Understanding Korean experiences of online game hype, identity, and the menace of the "Wang-tta".

Florence Chee
School of Communication, Simon Fraser University
515 West Hastings Street,
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada V6B 5K3
+1 778-881-9342
florence.chee@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an ethnographic analysis of case studies derived from fieldwork that was designed to consider the different ways Korean game players establish community online and offline. I consider ways online game hype and identity are formed by looking at Korean PC game rooms as "third places,", and activities associated with professional and amateur gaming. A synthesis of the Korean concept "Wang-tta" provides extra insight into the motivations to excel at digital games and one of the strong drivers of such community membership. Korea's gaming society has many unique elements within the interplay of culture, social structure, and infrastructure.

Keywords

Wang-tta, online games, addiction, ethnography, community, Korea, identity

WHEN WORLDS AT PLAY COLLIDE – A LOOK AT KOREA

This study reports on ethnographic fieldwork analyzing the intricate relationship between the sociocultural factors at work in Korean game communities and the context in which games have become integrated into everyday life in South Korea. The nation is a world leader in broadband penetration rates and has a notoriously high number of resident online game players—the reasons for which, continue to contribute to much speculation and intrigue at the industrial, academic, and governmental levels. Gamers in Korea have repeatedly made world headlines with reports on their fascination with games, their real life social activities apparently suffering because of their addictions to game parlours known as "PC bangs" (pronounced *bahngs* and literally translated, mean "PC room"), general video game addictions, and even cases of Internet-related deaths. Are the extreme stories of death and virtual mayhem [6, 7, 9] the only accounts of Korean gaming phenomena by which the rest of the world should be basing their perceptions? Certainly, there are many more constructive users of said technologies than destructive users, so what is the problem? Also, because said 'problem' still apparently exists, why do current strategies that 'treat' allegedly addicted players continue to be by and large impotent? In this paper, I suggest that perhaps an in-depth look at the culture, social structure, and infrastructure might cast Korea's reputation for excessive online gaming in a different light. To this effect, the objective of the research was to dig deeper into Korean life in order to provide more cultural context and possible explanations for why gaming and its associated activities seem so

immersive and compelling in Korea. In addition to that, one may make educated guesses as to why they are not in other parts of the world.

The original fieldwork discussed in this paper adds to the current knowledge of the interplay between technology and the development of human relationships as expressed in digital games, a growing pastime and mode of social expressions. In order to formulate a more comprehensive understanding of game players' life and motivations, I frame this study using theories of play (e.g., Huizinga), derived typically from Western thought as a point of reference. Merged with the Korean field data, these theories add perspective to game research by highlighting the concept of online sociability as it is created in the interactions between players, online and offline. I refer to Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, and other influential theorists as a type of gap-assessment of the experiences involved in the player's relationship with games. These theories add to our understanding to the technologically mediated life-world of online gamers in Korea and help us to understand the application of play theory in international contexts.

After outlining the methodology employed in this study and painting a comprehensive picture of online game hype and identity in Korea, I provide a synthesis of the Korean social issue of "Wang-tta," which includes the act of singling out one person in a group to bully and treat as an outcast. It is later used to provide extra insight into one of the motivations to excel at digital games and one of the strong drivers of such community membership. As the results of this case study on Korea will indicate, the factors for excessive online gaming are most likely not cross-cultural (i.e. diagnosable as addiction in biomedical terms) and just as likely if not more to do with one's life context.

In Brian Sutton-Smith's (1997) book, _The Ambiguity of Play_, he asserts that the rhetorics of a larger culture will have its own socializing influence, and the norms and hierarchies of the gaming society and general society will interpenetrate the game with its own particular social arrangements. He writes, "there is no lasting social play without play culture" [12]. In other words, in order to assess the longevity and sustainability of social play, one needs to look at the broader implications of the culture in which that play is situated. In the following section, I discuss the methodology and resulting strategies I used to obtain the data used in this study.

METHODOLOGY
The field research for this study was conducted during a four-month period in Fall 2004, in Seoul, South Korea and short term observation was also conducted in regional centres such as Chuncheon, Sokcho, and Cheongju. As recommended by Stewart [10], I used the multiple methods, multiple measures approach in order to work towards a triangulated analysis of the primarily ethnographic field data. The personal narratives of online game players in Korea were of particular interest to me. I wished to observe and analyze patterns of behaviour and common histories in order to find out what was so compelling about these games/communities that players would supposedly forsake almost everything else in their lives to participate. In this section I will briefly summarize the events leading up to conducting the research and methods and rationale I used during the fieldwork.

One year before the fieldwork began in Korea, I prepared to conduct ethnography by learning to read and speak Korean. Being from Vancouver, Canada, this endeavour was actually facilitated by Vancouver's rich multicultural environment and specifically, the large number of citizens

originally from Korea with whom I could continue to practise. While it is true that the greater bulk of my learning about Korean language and culture began when my plane landed in Korea (the point of going there), it was quite important to have gone with the existing foundation I had built while in Vancouver. With my research being about daily life at the grassroots, I felt that it was very important to be prepared to speak Korean and blend in as much as possible. This decision ultimately impacted my study in a positive manner, as my visually Korean appearance and usage of the vernacular did indeed give me more access to everyday things thereby allowing everyone to acclimatize to my presence and for the most part forget that I was Canadian. Armed with the research, language, and cultural preparation of the past two years, I left everyone in my social network (including my husband) to form a new social network in Korea from the ground up.

Once I was in Korea, I conducted participant observation within the public and private social contexts of home, school, and everything else involved in daily life. Gaming culture is everywhere in Korea, every day, and observations were everything from those recorded in and around numerous PC game rooms (referred to as PC Bangs), to what I saw looking over someone's shoulder playing mobile phone games on Seoul's expansive subway system.

I had the privilege of doing a home stay with a multi-generational Korean family in Seoul as well as short-term stays and in other Korean homes outside of Seoul ranging from historical to contemporary types. In those environments, I made thick descriptions [5] in my fieldnotes of what I encountered each day, whenever possible. By sharing these living spaces, and fully participating in the culture (almost always blending in as a resident), I was privy to many things said and unsaid. Many of my experiences inside and outside of my family context provided much subtext for the behaviours I observed in during this research. As a female in my mid-twenties living in an urban high-rise three-generation home, I was immediately a member of the youngest generation in the household, with levels of Confucian hierarchy influencing the way I was viewed not only within the home to family members, but as I found, also to the general public. This situatedness enabled me to experience first-hand what it was like to navigate everyday life as a Korean youth.

In addition to the informal interviews that took place during my stay in Korea, I conducted formal in-depth interviews in both Korean and English with players who participate in game communities and subject matter experts in the field. The interviews, which took place in numerous locations and coupled with the participant observation, personal narratives provided insights into the lives of game players and their motivations for engaging in communities associated with game playing.

Lastly, I conducted focus groups where I gave participants examples of news articles about Internet addiction in South Korea and asked to comment on the veracity of the situation as they perceived it to be. The varying perspectives in these focus groups served to compare the many perspectives on Internet usage in Korea while gaining information about how Koreans perceive their own relations to games, the Internet, technologies, to one another, and the international community at large.

The methodology I employed was a result of my research plan formulated for research on PC game rooms in Canada, adapted to the different cultural circumstances in which I found myself

in Korea. The original research plan included a protocol for conducting in-depth personal interviews and participant-observation in PC game rooms. I had planned to gain rapport by becoming a "regular" in these environments and gradually forming friendships with players. Once in the field, circumstances required changes in the approach I would have taken in North America. Ordinarily, I would approach a field site, do participant-observation, and gradually make friends who could then help me as informants, expanding my social network as a result. However, with so many things dependent upon a system of introduction in Korea, especially given my time frame of four months, I had to do things differently. If I decided to go into a PC Bang, play for any amount of time, then randomly decide to talk to someone about their life, it would have seemed a bit strange. Naturally, the subtleties are more complex, but suffice it to say that I was fortunate enough to have a 'starter' network of friends who introduced me to gamer friends they knew or knew through a friend, at least to start. Thus, the methods by and large reflected the way things are generally done in Korea—a myriad of social networks and snowball samples. This occurrence was quite fortuitous, as I was able to map out "kinship diagrams" in my ethnographic fieldnotes and analyze friendship networks within the gamer communities and evaluate general lifestyles.

The amount I immersed myself in Korean culture and lifestyle played a significant part in generating the research insights in this study. This immersion allowed me to more fully understand some key aspects of Korean homes. During my stay, it became apparent to me why certain behaviours encouraged or discouraged the use of certain technologies. I could understand the context in which technology and resulting gaming habits so popular amongst contemporary Korean youth existed because I was living it. This participation in culture and lived experiences helped me to see how relationships were forged in different contexts online and offline.

ONLINE GAME HYPE AND IDENTITY

In this section I will provide an overall sketch of the sociocultural context in which games are situated in Korea. For many young Koreans, their participation in online games represents one facet of a whole community and way of life. The activities surrounding this media ecology determine how its members navigate within their vital orientations and make choices in how they take nourishment, spend money, earn money, and even partake in courtship rituals.

From the outside, one often sees neon signs stating the fact that the building has a PC game room or two, but they rarely exist on the first floor where other businesses like service shops typically are. One must often venture up or down tiny, dingy, often dodgy looking stairs, through a door, where one will find a PC bang. These rooms, often thick with cigarette smoke, vary in size, anywhere from five to twenty, to fifty computer stations, each with its own comfortable executive chair. If the PC bang is big enough, it may have a special "couple zone" where the stations are two computers in front of a "couple chair" made to seat two people. There may be a snack bar, varying in size and foodstuffs available. Standard items available tend to be quick snacks like vitamin drinks, water, soft drinks, bags of chips, cookies, and instant noodle soup bowls (ramyun). Upon entry, one can get a plastic card from the clerk at the front counter. The card will have a number on it which, when entered into the greeting interface of the computer, will activate the billing time for that computer station. The rate is often about $1 USD per hour, with some places offering discounts at non-peak times.[1] Compared to other 'bangs' like "norae

---

[1] It is interesting to note that the rate for PC bangs was substantially more expensive (about $10

bang" (karaoke room), "dvd bang" (movie watching room), or a board game bang, this rate is much more affordable to young people on a limited income. Upon leaving, the clerk punches in the number of the card, and the tab is paid. PC bangs are typically very popular as places to go because of their cheap rates and popular as start-up businesses, every neighbourhood in Seoul averages about one PC bang per block. They are generally open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and ones with newer computers are often completely full at all hours.

The importance of PC bangs as "third places" in Korea

Third places are those that are neither work nor home, but are places of psychological comfort and support [1]. These places often contain people of like mind and like interests. In Korea, such "third places" become especially important because entertaining one's friends is rarely done in the home. They become the site of numerous interactions. At a PC bang, one can choose from online games, email, online chat, Web surfing, visiting matchmaking sites, people watching, eating, smoking, being with big groups of friends, or just being with one's significant other in a friendlier setting. A PC bang has also been known to be a cheap place for shelter in the middle of the night, or within the broader context of a sometimes unkind job market, a place for the unemployed to spend the day. Here, I talk about a few examples from the formal interviews of various motives for spending a lot of time at PC game rooms.

One twenty-seven year old male university student I interviewed spent as much time outside his home as possible. After classes, he would typically go to dinner with his friends, go to a PC bang in the area and while there, and play a combination of Lineage, StarCraft and Cart Rider for four hours. By the time he was home it would be about midnight, at which point he would log onto his computer in his room and play for another few hours. When I asked why he would play at a PC bang as opposed to home, he answered that he could smoke at PC bangs whereas at home he could not. His parents did not like it.[2] "The biggest reason why I go to PC bang is [it's] more comfortable than home. I play games at home at midnight because my parents are sleeping."

Another male in the same age group actually talks about his lack of desire to play online games, but does so in order to be with his friends:

> S: If I have time to play with my friends after drinking... 3 times or more per week...

> F: And how long do you spend there?

> S: 1-3 hours

> F: What do you play?

> S: StarCraft.

USD) in the late 1990s. As availability and competition in PC bangs has increased, prices have decreased.

[2] Though things are changing slowly to reflect Western models of behaviour, it is still quite common for people to live with their parents until they are married. In fact, it is often expected. Thus, many coping strategies such as those talked about by informants are rather typical attitudes of youth living with their parents.

F: How did you learn StarCraft? At PC bangs or at home?

S: Just PC bangs. I want to play StarCraft really well, but the game is difficult for me. I want to play simple games like baseball and bowling games.

The casual player discussed here reflected the sentiments of other interviewees who were either "recovering game addicts" or "do not play." However, those who insisted they did not play for their own amusement, when probed further in the interviewing process, were found to actually game at least five hours per week on the sole premise of being with others. Sutton-Smith writes, "It has been shown that sometimes players play primarily to be with others" [12], and this seems to be reflected particularly accurately in Korean play sociality.

A twenty-four year old female university student tells me she has been playing the massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) Ragnarok and Cart Rider for about a year now and thinks she is addicted. She and her boyfriend had been dating a year and a half, and after six months she started playing computer games with him at PC bangs.[3] Here's what she had to say when I asked her what made her decide to play:

S: This time was winter, so it was very cold outside. We could spend less money in PC room because it was cheap compared to using other facilities.

F: Just to spend time together in a warm place?

S: Yes. We can spend time together in a warm place. I am a student, so I don't have a lot of money. So that's a good way to spend time with my boyfriend.

Although she says that the games she plays are fun and the time she spends at PC bangs may range from 15-20 hours per week, throughout the interview it was clear that her motives for going to the PC bang were not so much about the game itself, but what the venue itself meant for her relationship with her boyfriend.

Finding the courtship and PC bang link interesting, I later interviewed a couple in their early twenties who played Lineage together almost 40 hours per week. Stating that they now help each other cut down their hours online, their story included both of them arriving at an offline Lineage meet. The male saw the female, and it was "love at first sight." The female, however, did not notice him and ignored his advances. After the meet, the two would see one another online in Lineage, where the male would then try to protect the female from harm against attacks. After a while, this impressed the female enough so that she consented to having a date with him. Their relationship slowly evolved and as of the time of this paper being written they

---

[3] Though the gender implications of online game play still being male dominated in this context are intriguing, they are beyond the scope of this particular paper. The common stereotype, including the girls I talked to seemed to indicate that females tended to like "simple games" like Cart Rider or Tetris.

are still very happy, very much in love, and going to PC bangs together.

Considering the snippets of data above, it seems that the games are more of a 'fourth place' situated within the third places of PC bangs and very often not the prime motivator for people to go there. According to K. Stewart [11], "The PC Bang and Bang culture in Korea…[provides] children with media use opportunities outside of their home, away from parental rules and regulations and among groups of friends, which does not often happen within the Korean homes." My own observations and interviews concur with this assertion.

Which Pro-gamer do you have a crush on?

One of the most intriguing things about Korea is that unlike anywhere else in the world, professional gamers are regarded as celebrities without the commonly negative "geek" taboo that gamers have in other parts of the world. In fact, many people aspire to be just like the popular idols, sponsored by large corporations and swooned over by teenage girls. Those good enough to become professional gamers in Korea sometimes travel from the other side of the world because there would be no other way to experience the level of financial success (sometimes upwards of half a million USD)[4] and social status gained as a pro-gamer in any other country [4].

While in Korea, I managed to take in a few live studio broadcasts of pro-gamer tournaments. At the first live broadcast I attended, I walked into the studio two hours prior to the start time in order to assess the situation. With all the devotion that one might see adolescent girls waiting for the Backstreet Boys, girls in this studio, sitting by homemade pom-poms and giant posters professing their adoration, had saved seats. I was unsure of how long they had been there. So, it was standing room only. When the broadcast began, so did the screams, cheers, and strobe lights. I stood there in the back of the room in awe at the spectacle that was before me, with studio colour commentary that one might see for events such as the World Cup, and drama similar to that of professional wrestling matches, complete with team members of a losing side weeping. The atmosphere was unavoidably social, and full of excess youthful energy.

One cannot underestimate the role of the mass media in prolonging the enthusiasm for games like StarCraft that, in other parts of the world, has long since subsided. Some of my informants have told me that they would periodically lose interest in StarCraft, but would then see a pro-gamer match, and promptly head to the PC bang afterwards to try the 'new strategies' they saw on television out with or on their friends. Indeed, the pro-gamer scene is quite unlike anything else in the world.

Amateur gaming as a means of self-determination

The sense of identity found in amateur gamers in Korea is quite interesting as well. Those who make money by selling virtual items on sites like Itembay.com cannot compete with professional gamer levels of income, but one might be surprised to find out that average players can make sometimes $100 USD per week or more for their troubles. Continuing in the theme of this paper

---

[4] At this time I am unable to go adequately discuss whether or not what the professional gamers or amateur gamers are doing can indeed be described as play. Theorists like Huizinga [8] would say that they probably are not "playing" as playing to order is no longer play, but an imitation of it. "Work is obligatory, sober, serious, and not fun, and play is the opposite of these" [12]. This classification has implications for how we may think about gaming for money in similar terms as professional sports like soccer in the devotion and time required to be successful.

however, I will discuss contextual reasons for why this may be a popular activity.

In Korea, the soonest one can typically start working is eighteen years of age. Professional gamers, often starting younger, are already beating the odds. As it is highly irregular to move out of one's family home until marriage, once someone turns eighteen, it is on a case-by-case basis whether or not someone chooses to work. If someone takes a job, it is often a low paying part-time job, known as "arubeit" (originating from Japanese colonial times and second-hand influence from Germany). If one chooses to do so, it is quite possible to earn more selling online game items than holding a part-time job, which would require application, experience, and being chosen—which in the gaming world would not be required.

In addition to the issue of a young relatively inexperienced workforce that is structurally compelled to remain so for a longer period of time, there is the issue of compulsory military service for Korean males. The period of service is about two years (sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on the terms of service) during which time one has minimal contact with friends and family. One of my informants whose gaming habits were quite lucrative tells me, "I started gaming since my military service ended, because when I finished my military service I was really bored and had nothing to do." I interviewed others who had similar situations, feeling that they were in a state of limbo after their time away and now had to get their lives together to become a responsible adult.

One might see how earning money by selling online items might be attractive for many reasons. First, in an already saturated job market, the income may provide extra pocket change and an increased sense of independence from one's family. Second, there seems to be a feeling of productiveness associated with earning a living, especially after military service when people are often in a state of uncertainty. The practise of selling items may very well be a way people try to empower themselves with more agency and sense of self-worth.

THE MENACE OF THE "WANG-TTA"

In this section I attempt to summarize my findings regarding "Wang-tta," as it pertains to games. The title of this paper was inspired by a Korean term that emerged in interviews: the concept of "Wang-tta." This term describes isolating and bullying the worst game player out of one's peer group. A difficult term to translate into English terms (and hence very little English literature that attempts to do so), one can be said to, "make Wang-tta" or be the object of Wang-tta. The term is similar to (and some might say modeled after) the Japanese term for bullying, "Ijime." In reference to Ijime, Dogakinai [9] writes that in collectivist societies like Japan, similarity is a source of comfort while difference is disparaged and subject to much abuse from others.

My ignorance of this concept being almost amusing in retrospect, I first came across the term in one of the formal interviews (shown below) when my informant was trying to address his motivations for wanting to play games:

> S: Do you know Wang-tta?
>
> F: Is he a pro-gamer?
>
> S: No, [it's a] social problem word. Wang-tta … if one person can't play the game… Think about it this way: Every class has a little or poor… all people hate him. If one class has 40

people, 39 people playing a game together, but one person can't play the game. 39 people then hate him, and he wants to play together with them but he couldn't because he can't play that well. So, after time goes, this gap is increased. So everyone hates him. Everyone hates him.

At first, I was uncertain as to whether or not Wang-tta was being used as a noun to describe the individual "loser" (as it commonly tends to be used in English) or as a verb or adverb to describe the bullying situation. I asked for clarification, and obtained a hypothesis from an insightful informant. His supposition was that a primary motivator to play games in Korea was in order to achieve social acceptance among peers. In his interview he also made hints at the PC bang serving as an arena of talent exhibition. That is, one might practice playing at home and 'perform' at the PC bang where talents in a game would be scrutinized.

> F: So this one is the Wang-tta. The outlier is the wang-tta.
>
> S: The **whole situation** is Wang-tta. People say he is Wang-tta. If someone can't play the game… that situation makes this situation sometimes. So everyone doesn't want to be Wang-tta. That is why many people play games in Korea. Everyone likes a person who can play the game very well. That's why every day students practice games at home.

Thankfully, I was at an early point in my study where I could ask more informants about the concept of Wang-tta. It seemed like an important concept to find out more about because if Wang-tta was what it seemed, it would be very interesting to look at as a motivator that many may not realize is at work behind the scenes. I had built flexibility into my interview protocol, so quickly adapted it to this new finding and other new findings as I went along. A person who possesses a social deficit, articulated as Wang-tta, would be in many situations where immense social pressure to be good at games could exist. This could indeed cause many young people take every opportunity to practice the games of their peer groups in order to become more skilled and less subject to ridicule. Huizinga's [8] discussion of the way spoil-sports are treated is comparable to the creation of Wang-tta. "The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a "spoil-sport"…Therefore he must be cast out for he threatens the existence of the play-community." Caillois [2] concurs with Huizinga in that, "The game is ruined by the nihilist who denounces the rules as absurd and conventional, who refuses to play because the game is meaningless." In threatening the sanctity of the play community, one might subject oneself to being singled out as Wang-tta.

Here is another person's concept of Wang-tta:

> F: can you tell me what your definition of Wang-tta is?
>
> S: Wang-tta is [a] bad thing. Everyone doesn't like a Wang-tta. They have a different mind, different behaviour. So when one guy doesn't like another guy… Wang-tta is some group, and one guy is made the weirdo.

It is important to note that in the concept of Wang-tta there is fusion between collectivism and individualism in that one's talent might is not the only consideration and prevention of ostracization, but also one ability to engage with the group, be a willing 'team player,' a group's

protection and esteem for an individual.

The Wang-tta effect

In the quest for the elusive Wang-tta, I have come across what I call the "Wang-tta effect," which describes what I see as a retreat of one player from the given community due to a circumstance beyond the would-be player's control. Such circumstances often include a once frequent game player being removed from one's peer group for an extended period of time, like two years of army service or going abroad for sometimes a year or more to learn English. Once the player is back in circulation, game play time has typically dropped significantly. Implicit in informant's statements of things like, "it's no longer fun," or "my priorities changed," I see the "Wang-tta effect" occurring due to the informant unwilling to subject themselves to "Wang-tta" from their peer group. The examples I discuss in this section show how culture (in this case Wang-tta) and social structure, then infrastructure interact to influence player motives and habits.

Culture and social structure – army service

In this interview, I spoke to a twenty-five year old male in his final year of university. At first, he claimed to not play online games any longer, but as the interview went on, this proved to not be the case.

> F: So how long have you been gaming?
>
> S: Seven years, maybe. Since I was twenty. I stopped or maybe two and a half years, because I was addicted to Starcraft. For four years, I played StarCraft a lot. After I quit the army, I recognized that I was really bad at playing StarCraft. Because after that everyone played StarCraft really well, but not me. So before I went to the army I was kind of a regular player, but after I quit from the army, I was the lower class player. So I just quit because I wasn't very good at StarCraft.

However, I knew from observation that he spent time at PC bangs, had social gatherings centering around game tournaments, and other such activities. This left me wondering, so I asked for clarification.

> F: So when you go to a PC bang, is it only for friends?
>
> S: Yes, mostly. I go to PC room with my friends to play games with my friends. But if I go just by myself it's not fun. I'm not good at games, but if I go to a PC bang with my friends, we can make a team and play with other teams. So it's kind of socialization. So I like that. Not playing by myself. Before we went to the army, we played StarCraft all the time together. When I was in the army, I was dying to go online. I wanted to play StarCraft, but I couldn't. They didn't allow it. After I quit from the army, of course I played StarCraft, but it wasn't very much fun compared to before the army. I was defeated by people.
>
> F: Ok, now I don't know very much about army service here. When people are doing military service, they don't do school or anything else?
>
> S: We stayed at the army base two years and two months. We could only go out forty-five days. That is the only vacation we have. Four or five times. Ten days. Ten days per vacation. During

the army service, we cannot go out. Even though we go outside, we cannot do things like drink alcohol, or play games.

Clearly, there are issues in the social structure unique in many ways to Korean life. Among young Korean males, military service is both a rite of passage, signalling a clear demarcation between one's relatively carefree youth and responsible adulthood. The typical severing of social networks during this time also has much to do with ambivalent feelings of how one will be received back into the social network of origin.

Yet another example of the Wang-tta effect is derived from a once extremely frequent (has played 36 hours in a row) player being cut off from Korea's broadband infrastructure when he went to England to learn more English.

> F: How much time do you spend per week playing games?
>
> S: Nowadays six to seven hours per week because this is my last semester. So I'm really busy. I have to study harder than before for getting a job. The biggest reason is studying because it's my last semester.
>
> F: At the time you spent 36 hours playing, when did you start cutting down?
>
> S: During my stay in England. That was a big reason. Their internet speed is much slower. Very slow. I couldn't play a game for nearly one year. So that's why. After that, I lose my temper. I lose interest in playing games.
>
> F: Because you were doing other things?
>
> S: Yah I couldn't play games… Still, my friends played games, so I restarted with them.

When I asked what he ended up doing in England instead of playing online games, he said, "Drinking. Smoking."

The concept of the Wang-tta effect illustrates the often implicit concern over lack of ability to not only participate in online game activities in peer groups, but the ability to participate well after an investment of practice time. In my encounters with Korean gamers, in interviews and focus groups, the ability to do something "extremely well," in the areas of school or games, is very much taken seriously and admired.

UNDERSTANDING KOREAN EXPERIENCES – CONCLUSION
In this study, I reported on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in order to analyze possible sociocultural factors at work in Korean game communities and the context in which games have become integrated into everyday life in South Korea. Throughout the paper I suggested that perhaps an in-depth look at the culture, social structure, and infrastructure might cast Korea's reputation for excessive online gaming in a different light. By engaging in this first-hand study, I hoped to provide more cultural context and possible explanations for why gaming and its associated activities seem so immersive and compelling in Korea. In addition to that, one may make educated guesses as to why they are not in other parts of the world.

The original fieldwork, concerning online game hype and identity, merged with theories of play

add perspective to game research by highlighting the concept of online sociability as it is created in the interactions between players, online and offline

After outlining the methodology employed in this study and painting a comprehensive picture of online game hype and identity in Korea, I provided a synthesis of the Korean social issue of "Wang-tta," which includes the act of singling out one person in a group to bully and treat as an outcast. I used it to provide extra insight into one of the motivations to excel at digital games and one of the strong drivers of such community membership. As the results of this case study on Korea will indicate, the factors for excessive online gaming are most likely not cross-cultural (i.e. diagnosable as addiction in biomedical terms) and just as likely if not more to do with one's life context.

While other factors in Korean online game culture are definitely worth consideration, I hope to have shown that other factors not readily apparent in conventional games studies might be responsible for Korea's reputation for many hours logged at the PC bang and other such enabling aspects of its gaming society, such as culture, social structure and infrastructure.

REFERENCES

1. Bruckman, A., and Mitchel Resnick. "The MediaMOO Project:Constructionism and Professional Community," in *Convergence* vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1995).

2. Caillois, R., *Man, Play, and Games.* Free Press, New York: NY, 1961.

3. Ijime: A Social Illness of Japan. Available at http://www.lclark.edu/~krauss/advwrf99/causeeffect/akikocause.html.

4. Living the Dream: Life as a Professional Gamer. Available at http://geartest.com/sections/games/professional_gamer.html

5. Geertz, C. *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics.* Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2000.

6. South Korea's Gaming Addicts. Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/2499957.stm

7. Ho, A. "Broadband: Virtually a den of iniquity?", (Singapore, Mar 18 2005), *The Straits Times* p. 27..

8. Huizinga, J. *Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture.* The Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1955.

9. Internet addiction haunts Korea. Available at: http://search.hankooki.com/times/times_view.php?terms=Internet+haunts+Korea+code%3A+kt&path=hankooki3%2Ftimes%2Flpage%2F200501%2Fkt2005012117464953460.htm&kw=Internet%20haunts%20Korea

10. Stewart, A. *The Ethnographer's Method (Vol. 46).* Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA,1998.

11. Stewart, K. *Informatization of a Nation: A Case Study of South Korea's Computer Gaming and PC-Bang Culture.* Unpublished MA, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, 2004.

12. Sutton-Smith, B. *The Ambiguity of Play.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997.