

Kate Kennedy  
9.10.2017  
INFO 497  
Final Reflection

Question: How do unique cultural aspects or social practices (i.e. manner, attitude, values) influence how Koreans apply technology in the home, school, or workplace? Technology applications include devices and equipment (e.g. cell phones) or social media (e.g. Cyworld, online gaming, Facebook).

Korea loves its online gaming. The rumors you've heard that Seoul is the gaming capital of the world, with professional leagues, establishments catered entirely to the average gamer, and a culture that treats the video games are more than just a pastime, are all true. But why is it that a technology that stems primarily either from the United States or Japan thriving more in Korea than in their home countries of origin that treat gaming more like a hobby? From my experiences in Korea, I believe it comes down to an inherent motivation amongst Korean youth unprecedented by other cultures as well as the general culture of Korea that encourages people to be social and out and about in a confined city.

Since before I knew I'd be traveling to Seoul, I'd heard about Korea's gaming culture, and was eager to experience it. As a casual American gamer, I treat online gaming as a fun hobby to partake in during my free time when I'm not working, going to school, or hanging out with friends. Sometimes, I'll play with friends online, or we'll meet at someone's house and play together, but one thing is clear; we play at home. In Korea, Seoul in particular, gaming is much more of an out-of-the-house activity, primarily for two reasons. First, Seoul is a cramped city with sky-high apartment buildings and little personal space within them, so it is customary to treat leisure time as an opportunity to get out of the house and enjoy life and the company of others. Many people in Seoul, especially youth, don't even have space in their apartments for a

gamer rig, alone from maybe a laptop, so leaving the house to game is usually expected. Second, the establishments known as PC bangs (“bang” translating to “room”) are much more extravagant than your average internet cafe in the States, so gaming is not only treated as an excuse to get out of the house, but an actual night out on the town. Some people go clubbing, others just like to eat and drink the night away, and then there's the gamers, that gather at PC bangs that not only provide the best computers, games, and internet, but also food concession, comfortable chairs, and a cheap fare to play. To buy the average new release game, it usually costs around \$40-\$60, a gamer computer costing usually over \$1000, and the gear to go with it like chairs, headsets, keyboards, and mice all adding up to a serious price tag. The price to pay for some game-time at your average PC bang in Korea? ~\$1 an hour. Who can argue with that?

I was, of course, extremely intrigued by the idea of an establishment that specialized in making a home for gamers, so I visited one called eSports Arena close by to our dorms. Once stepping through the door, I finally understood why there is one on every corner in Seoul. It is heaven for any gamer, with ergonomic chairs, monitor screens the size of TVs, high-tech headsets, and light-up mechanical keyboards, all more extravagant than even my system I have at home. Not to forget the concession stand in the front of the room, equipped with not only snacks, but actual meals like noodles and kimbap available for people to buy when they take a well-deserved break from their screens. Just as the sleek and shimmery lights within the establishment, my eyes lit up as soon as I walked in the door, especially after seeing that the majority of my screens were playing my favorite game, Overwatch.

Overwatch has become huge in Korea, despite being a Blizzard game manufactured in California. Part of it is the quick gameplay with a diverse cast of characters with an equally di-

verse set of abilities that make for a unique gameplay each match, but it also may have to do with one of its characters, D.Va, who is the epitome of Korean gamer culture. In the game's lore, she is a professional Starcraft player (another Blizzard game with a huge following in Korea) that ends up becoming a national hero after she is recruited by the Korean military to fight the robots wreaking havoc throughout the globe. The idea is that Korean gamers become soldiers because they are already acutely trained to shoot, and take their games seriously, so they are tasked with driving weaponized mech suits to fight the enemy. As I sit in the PC bang, watching all the gamers around me playing as D.Va as I do the same (she is my favorite to play after all), I feel my own skills improving, and start to wonder how probable a storyline like D.Va's could really be.

When I am playing at home, I am constantly dreading seeing Hangul letters in the usernames of the players on the opposing team, instantly knowing my fate. Korean players know what they're doing, and part of me wonders, why are they so good? I had the pleasure of meeting the old head of Blizzard Korea during our site visit to Google, his current company affiliation. I was able to speak with him a bit about this Korean gaming prodigy phenomenon, and he was able to give some great insight. I asked, compared to Americans, why Korean gamers are always so skilled at games like Starcraft and Overwatch. He told me that due to the strong pursuance of goals in Korean culture, average gamers take playing much more seriously than the average gamer in the States, putting in real hours and sometimes staying at PC bangs for 10 hours at a time. They see the game as a goal to be achieved, constantly working on improving weaknesses in their gameplay, comparing with other players to build off of one another, and even rewatch their plays to see how they can fix errors they've made in past matches. Essentially, he said Ko-

rean gamers are more motivated to better their skills, while Western gamers are more motivated to just have a good time, so there is no question why Korean players rule all in the online-gaming world.

I'd had my time in PC bang heaven, and I had gained some valuable information about how Korea's goal-setting culture supplements a healthy population of amazing gamers in the country, and it was time for me to see their skills in action. Since before my departure to Seoul from Seattle, I was excited to see an eSports event on my travels, as not only do average Korean gamers set the bar high for the rest of us, the very best actually make a professional career out of it. As time went by, it started to sink in that there was little time or resources available to see one of these events, as I had no idea if I was even in Seoul for the right season (just like normal sports, eSports has seasons too, depending on the game). It was two days before my flight back to SeaTac, and I figured I'd try one more stab at finding any information I could about Korea's eSports. I stumbled upon a Korean Ticketmaster-type site that was selling \$5 tickets for something called "Overwatch Hot6 Apex Season 4," and I knew I hit the jackpot. After a difficult time booking the ticket (the site required a Korean card, so I had to contact some family in Seoul for help), I set off to the OGN eSports Stadium in the Mapo region Seoul. I was greeted by a glorious sky-scraper with an elevator to the top floor where my seats were located. After about a good 20 minutes of mutual misunderstandings amongst helpful Koreans with as much knowledge of English as I of Korean, I was able to get directions to my seats. As I open the doors to the quite lobby into the arena, I am presented with a sensory overload of colors, flashing lights, and excited cheering and shouting, as two teams of 6 duke it out on opposite sides of the stage, with a giant screen in the center like a movie theater showing the action unfolding as they play. The guide

checks my ticket, leads me to my seat, and provides me with a Hot6 brand energy drink, the sponsor of the event, and about as ubiquitous with Korean gamers as Doritos and Mountain Dew are with gamers in America. Of course, they want the fans as hopped up and energized at 10pm as the players. I took my seat and was treated to 3 hours of some of the most intense gaming I've ever witnessed, with crazy plays, screaming fans, and intense neck and neck matches, all just like you'd see at your average American football game. Surprisingly as well, the majority of the fans were women, teenagers at that, and in that moment I realized, not only is gaming popular with Korean youth, but the professional gamers are like superstars here. Girls made fan signs to hold up for their favorite players, they screamed bloody murder when their favorites were eliminated in-game, and they screamed even louder when their favorites made a good play. There was even a line of young women at the end of the event waiting to meet their favorite players from the losing team as if they were waiting to meet LeBron James or Justin Bieber. Just like how sports stars are idolized in the states, professional gamers are the real stars of Korea, right up there with K-pop idols, despite the fact they look like the kind of guys that would be teased for being a little too into gaming back in the States. The whole experience showed how ingrained gaming is in Korean youth culture, especially as a way to bring people together, even if they're not into the more conventional sports or nighttime activities. It was rip-roaring, thrilling, and more exciting than any sporting event I've ever been to.

What I've learned during this adventure in the Korean gaming culture is how the times may change, but the motivations stay the same. Yes, eSports is still a niche market, as most people over 30 in Korea seem to know what it is, or simply don't care, but as it has quickly taken up a following within the last 5 years, its growth shows how sports has evolved in Korea as technol-

ogy becomes more and more prevalent in society. Fueled by an intense cultural drive to succeed that starts at a young age for Koreans, it's no doubt why eSports became the it-pastime to the Korean youth as a great way to form skills for those less athletically-inclined. The fact that gaming is such a normal aspect of culture in Seoul, with PC bangs on every block, entire arenas dedicated to eSports, and many Korean students sharing with me that their favorite thing to do with friends was game together, shows that it's not going anywhere anytime soon, and is clearly going to continue being a thriving industry based on technology, skill-building, and togetherness.