE, Ernest. *Ready Player One*. New York: Random House, 2011.

Looking over to Portugal, the future is not too promising, especially regarding the current economic situation, following the 2008 financial crisis. While most young people play videogames, most of them are what is called "casual gamers". There is a handful of people at maximum that I have met outside of videogame environments or communities who play seriously. As a long-time, experienced player, most of my acquaintances who do play games do it very sporadically or not very committedly. Moreover, the Portuguese market in general is not all that great. Big publishers do not invest significantly here, although we have seen an increasing number of advertising campaigns in mainstream media in the past couple of years. In terms of production, Portugal has almost no videogame production, with only a couple of minor studios making very simple, limited, and not very successful games.

All of this, in my opinion, is because there is a great stigma against videogames, and although players are being increasingly accepted by their elder, videogame developers are still ostracized, and I suspect this is because people do not really seem to know what they actually do. While Computer Science and Engineering are well accepted as professions, as well as being "just" a programmer, when you introduce the term videogame, people give you a funny look. This is the type of mentality that needs to change, not only for the good of gamers and developers, but also for the good of the country as a whole. Videogames are an integral part of modern technology, both as creations and creators of technology. Not only does society benefit from technology, but so does the market. Looking at countries like Brazil, which have had a significant impact over the industry in the last couple of years, we can see how embracing videogames as a mainstream entertainment media can help boosting the economy. Many game companies are investing in Brazil, and there are more and more tournaments and events hosted each month.

This is in stark contrast to Europe, where even in more developed countries like Germany, France and England the gaming culture is not so big. Although England is one of the biggest worldwide markets for games and one of their most prolific development sources[21], this stigma also prevails, which is nothing but a hindrance to the progress of

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[21]AA.VV. "Video game companies by country." *Wikipedia.*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Video_game_companies_by_country (Last accessed 03/09/2013).

modern digital societies. Naturally, this will change more and more over time, when the young generations who grew up with videogames become adults and the leaders of tomorrow. Only then do I feel videogames will be accepted as an every-day, mainstream media.

Conclusion

In this brief reflection we saw how South Korea beat the odds to become one of the world leaders in technology and embrace the online world, and how videogames have a huge impact on Korean society. We also discussed the present and future of the videogame industry, and cultural aspects of gaming in Asia, Europe and America. It all comes down to culture, and decision-makers. Games are essential to technology, and South Korea more than anyone, has embarked into a no-return journey to the future, a future where videogames are part of everyday life and well established as a mainstream form of entertainment and media.

It is important to keep in mind that games can be used to teach children in fun and creative ways, to simulate real world scenarios, to study how people react to certain stimuli and situations, and to conduct exciting experiments and test new digital and mechanical technologies. Games can be more than just fun, and we should expect to see more and more projects that try to bring out the educational and training aspects of games, making them an essential part of our lives.

And although a future dominated by videogames might seem grim for the most pessimistic bunch, I do believe that full integration between "real" life, technology and virtual life is possible and indeed nigh.

How will Western societies adapt to this new digital era, and what are they doing to catch up to modern Asian societies? The transition is not being too smooth for now, but we may rest assured that it will happen even before we know it.

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