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CHAPTER 11.

A GAME INDUSTRY BEYOND DIVERSITY

Systemic Barriers to Participation for Women in South Korea

BY FLORENCE M. CHEE

Digital gaming has become a prominent part of mainstream culture. However, as one may observe in the public exhibitions of this form of play, the multitude of reasons for participation in the games industry are especially divided along gender lines. This paper is an analysis of themes emerging from the critical ethnographic examination of South Korea's¹ online game culture that, upon closer and iterative analyses, point to additional socioeconomic complications and systemic barriers to women's equitable participation in the game development and production. Using South Korea's national context as a point of reference, the findings from this case study offer a synthesis between educational policies and industry practices that implicate how labor originating from STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) disciplines may include crucial systemic barriers to women's participation in the aspects of game culture contributing the most to upward mobility. The findings illustrate that factors (such as compulsory military service) that are typically overlooked in policy research are imperative to understanding how specific structural systems serve to reinforce existing gender norms. These factors go beyond gender disparities, pipeline issues and problems of representation that preclude female's substantive involvement in the game industry.

My original research objectives included forming a comprehensive idea of the factors contributing to the prominence of online gaming culture in Korea, along with illustrating the importance of analyzing local dynamics in a globalizing industry such as games. My ethnographic research on gaming culture has focused primarily on the field site of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and its globally infamous online game culture, which has been simultaneously lauded and derided by 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 (Kim, 2011), as the country is one of the most sophisticated in terms of commercial and consumerist hardware. 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.

An ethnographic approach has proven valuable (Boelstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012) for developing insights into how people create meaning amidst their technological artifacts and everyday culture. Over the last decade (2004-2014) of conducting research on Korean online game culture, I have engaged in 3 distinct phases of fieldwork inquiry, with each subsequent visit building upon insights of the last in an iterative manner. The initial phase focused on data gathering at the grassroots level, engaging with the game players and members of online communities (Chee, 2006). The next phase, years later, I focused upon broader political and economic factors in Korea, (Jin & Chee, 2008) to provide a more comprehensive picture of how online games have come to occupy a prominent role in Korean mainstream popular culture. Results from the first two phases helped to precipitate an inquiry into the field data using a gender lens, carefully crafted to the specific circumstances and findings appropriate to the Korean context. In this third phase, the focus of this chapter, my goal was to examine some of the gendered themes emerging from the field research that began 10 years ago and to contribute greater nuance to the ways in which we may understand who plays games, who produces them, how this process occurs, and why.

UNDERSTANDING PRACTICES AND POLICIES AS BARRIERS TO FULL PARTICIPATION IN THE GAMING INDUSTRY

Through documenting the factors that contributed to the rise of online gaming in South Korea to its current state of prominence, I want to underscore how evaluating games and their platforms represents only a partial assessment of a complex system. The popularity of online gaming in Korea especially can be attributed to key technological policy decisions and events, though these wider issues of policy are rarely discussed in games literature. Deliberate choices in international relations and restriction have likewise influenced the domestic trajectory of opportunities available to participate in the online game economy. Insights discussed here emerged from long-term ethnographic engagement in South Korea, where games represent not only a celebrity “e-sports” industry, but also a dynamic and robust environment for developers. Korea is a leading game market in the world, with an impressive USD 3.36 billion in revenue (Newzoo, 2014) which represents a significant part of the

global economy accounting for over 100 billion USD in revenue (Gartner, 2015). My findings offer a perspective of how industry practices and government policies, such as education goals and military service, also influence how and why people may choose to pursue certain career paths over others. The findings also implicate how labor originating from STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) disciplines may include crucial systemic barriers to the representation of women in roles contributing the most to upward mobility.

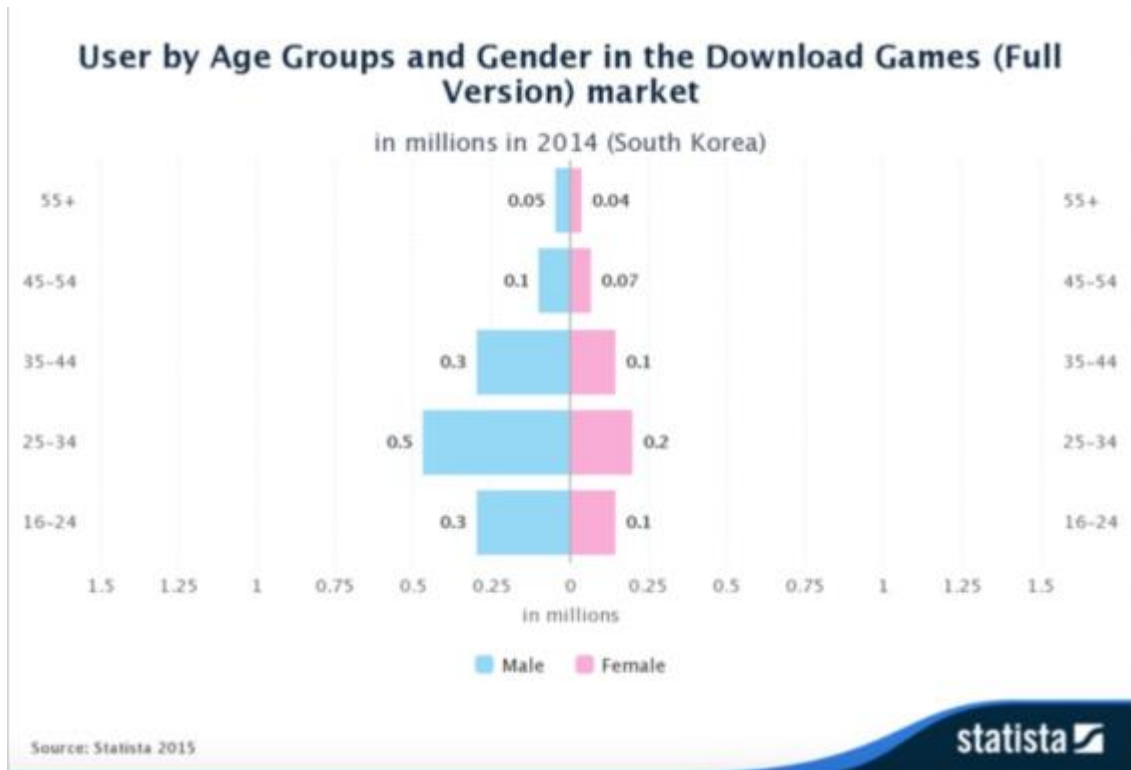


Figure 11.1. Breakdown of male and female users by age group in the “Download Games” market in South Korea. Of note is the disparity in the ages 25-34 bracket

The unprecedented development of the gaming industry in South Korea draws from the national emphasis placed on an “education culture” that favors STEM and the goals of national institutions such as the Chaebols, a South Korean form of business conglomerate, also called “money clique” in Hangul. South Korea’s extraordinarily large investment in education (Seth, 2002) as compared with other OECD countries (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), and its emphasis on STEM fields, along with (to a lesser extent) military exemption policies have facilitated the nationwide growth of the now-pervasive online gaming. However, one

cannot underestimate the role that the corporate entities, the Chaebol, Samsung, LG, and Hyundai, among others, play in almost all the affairs of South 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 have shaped and continue to shape the landscape of Korean communications (Larson 1995) and, in turn gaming.

There are, however, some assertions that require critique in this context for a fuller understanding of the dynamics at play and these reiterate longstanding stereotypes. It is assumed that the game industry is male-dominated because females from an early age biologically and socially are predisposed to a lack of interest in STEM (Science, Technology Engineering, and Mathematics), the disciplines which primarily feed into the game industry. Therefore it is assumed that the game industry is naturally (and correctly) male-dominated. Left unchecked, these assumptions reverberate into popular discourse, which then get reinforcement and support at all levels. But in South Korea, even if women are interested in STEM, I posit that they are systemically excluded from positions of power in the game industry because the deck is stacked against them from the very beginning for many reasons. While many reasons account for the prominence of games in the sociocultural and economic media landscape in South Korea (Chee 2012), I will focus and discuss here the military service, and exemption from it, as crucial and unique factors determining the Korean IT workforce dynamic from the perspective of those involved with the games industry.

INDUSTRY PRACTICES: CHAEBOLS AND CORPORATE CONTEXT IN SOUTH KOREA

As far as technology is concerned, South Korea has outdone most countries in the world. It is a global leader in the production of semiconductors, cars, ships, and gadgets (Hira, Morfopolous, & Chee, 2012). At first blush, a discussion of Korea solely in terms of being a contemporary economic “miracle” (Amsden, 1989) is in line with the celebration of technology being solely responsible for emancipating nations from poverty. In a classic case of what Mosco calls the “digital sublime,” (Mosco, 2004) in the collective vision and belief in digital lifestyles, Korea’s embrace of the information economy as national panacea has indeed been remarkable in every aspect. After all, as Deleuze is noted for saying, “Technology is social before it is technical” (Galloway, 2004 p. 79). South Korea is a country that must be examined within the boundaries of its national circumstances. As a whole, the investigation of the Korean context best shows that games and platforms are not the sole explanatory measure of success.

South Korea has participated in an extraordinary moment in global communication history, as well as in its own right. Subject to what Nancy Abelmann (2003) calls a “compressed modernity,” the nation has propelled itself into becoming the bona fide networked information society that many countries aspire to be, yet continue to find such an elusive goal. Notions of modernity (Feenberg, 1995; P. Kim, 2011) were adopted and reworked to the geopolitical and social realities on the Korean peninsula through a discussion of Japanese colonization, the Cold War, Korean War, and subsequent political and economic ramifications that framed the workings of Korean life on the peninsula. These events set the stage for the institutions that emerged from those times of creative destruction.

The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 was a catalytic moment that created a perfect storm of conditions for the online games scene in South Korea to flourish. At the time, the country 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” (International Monetary Fund Crisis), served to upend much of South Korea’s extant wealth and power structures that had asserted themselves over the nation’s affairs up to that point. With international auditors throwing open the books and reforming the Chaebols, there were many casualties in job loss. This destabilization in salaried employment structures shifted longstanding ideologies regarding gender and power structures, including a wider challenge to the country’s hegemonic masculinity and the prevalence of male-dominated single income households (Maliangkay, 2013). However, this economic catastrophe in the established realm of big business 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 (PC Room).

As I have discussed in Chee (2006), the PC Bang was a cornerstone of social interaction online and offline, near and far. Such locations served as de facto community centres all over the country, and they were often 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 under-documented side-effects to the economic downturn as well: PC Bangs

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 (Chee and Smith 2005). 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 has manifested as eSports, serving to catapult gaming into mainstream culture. It is this confluence of factors that are part and parcel with the prominence of gaming in South Korea, as it currently exists as a communication medium.

Due to Korea's colonization by Japan in the early 20th century, as well as its longstanding concern with Japanese cultural invasion, the country's 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 past work with Dal Yong Jin (Jin & Chee 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 South Korean game market were disappointed to find a negligible amount of revenue. With Japanese console makers such as Sony, Nintendo and Sega experiencing such difficulties in penetrating the South Korean game market, the country utilized the opportunity to develop its own domestic online game industry.

Over the years, ethnographic data and historical analyses have directed me to investigate the linkages between particular watershed moments in Korea's history and their influences on science/technology policy decisions. For example, the Korean ban on Japanese products served to hold the development of console gaming platforms at bay, while online PCs with their ability to access broadband internet had a chance to gain a foothold. The past and present tensions between Japan and Korea have and continue to shape Korea's game culture and continue to reverberate into present day (Oh & Larson 2011; Jin 2010 Larson 1995;). These histories have indeed informed and mediated their understandings of life in Korea. With this similar approach applied to other contexts, it would be fascinating to investigate how the interaction of culture, social structure, infrastructure, and policy would facilitate differing manifestations of inclusion in game culture.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES: HOW EXEMPTIONS OF COMPULSORY MILITARY SERVICE: FEED THE PIPELINE INTO STEM AND GAMING INDUSTRY

As games have grown in prominence, government and industry alike have regarded this cultural activity as a potential economic panacea for South Korea's economic re-development. In order to improve the country's economy, the government prioritized STEM disciplines. This prioritization occurred at the expense of investment in the critical social sciences and humanities (Seth, 2002), yet these initiatives contributed to the growth in the industrial and informational capacities of South Korea's domestic workforce such that the nation is a global contender in STEM training and achievement, has a strong export economy, and is a veritable hotbed of technological activity due to its domestic talent. As Michael Seth in his book on Korean education notes, "No nation spends a larger share of its income on education" (Seth, 2002, p. 5). According to the 2010 Business Higher Education Forum STEM report (BHEF, 2010 p. 4), 15.6 percent of Bachelor's degrees in the U.S. were awarded in the STEM disciplines, compared with 37.8 percent in South Korea. Given the country's significant push to prioritize STEM via gaming and game development, I will discuss various under-examined factors that lead to systemic barriers to full participation in the game industry.

The military is an inextricable part of life on the Korean peninsula; military service for males in Korea is compulsory. At some point in the late teens or early twenties, all males are expected to give up over two years to this service, which is highly regarded and looked upon as a major transition from boyhood to manhood. This is so much the case that that in job applications one receives advantages over other candidates in the form of extra "points" for having completed military service. Though I did not have explicit questions regarding military service in my interview guide, my informants would broach the topic of their own accord. Their perspectives were always slightly different from one another and immensely fascinating. It showed me how very much military service was a fact of living life in Korea, and as someone who was studying an industry dominated by men and steeped in a patriarchal culture, it made sense to embrace a study of this important phenomenon as it pertains to how people make sense of their social roles.

Even celebrities are officially not exempt from military service, and in my interviews and informal discussions I would hear the saying echoing common a common sentiment, loosely translated, "Only a god can escape military service." While compulsory military service for Korean men only has been regarded at once a geopolitical necessity and a burdensome disruption, there are specific provisions for

young men in STEM fields. For talented programmers and engineers accepted into competitive university programs, there is a policy that exempts them from military duty, provided they stay in the country for five years. This policy makes majoring in these STEM disciplines quite attractive. Though such a provision is not solely responsible for the prominence of game development talent, they add to the luster of South Korea's pervasive game culture. The classification of companies also received different treatment years ago, with "IT" having such broad meaning to include internet industries of many types, such as online games. Thus while military service presents an expected and sustained break in non-military life and career progression, this particular situation has implications for role online games play in their lives as a medium of communication.

My ethnographic studies in Korea and interviews with those who have experienced both the pros and cons of their compulsory military service serve to shed some light on some of these pipeline issues. Upon hearing about some of the structural and cultural points brought up by my informants with regard to this link, I delved further into this question of how women's participation in the game industry, despite training in STEM fields, be influenced starting from post-secondary schooling. First off, a major difference between two concentrations exist for students: 1) Arts – *Mungwa*, and 2) Sciences – *Igwa*. Those who went through Arts were not eligible for military exemption in principle. Some grey zones did exist, however, in that there were niche technology service requirements that could be fulfilled by those who were not necessarily programmers, but Business or Literature majors who happened to be enrolled in qualifying courses. Those young men, who were consequently exempt from military service would instead allow those trained in STEM related disciplines to spend 3-5 years in an IT company. In speaking with industry executives who themselves started at nascent companies such as Naver and NCSoft (now titans in the game industry), I learned that were considered small-medium IT enterprises and eligible to retain this specific type of talent in a young workforce. This initiative has been lauded for allowing young talent to populate mid-sized companies in Korea, which have been typically short of skilled knowledge labor. As older generations employed in the large Chaebol companies could not typically fulfill these roles, this was a major opportunity for early career mobility in the Korean IT industries that would not have existed for youth otherwise.

If the military service requirement is fulfilled by men working at a games company for 3-5 years, which then results in networking opportunities and skill building for those men, it means that women are systemically typically shut out of this specific process entirely despite their possible training precisely because of their gender.

Women would then enter into the game industry later, if ever, or participate in the industry by other means and specializations. As a result, the prevailing notion that women do not become game developers because they are not interested in STEM and/or games is entirely over simplistic. Even if, hypothetically, girls were not socialized away from STEM and games as they are in other countries like the United States, they have been and are still in this case turned away from opportunities for participation in a growing proportion of the Korean information economy at the crucial junctures of educational, friendship, and business networks at their nascent and founding stages. Given that the reasons for gaming and getting into the games industry to begin with are so very divided along gender lines already, in the Korean context these policies serve to reinforce existing gender norms beyond that of just the military. Rather, the perspective for which I have advocated is that games do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, the current online game culture includes a number of inextricable dependencies in a national media ecology.

REFLECTIONS ON DIVERSIFYING A GLOBAL INDUSTRY

My research, to the extent outlined here, has sought out a sociocultural explanation for the oft-celebrated success of South Korea's gaming industry and correspondingly frenetic mainstream online gaming culture. From global and local industry standpoints, the dynamics between Korean business and technology policy has presented some fruitful outcomes as well as challenges. On the one hand, state-guided infrastructural initiatives have been instrumental in providing the conditions for success of the Korean online games industry (Jin, 2010/2011; Oh & Larson, 2011). On the other hand, further systemic factors regarding gender that intersect training and workforce diversity continue to present underarticulated challenges to equitable participation and innovation.

As discussed, these findings offer a synthesis between educational policies, military service, and industry practices that implicate how labor originating from STEM disciplines may include crucial systemic barriers to the representation of women in roles contributing the most to upward mobility. It is crucial to understand how specific policies serve to reinforce existing gender norms. It is important that attention to gender issues go beyond stop-gap solutions with the laudable goals of getting more women into STEM fields, to move toward more equitable participation beyond schooling. I point here to very real gender issues and analysis of this case within a global industry. The negotiations of what comprises game culture does not exist in a vacuum, but includes a number of dependencies such as policy.

Mobility in the games industry encompasses a mere sample of career challenges that are important to consider because they point to yet more subtle and systemic factors affecting how the online games industry attracts and retains talent. As in the case with North America, women are not typically streamed into gaming, as they are not into STEM disciplines. The same systematic barriers to participation exist in South Korea, with the added complexities inherent in the present demands of patriarchal and militaristic rigors. While this paper primarily explored reasons why women in South Korea may not fully participate in one of the nation's most lucrative industries, it may be worthwhile examining alternatives to the STEM pipeline argument through gender and other national game industry contexts. Beyond various ad-hoc attempts to 'increase female participation' in an industry that is anecdotally unappealing to women, one must also consider some of the more subtle barriers to participation in the games industry, such as gender and the role of compulsory military service for men, which has become an inextricable part of everyday life.

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Notes

1. South Korea may be referred to here as Korea hereafter.