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# The Dynamics of Digital Play in Asia

## *Introduction to the Third Special Issue of Asiascape: Digital Asia*

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### Introduction: Asian Video Games

Digital gaming is one of the most popular pastimes when it comes to digital media usage, and it often outranks other digital activities, such as reading online news, searching for information, listening to music, or streaming movies. While watching television programmes and films is still among the most popular cultural activities around the world, digital gaming has progressively become one of the most dynamic digital cultures, particularly for youths. This is certainly the case across Asia, where digital games, encompassing console, handheld, online, mobile, and PC games, are a crucial sector of the cultural industries and youth culture, though often in diverse ways.<sup>1</sup> Aphra Kerr pointed out in 2006 that 'digital games are an intrinsic part of contemporary global flows of cultural goods, services and images in Western societies' (Kerr 2006: 1). Ten years later, this flow has taken on a new guise, and the rapid growth of digital technologies and digital games in Asia has shifted the locus of game innovation and practice. In the early twenty-first century, Asia has gained the global attention of the game industry.

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1 A number of different terms are in use today to describe gaming activities, such as digital games, computer games, video games, and interactive games (see Wolf 2001; Kline et al. 2003; Kerr 2006; Jin 2010). In this special issue, the contributors use the terms 'digital games' and 'video games' interchangeably to refer to the entire field and to embrace arcade, PC, console, handheld, mobile (or smart), and social games in all their diversity (originally, the term digital gaming did not include arcade games, an early form of video gaming).

The vast popularity of digital games in Asia is closely related to the widespread proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which have facilitated communication and interaction at an unprecedented level in Asia (Hjorth 2008). As a region, 'Asia is marked by diverse penetration rates of gaming, mobile and broadband technologies, which are subject to local cultural and socio-economic nuances. This makes Asia a compelling case study for both gaming and mobile technologies' (Hjorth 2007: 369). In particular, Japan, Korea, and China are the three major players in Asia's digital game industry. In this regard, on the one hand, Hjorth (2007, 2008, 2011) argues that Japan and Korea – based on the differing technological, economic, political, social, and cultural contexts – have developed their digital game industries in two opposing directions, representing two futures for gaming. First, as two opposing global mobile and gaming centres, Seoul and Tokyo provide two very different potential paths for gaming and mobiles. Unlike Japan, which pioneered the *keitai* (mobile) IT revolution, Korea has become a centre for MMOGs (massively multiplayer online games) played primarily in the social spaces of internet cafes, the so-called 'PC bangs' (Hjorth 2007: 370). Second, Japan has been the pioneer in mobile (privatized) convergent devices and thus mobile gaming, while Korea's emphasis on online MMOGs has been driven by the increase in broadband subscribers (*ibid.*: 2007; Jin 2010; Fung & Ho 2015).

On the other hand, Cao and Downing (2008) propose that Korea and China serve as the two central towers of gaming in Asia, as China is gaining increasing importance in the Asian gaming scene. Therefore, Hjorth (2008) considers these three major players, namely Japan, Korea, and China, to provide a 'three-stage gaming paradigm' in which she suggests that economic, cultural, and ideological weights have been shifting from Japan as the 'geo-imaginary center' to Korea during the rise of the Korean wave,<sup>2</sup> and that these trends are today shifting further to burgeoning China (*cf.* also Fung & Ho 2015).

Indeed, scholarly attention once focused primarily on the new media technologies centre of Japan. Since the 1970s, Japan has led the way in the global rise of personal technologies, from the worldwide uptake of the Sony Walkman to the innovation of DoCoMo i-mode, which became known as the 'mobile IT revolution' due to its ability to create convergence between mobile telephony and the internet (*cf.* Hjorth 2008: 3). At the same time, Japanese enterprises started to develop console systems and games, which are some of the most advanced in the world, although the Japanese industry has not been able to

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2 The 'Korean wave' refers to the sudden growth of Korean cultural industries and the exports of Korean cultural products, such as films, television programmes, music, and video games in Asia, starting in the late 1990s (see Kim & Kim 2011).

successfully introduce its console games in several East Asian countries due to various reasons, including Japan's colonial experience (see Chan 2008). In the late 1990s, Korea presented itself as a global leader in the realm of broadband internet, followed by the boom of PC cafes and online games. As Chon et al. (2013: 13) write, 'in the late 1990s when demand for Internet services was increasing, but Internet access from individual homes did not meet the demand, internet cafes or PC bang (café) began to appear.' In the middle of the financial crisis starting in 1997, Koreans started to develop PC bang and online games based on the timely developed broadband services (Jin 2010).

China has also jumped on the bandwagon of the online game industry as its online game market has grown into the largest in the world, while also massively developing its internet cafes. However, as Chung Peichi (2015: 404) correctly observes, 'the digital space of Southeast Asia is a growing interconnected space that allows media production and consumption to cross national borders. Southeast Asia is currently undergoing a rapid technological transformation, which has produced an ever-changing difference in the scale of Internet development among the region's nations.' In other words, since the late 2000s, East Asian countries alongside several Southeast Asian economies, such as Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, have also developed their mobile game markets together with their soaring smartphone production and use. While a few Western countries, including the US, the UK, and France, as well as a few northern European countries, have been traditionally major players based on their advanced information technology infrastructure and skills, several Asian countries have rapidly advanced their digital game industries and related cultural activities to compete with American and European companies.

There are several key elements to the emergence of Asian digital games, such as the increasing market size, diverse game production, favourable government game policies, and the changing patterns of youth culture driven by digital games and smartphones. To begin with, the Asian digital game markets are the largest in the world. When the global digital game market recorded 117 billion USD in 2013, Asia – with its emerging economies and population size – was the largest contributor, accounting for as much as 45.5% of the total revenue, followed by Europe (31.8%) and North America (21%). Since several Asian markets, including China, Japan, and Korea, as well as several Southeast Asian countries, have substantially increased their mobile as well as online game markets, the trend will continue at least for a while due to the rapid growth of smartphones in the region (Korea Creative Content Agency 2014: 669-671). The Asian digital game markets have continued to grow because online gaming and mobile gaming, which are major driving forces in the global

game markets, are two popular game forms in Asia, while console gaming and arcade gaming, which have shown limited growth locally, are popular in North America and Europe. In fact, the number of smartphone users worldwide will surpass two billion in 2016, which will eventually result in the rapid growth of mobile games. With the 2014 top-ten ranking of countries with the most smartphone users dominated by China (at rank 1), India (3), Japan (4), Indonesia (7), and Korea (10), mobile gaming in these countries, and therefore in Asia overall, will continue to grow (eMarketer 2014).

Second, Asia is noticeable in game production. Although console gaming is mainly popular in North America and Europe, Japan has been one of two major console makers, with some of the primary console producers (Sony and Nintendo) located in Japan. Likewise, Korea has advanced online games, although China has now surpassed Korea in terms of market share in the global online game markets – the two countries again representing ‘two towers’ in the realm of online games (Cao & Downing 2008). Asian countries are also significant in mobile communication and mobile games based on both locally-produced smartphones and locally-developed mobile instant messaging systems, which serve as mobile game platforms. Asia is home to several major smartphone makers, including Samsung and LG in Korea, Xiaomi and Lenovo in China, and HTC in Taiwan, and these are either global or local leaders, constituting fundamental assets for creating both local and global mobile games.

Meanwhile, Asian youths have nurtured friendships through their engagement in activities such as mobile gaming on mobile instant messaging systems, and services like KaKao Talk (Korea), Line (Japan), and WeChat (China) have played an important role in this regard. Asian game industries have become significant drivers of youth culture, as well as of ICTs more generally, and the ways in which digital technologies and entertainment converge across these industries has to be seriously investigated within the respective socio-cultural milieus.

Third, digital gaming has also become so pervasive that, for many players, it is no longer just a hobby. Whether it is digital game tournaments, known as e-Sports, or the economy surrounding ‘Gold Farmers’ – professional players who offer to play and upgrade other gamers’ characters for a fee – video games are also a serious affair. In Korea, e-Sport, referring to electronic sport and the leagues where players compete through networked games and related activities, has become cutting-edge youth culture, and the rapid growth of e-Sports is closely related to the media, in particular broadcasting (Jin 2010). Gamers, both professional gamers and amateur gamers, enjoy e-Sports as participants and fans. In 1998, American video game maker Blizzard Entertainment changed the history and culture of Korea when it released StarCraft. Korea was an ideal

launching ground for StarCraft because, unlike the US and Japanese markets that favoured home gaming consoles like the PlayStation, Korean gamers preferred PC games. StarCraft was one of the first multiplayer strategy games that enabled players to compete against each other via the internet (Eum 2015).

China and Japan have also introduced e-Sports, and since 2014 League of Legends has become one of the most popular games for e-Sports in Asia. PC cafes are a perfect place for a competitive scene to be born, and since China and Korea are nations with a large base of internet cafes, e-Sports have become immensely popular there. Young people continue to congregate in such cafes to practice, compete, and discuss their favourite games such as StarCraft and League of Legends (Groen 2013). As is well chronicled, global youths with a lot of money are watching e-Sports, and this is turning the e-Sports scene into a market of its own. According to SuperData Research, a consulting company (Grubb 2015), e-Sport is a 621 million USD business, and that money primarily comes from Asian markets (61%) like Korea and China, where the e-Sports scene is huge and has an established history of success. In addition to the money, participation numbers are also soaring, with e-Sports fans around the world now numbering roughly 134 million. These players, many of whom are located in Asia, are creating a new youth culture in the era of digital media.

Fourth, gamers are not the only ones taking digital games seriously: governments in the region regularly intervene in digital cultural industries, whether it is to regulate 'harmful' content, produce propaganda games, or 'cure' perceived gaming addictions. On the one hand, Asian governments have supported video game corporations through their legal and/or financial measures, primarily because digital gaming has become one of the most significant parts of their digital economies. From Japanese console games to Korean online gaming and to Chinese mobile gaming, these digital game industries have become significant components of the respective national economies, which today rely heavily on ICT. On the other hand, the same governments have pursued regulatory measures due to increasing concerns about so-called 'gaming addictions'. Several Asian nation states, including Korea, have developed new game policies to curb excessive game activities. However, Asian youths and game developers have not been satisfied with government interventions, and this is causing new social conflicts.

Last, but not least, digital gaming has become one of the most significant areas for youth culture in the early twenty-first century. Many teens and people in their twenties have started to play games as their major hobby and pastime. Asian youths want to enjoy digital games not only as consumers but also as players of e-Sports, and these youths enjoy games not solely on their own but also with other players, which creates new types of social networks. Likewise,

a very significant element for the growth of mobile and online games in many Asian countries is the community-based social environment that gaming creates. In particular, mobile game players enhance and/or maintain social ties with both strangers and community members through their smartphones. As Gazzard (2011) points out for the case of the mobile search and discovery service Foursquare, young players accumulate friends by competing with each other to win points by logging their path through the city. In other words, social play is a major characteristic of the current new media youth culture (Jin et al. 2015).

### Approaches in Asian Video Gaming

As several major elements characterize the emergence and growth of Asian digital games, the underlying premise of the articles in this special issue is that digital games are 'socially constructed artefacts that emerge from a complex process of negotiation between various human and non-human actors within the context of a particular historical formation' (Kerr 2006: 4). While digital games cannot be understood without attention to the post-Fordist capitalist economic systems, it is critical to understand the socio-cultural elements that shape the growth of video games, both across Asia as a whole and in individual countries. As Schneider and Goto-Jones (2015: 6) put it:

[. . .] what distinguishes good scholarship on an area such as Asia is that it challenges our own sense of the location of our work, and that it takes the locations of others seriously. These locations may be situated in specific geographical locales; but, more importantly, they are part of ideological, social, historical, economic, and political places, which deserve scholarly attention.

Video games in Asia are also shaped by human actions within the wider context of existing social, cultural, political, and economic elements, as various authors have shown (e.g. Volti 2008; Bijker et al. 2012; Hjorth 2011).

Several previous works already developed their research based on this particular perspective. Richardson (2012: 135) argues that a heuristic understanding of the nexus of the cultural, organizational, and technological aspects is necessary in order to map out the emergence of new technologies. Hjorth (2012: 194-195) states that the manner in which technology is deployed is not only a matter of simplistic understandings of technologies and users, but also a matter of conceptualizing the dynamic relationship between the user and their technologies. Using smartphone games in Korea as an example, Jin et al.

2015 also found that the recent growth of Korea's mobile game culture primarily relied on the interplay of several socio-cultural and political initiatives. What these authors commonly argue is that digital gaming, and technology in general, is not an area isolated from society. As such, what we emphasize is that definitions of digital gaming must be based on the sociocultural specificity of Asia's digital media. Through this sociotechnical examination of online game culture, we hope to illuminate some of the complexities inherent in examining online game platforms as they have manifested themselves – and continue to manifest themselves – in Asia. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that the Asian region is characterized by diverse penetration rates of digital games, broadband technologies, PC cafes, and smartphones, as well as mobile instant messaging systems as hubs of digital gaming cultures and technologies.

In this special issue, we explore the dynamics of digital play in Asia. What social, political and ethical roles do video games play in the region? What factors shape their creation, content, and distribution? How do gamers interact with the medium, and how does the medium react to gamers? What are the major roles of PC cafes in the growth of national game industries and youth culture? What happens when digital play becomes digital labour, or when it becomes professionalized in the form of e-Sports? Most importantly: where should we locate 'Asia' in these dynamics, whether aesthetically, politically, socially, or economically? And what tools and methods should researchers deploy to analyze these issues in the Asian context?

### Summaries of the Papers in the Special Issue

The papers included in this special issue reflect, in one way or another, the major characteristics of digital play in Asia that we have outlined above. The first paper, written by Barry Ip and Che Xianhui (titled 'A Primer Survey of Chinese Mobile Games'), provides an introduction to and evaluation of the nature and current composition of the Chinese mobile games market. The authors explore the subtle yet prevalent distinctions in game genre classifications in China, and their article examines game rankings as an indication of titles that are popular in the region. Ip and Che then offer further insights into the leading distribution platforms where mobile games are hosted, arguing that these platforms represent a particular characteristic of the Chinese market. Finally, the authors evaluate mobile games via a three-step model that considers strategies for attracting new players, retaining gamers, and generating revenue. The article thus provides valuable and practical insights into the characteristics and operation of the market for Chinese mobile games.

In the second contribution to this issue, Zhang Ge discusses the decline of Chinese internet cafes. The paper is titled 'Ruin and Renewal of the Chinese Internet Café: Toward a History of a Social Space'. In the Chinese context, the internet cafe, or *wangba*, is a ubiquitous business that has prospered throughout China's reform era, despite various setbacks and crackdowns. However, from 2010 to 2013, the quantity of internet cafes in urban areas was in decline despite the fact that the authorities had relaxed regulations for leasing business licences. As Zhang outlines, drawing his data from official reports, there were 136,000 registered *wangbas* across the country in 2012, ten thousand fewer than in 2011. The government estimated that there was a further slump in 2014 (CNNIC 2014). While 57.5% of youths reportedly went to internet cafes to play games in 2008, this figure plummeted to a mere 27.4% in 2013. The slump of the total number of internet cafe visitors during the five years from 2008 to 2013 was enormous and, as the author argues, this development marked the arrival of a 'Dark Age' for internet cafes. While the future of China's internet cafes remains uncertain, Zhang maintains that the former prosperity of this industry is no more and that we are witnessing the 'sunset' era of internet cafe businesses in China. Intriguingly, this history of internet cafes also serves Zhang as a window into Chinese modernity, and into the various ways in which social groups like university students or migrant labourers attempt to carve out social spaces for themselves.

Yoon and Jin's contribution to this special issue discusses the ways in which mobile media and gaming practices are integrated with young people's everyday lives in Seoul, Korea. In particular, the paper critically examines mobile gaming as a social practice, by adopting the notion of 'gamification'. The study has found that users coped with urban everyday life by appropriating mobile apps and thus engaging with the gamification of mobile communication. Various mobile games have become popular add-ons on smartphones and offered casual involvement in gaming in daily moments such as commuting, waiting, and eating times. Gamified communication practices may imply that smartphone-mediated communication redefines our world as a 'gameful' world, while urban space and agency constantly engage with gameplay. However, the seemingly gameful world that may empower certain casual gamers may conceal the hegemonic process in which mobile gamers are subject to existing power relations.

Finally, Yoon and Vargas' paper, titled 'I See Myself through my Avatar: Evidence from East Asia and North America for Acculturated Effects on Virtual Representation Preference', argues that avatars, as identity containers, can mirror people's self-concepts. Referencing social psychologists, the authors provocatively make the case that people in East Asian tend to be more tolerant of contradictions than people in North America, and that they consequently

adjust their self-concepts more easily in accordance with changing contexts. The paper argues that preferred forms of avatars among East Asian and North American gamers are different because the concept of the 'self' varies across cultures. Specifically, the authors conduct a quasi-experiment to explore how people from two different cultural backgrounds evaluate two forms of avatars, human-like and cartoon-like, across different psychological indicators. The paper finds that East Asian players rated cartoon-like avatars more favourably than North Americans. Moreover, compared to North American gamers, East Asian players preferred cartoon-like avatars to human-like avatars for their hypothetical avatars to play games. The authors conclude by discussing the implications of their study and by outlining opportunities for future research.

As all of these papers show, exploring Asian digital games in tandem with digital technologies and cultures from Asia is a productive way to integrate the digital game with the tradition of critical/cultural area studies. For game researchers, this implies exploring not only the largest digital game market but also developing innovative methods and theories to analyze digital games in Asia. The papers in this special issue contribute their in-depth analyses and perspectives to the special-issue theme, the dynamics of digital play in Asia, and they each reflect the ways in which society has constructed the growth of digital gaming in several different ways that, we hope, will provoke a continuous academic exchange over the meaning of Asian digital media and digital games.

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