

Crafting Stars SOUTH KOREAN E-SPORTS AND THE EMERGENCE OF A DIGITAL GAMING CULTURE

By Stephen C. Rea



Lee Shin-hyung, AKA INnoVation, is presented a check for 40,000 won (about \$36,000) for winning the 2015 GSL Season 3 *StarCraft II* competition. Source: Flickr site of Yong Woo "kenzi" Kim at <http://tinyurl.com/hs7rq7>.

For nearly two decades now, South Korea has been at the forefront of a global sports culture that is rapidly growing in popularity. But unlike other sports, athletes don't physically overpower or outlast one another. Rather, they engage their opponents through strategic thinking and the expert manipulation of a mouse and keyboard in contests mediated by digital game environments. Known as "e-sports"—an abbreviation of "electronic sports"—these competitions attract crowds of enthusiastic spectators in the tens of thousands and audiences of millions more through online video streaming services.

Not only have e-sports had a significant impact on Korean popular culture, Korea has also influenced the development of global e-sports. E-sports have become emblematic of Korea's high-speed, high-tech information society and have helped distinguish Korea as a global leader in information and communication technologies (ICTs). However, they have also been at the center of contemporary debates over intellectual property and so-called game "addiction" that are reshaping digital culture in Korea, and around the world.

Coincidence and Crisis

In the early 1990s, Korean politicians began laying the groundwork for an advanced information society through a set of policies known collectively as *jeongbohwa*, or "informatization," banking the country's long-term economic future on becoming a global center for ICT that could compete with any other nation. The first step in building Korea's information society was constructing the Korea Information Infrastructure (KII), which was intended to deliver high-speed broadband Internet to the entire country.¹ By

February 1997, domestic Internet service providers running on top of the KII had reached 1.6 million subscribers. However, the cost of broadband subscriptions was still prohibitively expensive for most Korean households at the time, which presented a problem for the goals of informatization. Subscription levels would need to rise in order to make the KII project viable both for the government and the telecommunications companies that had been contracted to build out the network. In order to demonstrate that broadband Internet was indispensable not just for business, but also for everyday use, the Kim Young-sam administration financed a number of "community access centers," public spaces where anyone could access the Internet for free, in neighborhoods all over the country.² However, these centers suffered from poor management and a lack of adequate funding, and broadband subscriptions remained lower than expectations.

Then, at the end of 1997, disaster struck in the form of a massive financial crisis across Southeast and East Asia. The Kim Dae-jung government—elected just as the crisis was beginning—temporarily suspended some of the public informatization programs, including shutting down most of the nation's community access centers. At the same time, many workers who had been laid off during the crisis turned to private entrepreneurial projects. Among these projects were *PC bang* (bang is the Korean word for "room"), the Korean variant of Internet cafés, which afforded customers a computer terminal and online access for a small hourly fee. By accident more than by design, *PC bang* filled the void left by the shuttering of the community access centers and proved to be indispensable in promoting the usefulness and convenience of broadband.

The number of *PC bang* grew from an estimated 100 in 1997 to over 13,000 by 1999. Driving this dizzying growth rate was not so much the availability of computers for surfing the web or checking email, but rather cheap and reliable access to online games and the high-speed connections that were necessary for playing them. In March 1998, American game developer Blizzard Entertainment released *StarCraft*, a science fiction-themed real-time strategy simulation. Korea accounted for one-third of *StarCraft*'s total global sales that year, with over one million game discs purchased, primarily by *PC bang*. The timing, though coincidental, was perfect for *StarCraft* to catch on with Korean gamers, and it soon became the most popular leisure activity among adolescent boys and young men in particular. Kyung-joon, who was in middle school in 1998, told me that if a boy in his class didn't know how to play *StarCraft*, then he would be labeled a *wang-tta* (loser) and shunned by his peers.³ *StarCraft*'s popularity also helped make the case for household broadband subscriptions. An early advertisement for Hanaro Telecom argued that purchasing its household broadband service meant that parents no longer had to worry about their children playing *StarCraft* all day in a *PC bang* because now they could play the game at home.

In the midst of Korea's "*StarCraft* mania," *PC bang* owners began to observe a strange phenomenon among their customers. Not only were people flocking to *PC bang* to play *StarCraft*, they were also coming to watch others play. Soon, *PC bang* began organizing informal competitions in which the best players built their reputations in the community, developed

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rivalries, and even cultivated fan followings. Before long, PC bang franchises realized that they could use these competitions as marketing tools, and began sponsoring individual players and teams, marking the beginning of professional Korean e-sports.

From “Maniacs” to the Mainstream

When *StarCraft* first hit the Korean market, it was played mostly by the adolescent and twenty-something men who flocked to PC bang and had

preexisting interests in digital games. In Korean popular culture, these players were known as *geim maeniak*, a transliteration of the English words “game” and “maniac.” While this community grew rapidly enough to justify organizing the Korea Professional Gamers’ League (KPGI) in December 1998, it wasn’t until cable television channels began broadcasting matches regularly in 1999 that *StarCraft* and, by extension, e-sports became truly mainstream cultural phenomena. In 2000, “pro-gaming” was recognized as an official job category in Korea, further legitimizing the world of e-sports.

The Korean public responded enthusiastically to this new sphere of athletic competition. The 2004 professional *StarCraft* league finals attracted an estimated 100,000 fans. Top player Lee Ki-seok was featured in advertisements for Korean telecommunications companies, reinforcing the connection between e-sports and informatization. Lim Yo-hwan became the sport’s first true pop culture icon, making cameos in film and television, and receiving recognition as a “cultural celebrity” in 2003’s Blue House Cultural Industry Policy Report, an annual report produced by the Korean government’s executive branch. In fact, Lim’s celebrity was so important to Korean e-sports’ viability that when his compulsory military service forced him to retire in 2006, a *StarCraft* team was created within the Korean air force that would allow him and other pro-gamers to continue competing while in the military.

Jin-soo, a liaison between the Korea e-sports Association (KeSPA)—the KPGI’s successor, with a mandate from the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism to oversee Korean e-sports—and the professional *StarCraft* teams, told me that the game’s popularity could be attributed to its alignment with what he called Korea’s *gukminseong*, or “national character.” “Our *gukminseong* is very similar to *StarCraft*,” he explained to me. “Koreans are very fast, very intelligent, and want to talk with others. And so *StarCraft* was very good for Koreans.” *StarCraft*’s gameplay, which requires players to make quick, strategic decisions, combined with its inherently social qualities—i.e., as an arena for both contests and shared



Lim Yo-hwan, AKA BoxeR, *StarCraft*’s first superstar, at the height of his success in the mid-2000s. Source: His profile page on KPOPMUSIC at <http://tinyurl.com/hmgtyf>.



Crowd waiting for the South Korean launch of *Starcraft II: Heart of the Swarm*. Source: The author, 2013.



Intel e-stadium and PC bang. Source: The author, 2013.

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interests—made it an attractive leisure activity for many Koreans. These interests intensified in the context of organized e-sports, as hardcore and casual fans alike could cheer on their favorite players and teams, and follow competitions as they unfolded in a traditional sports season structure.

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Who Owns *StarCraft*-as-e-sport?

As influential as *StarCraft* and e-sports have been for Korean popular culture, the Korean e-sports scene has arguably had a greater impact on the evolution of global e-sports and how game developers market their products. As Jin-soo remembered, game companies in the late 1990s framed their games in terms of "*jjalb-eun jaemi*," or "short-term entertainment." "At that time, game companies didn't know the power of e-sports," he told me. "They just thought, 'It's just a marketing thing.' So many, many companies did the e-sports events for just one year or six months, and that was the end." Whereas other sports are organized primarily around physical contests, with long social and cultural histories, e-sports depend upon relatively new digital media products as the ground for competition. The merging of sport and digital media in e-sports entails combining two different temporalities. Sports leagues work to create institutional infrastructures that will help sustain interest in a given sport for long periods of time, while game developers have been content to promote interest in their products until a new game title is released.

When the KPGL debuted, Blizzard was primarily interested in e-sports as a means of promoting and marketing *StarCraft* in Korea. *StarCraft*-as-e-sport was a welcome—if unexpected—byproduct of that process, but at the time, Blizzard was not particularly interested in designing games specifically for e-sports. As the company's CEO and cofounder Mike Morhaim recounted in 2015:

At its peak, in Korea, where e-sports grew and led the world, there were three cable channels broadcasting StarCraft 24/7 . . . Today, StarCraft: Brood War, [essentially] the original version of StarCraft, is still one of the most popular, most played games in Korea. It was a huge wake-up

call to us just how much interest there was globally in playing Blizzard games.⁵

However, with the sustained success of the Korean professional leagues over more than a decade, Blizzard was fully invested in designing games with e-sports in mind by the time that the game's sequel, *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty*, was released in 2010. In an open letter to the Korean e-sports community, Morhaim stated:

We are very proud that Starcraft contributed greatly to Korea becoming a global forerunner in e-sports . . . We will continue to do our best for the development of e-sports, and to that end we will improve the quality of matches and add features that will create competitive factors for the enjoyment of the audience.⁶

In the lead-up to *StarCraft II*'s release, Blizzard became embroiled in a legal dispute with KeSPA, as the company sought to exert greater institutional control over e-sports competitions. Blizzard claimed that KeSPA owed the company licensing fees for using its game contents as the substance of its competitions and broadcasts, which KeSPA had never paid and Blizzard had never asked for. In February 2007, nearly nine years after the first matches had been broadcast on Korean cable television, Blizzard sent KeSPA a formal request demanding that it immediately cease broadcasting any matches featuring its game products, a decision precipitated by KeSPA's attempts to sell the broadcast rights to professional *StarCraft* to Korean media outlets. KeSPA countered by arguing that:

E-sports is a newly emerging sports industry based around video games, and is a gaming business as well as a sports-entertainment business that provides game developers an opportunity to increase revenue and customer satisfaction, and provides sponsors the opportunity to promote and market their products. Taking these features into consideration, if a game is to become a popular e-sports competition, the game developer and the e-sports organization must have a flexible relationship. If a game achieves success as an iconic e-sports competition, and the developer pursues profits by declaring that their copyright is valid in the sports industry as well, then that is a large obstacle for e-sports' growth and establishment as a future sports-entertainment industry.⁷

Essentially, the question was whether or not game developers' intellectual property rights to their games' contents extended into the realm of e-sports. In other words, was *StarCraft*-as-e-sport a qualitatively different entertainment product than *StarCraft*-as-online-game?

Ultimately, the two parties settled out of court, and beginning in the 2012–2013 proleague season, KeSPA's media partners were granted permission to broadcast *StarCraft II* matches. Since 2013, Blizzard has taken a more active role in promoting *StarCraft II* by organizing the tri-annual World Championship Series (WCS), which pits the winners of regional tournaments against each other in order to determine a definitive world champion. Though the scale of competition has taken on a more global character, Korea's influence is clear: competitions are divided between the "WCS Circuit"—a mix of players from Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Oceania—and "WCS Korea." Moreover, Korean players compete in both divisions, and every WCS champion and runner-up thus far has been a Korean player. Although the legal dispute between Blizzard and KeSPA was settled more or less amicably, it raised important questions for the future of e-sports with respect to institutional arrangements, intellectual property, copyright law, and the status of sports that depend upon preexisting entertainment products for the content of their competitions.

E-sports' Future and the Specter of "Addiction"

As Korean e-sports near the end of their second decade of existence, they have become entangled in political and social debates about the future of Korea's information society. One of Korea's e-sports' strongest political supporters has been Jun Byung-hun, a representative of the center-left New Politics Alliance for Democracy. Jun served as President of KeSPA



E-sports advocate Jun Byung-hun. Source: *LiquidLegends* website at <http://tinyurl.com/jnyp4bo>.

between 2013 and 2014, and has continued to advocate for e-sports and the domestic game industry after completing his term. Most recently, he hosted the Korea E-sports Development Forum at the National Assembly in 2016, bringing together politicians, game developers, and e-sports organizers to discuss how e-sports can be a driver for cultural contents production. In 2012, the National Assembly passed the Act on Promotion of e-sports, which seeks to “establish infrastructure for the culture and industry of e-sports, enhance competitiveness in e-sports, and contribute to increasing people’s opportunities to enjoy leisure time with e-sports and the robust development of the national economy by providing for matters necessary to promote e-sports,” including public funding for e-sports stadiums in Korean cities outside of Seoul.⁸

At the same time, Korean e-sports have become associated with the discourse on so-called game “addiction” that reflects public anxieties about the role of digital games in Korean society, particularly their influence on adolescents. A handful of highly publicized deaths related to digital gaming have sparked growing concerns among child advocacy groups, politicians, and medical professionals about the broader social and economic effects of problematic gaming.⁹ Statistics tracking the rate of Internet addiction—the category under which game addiction falls—indicate that while the percentage of Koreans reported to be addicted to the Internet had fallen from 8.8 percent in 2008 to 6.9 percent in 2014, the population at risk of developing an addiction had actually risen from just under two million in 2008 to more than 2.6 million in 2014 (about 5 percent of the total population). Moreover, the addiction rate jumped to 12.5 percent among adolescents and has been steadily rising since 2011.¹⁰ Many of the public’s anxieties are focused around PC bang, which have gone from being celebrated as emblems of Korean informatization in the early 2000s to being characterized as “seedy” places that enable engagement with digital games characterized as improper or even dangerous, and where Korean youth can escape the watchful gaze of their parents. The director of an inpatient game addiction treatment center in Seoul told me that he saw “unhealthy individualization” as the greatest threat posed by excessive gaming. “Game addicts have their own world,” he said. “They do not focus on the real world. In the end, in the future, [this could lead to] the dis-cohesion of Korean society.”¹¹

In response to what some are calling an “addiction crisis,” conservative politicians in the Saenuri Party have proposed legislation that would recognize game addiction as one of Korea’s four “official” addictions, along with alcohol, drugs, and gambling. When this article was written, the bill had been “pending” for four years, and seems unlikely to be passed.¹² More practical efforts at managing and preventing game addiction include public school curricula, private and public clinics for counseling and treatment, and rehabilitation centers such as the now-defunct Korea Youth Counseling and Welfare Institute and Ministry of Gender Equality and



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In January 2016, ESPN—the self-proclaimed “worldwide leader” in sports entertainment—created a division dedicated entirely to covering e-sports.

Family’s Jump Up RESCUE School, a two-week-long program of conditioned aversion therapy for adolescents and their families. These strategies have been subsidized by both the Korean government and a consortium of Korean game developers.

Given that Korean pro-gamers practice for upward of ten hours per day, politicians, parents, and news media have drawn connections between e-sports and the behaviors of game addicts, expressing worries about how e-sports might promote addictive relationships to digital games and the Internet. In 2003, Lim Yo-hwan was invited to participate in a segment on KBS—one of Korea’s three major television networks—to discuss the “harms of online games.” KeSPA’s official history of Korean e-sports reports that “it was the mistake of the producers, who did not realize the difference between gaming and e-sports. Especially as the moderator treated Yo-hwan as a game addict, the KBS viewer bulletin was on the verge of paralysis, due to the complaints of netizens.”¹³ The addiction discourse even appears in the Korean e-sports community itself, such as in this exchange between the English-language shoutcasting team of Alex “Supernovamaniac” Kim and Justin “Whiplash” Wilson at the 2012–2013 *StarCraft II* proleague finals:

Supernovamaniac: “You know what’s also funny, these guys, they might be pro-gamers, but they’re not game addicts.”

Whiplash: “Well . . . I don’t know about that, man . . . They play *StarCraft* ten to twelve hours a day.”

Supernovamaniac: “Yeah, but here’s the thing: the addicts, they can never stop, and, you know, they’re always forced to play the game. These guys, when they do not play the game, they’re like, ‘OK, you

know what? I’m not playing the game right now; I’m not practicing.’ So the brain is OK.”¹⁴

Jun Byung-hun is among those politicians who have been vocal critics of legislation designed to curb addiction, such as the controversial Shutdown Law, an amendment to the Juvenile Protection Act passed in 2011 that prohibits anyone under sixteen from logging into online games between midnight and 6:00 a.m. The law has had an unintentional impact on e-sports, since a few pro-gamers are under sixteen and therefore cannot participate in matches that require them to be online after midnight. One such incident occurred in 2012 when Lee Seung-hyeon, playing in a *StarCraft II* tournament qualifying match, realized that it was approaching midnight and he would soon be kicked offline, and thus deployed a risky attack even though he knew that it was a bad idea. The attack ultimately failed and Lee lost the match, but in recognition of how the Shutdown Law had negatively affected his performance, the tournament organizers awarded him a place in the finals anyway. Jun has described the law as an ineffectual, politically motivated measure that represents a misunderstanding about how to manage the addiction problem. With respect to e-sports specifically, he argued that they should not be lumped in with the problematic aspects of online games, as they demonstrated the creative, fun, and “healthy” side of Korean online gaming culture, a sphere of activity that is being “reborn as a new culture of family play for the digital generation.”¹⁵

Jin-soo echoed Jun’s statements in our conversation, telling me that e-sports are the *antidote* to problematic gaming, rather than its cause. Although he said that KeSPA does not have a formal relationship with any addiction treatment centers or organizations, it is something that he and others in the Korean e-sports community think about. “Addiction is a problem for young people because they are losing their creativity,” Jin-soo told me. He continued:

Young Korean students just learn routines at school, and after school they play games just alone, just competing with electronics. But doing e-sports, it’s different. For e-sports they need more activity and creativity to compete with each other. Playing an e-sports game with their friends is different because they could communicate with their friends and with others. So you can see many young [people] watching e-sports

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contents together on the subway and saying together, “Oh, that strategy is not good!” or something. E-sports are easier for them to connect to because it is easier to connect to game contents than other sports content. We think that e-sports are a cure for addiction to games.¹⁶

E-sports’ international profile is currently on the rise. In January 2016, ESPN—the self-proclaimed “worldwide leader” in sports entertainment—created a division dedicated entirely to covering e-sports. This would have hardly seemed possible in 1998, and the industry owes its success in no small part to Korean e-sports, and professional *StarCraft* in particular. Through driving technological innovation, influencing game developers’ strategies in redefining intellectual property laws, and inspiring young people to take up digital gaming—for better or worse—e-sports’ impact on contemporary Korea can be difficult to fully appreciate. The various domains of Korean society that e-sports have influenced are testaments to their status as important cultural activities. ■

NOTES

1. See Myung Oh and James Larson, *Digital Development in Korea: Building an Information Society* (New York: Routledge, 2013) for a comprehensive history of Korea’s ICT development.
2. Kym Stewart and Hyewon Park Choi, “PC Bang (Room) Culture: A Study of Korean College Students’ Private and Public Use of Computers and the Internet,” *Trends in Communication* 11, no. 1 (2003): 63.
3. With the exception of public figures, all names are pseudonyms.
4. Kym Stewart, “Informatization of a Nation: A Case Study of South Korea’s Computer Gaming and PC Bang Culture” (master’s thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2004), 9, footnote 3, <http://tinyurl.com/zkzgvsg>.
5. Quoted in Megan Farokhmanesh, “*StarCraft*: The Past, Present, and Future,” *Polygon*, last modified March 4, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/qhxda6h>.
6. Username “supernovamaniac” to *teamliquid.net* forum, “GOM TV/Blizzard Sign Exclusive Broadcast Agreement,” May 27, 2010, <http://tinyurl.com/zt39mjf>.
7. Username “Waxangel” to *teamliquid.net* forum, “KeSPA Speaks Out on Intellectual Property Rights,” May 3, 2010, <http://tinyurl.com/jlvou7f>. Translated from the Korean by Waxangel.
8. “Act on Promotion of E-sports (Electronic Sports) [Act No.11315, 17. February 2012],” *The National Law Information Center*, accessed July 11, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/z2dosp5>.
9. My interlocutors most often cited the 2010 case of a Suwon couple whose infant daughter starved to death while her parents were playing games at a nearby PC bang. The incident received a lot of attention in the international press and was the subject of Valerie Veatch’s 2014 documentary on game addiction in Korea, produced by HBO, *Love Child*.
10. National Information Society Agency (NIA), *2015 National Informatization White Paper* (Seoul: NIA, 2015), 370. All statistics come from a survey administered by the Ministry of Public Administration and Safety and the National Information Society Agency in 2014.
11. Dr. Hong, director of an addiction treatment center, in discussion with the author, December 2012.
12. Melia Robinson, “Korea’s Internet Addiction Crisis Is Getting Worse, as Teens Spend Up to Eighty-Eight Hours a Week Gaming,” *Business Insider Australia*, last modified March 26, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/nfv36kc>.
13. KeSPA, *The Ten-Year History of E-sports* (Seoul: KeSPA, 2008), 51.
14. In e-sports, play-by-play and color commentators are known as “shoutcasters.” The term is derived from SHOUTcast, streaming media software developed by Nullsoft in 1998 that was used by early e-sports enthusiasts to add audio commentary to recorded matches.
15. Jun, “‘E-sports Festival’ that Is Fun for the Whole Family Opened” Jun’s personal blog on *Daum.net*, last modified May 17, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/h7z72cc>. My translation.
16. Jin-soo, liaison for KeSPA and professional Korean *StarCraft* teams, in discussion with the author, March 2013.

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