OUTLANDISH THINGS

Travel in the video game industry means intercontinental city hopping. There are one or two games that were created out in the wilderness (such as the sheep farm where the techno-hippie Jeff Minter developed *SpaceGiraffe*), but their numbers are few and their budgets low. Bringing together high-technology communications and large teams of people means that games are generally made in built-up areas. These teams require the infrastructure and the managed office space that modern cities provide. Consequently, I have seen more than my fair share of downtown IT business districts—in Seattle and Dallas; Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles and San Francisco. I’ve visited endless corporate offices, usually to sit in a spare room and escape for a few hours to a fantasy realm: occult World War II, a 1930s gang war, postapocalyptic Eastern Europe, the fleshy surface of distant planets. This is the job, and while the venue is almost always somewhere with an air-conditioned office, I never know where games will take me. In March 2005, however, I did have a choice about where I would end up, and it took me to Seoul, South Korea.
Early March in Korea was a gloomy sight, and the drive from the airport provided a gradual introduction to the city’s ramshackle immensity. The road hugged a smoggy coastline, heavy with industry and desolate-looking fishermen. Vast cargo craft sat out at sea, ready to depart with billion-ton shipments of hatchbacks, plastic rabbits, or shoes. The airport route was littered with leftover moments of cold war paranoia: our coach passed hilltop antiaircraft missiles, sinister in their battlefield camouflage.

Rounding a bend in the coast, we saw the giant conurbation rising up: the city is expansive and high-rise. The exploded population has been quartered in grim-looking apartment blocks that are often emblazoned with numbers. There seems to be little evidence of the older, pastoral world that Korea once belonged to, although it is still there, hidden in the backstreets and tourist cloisters. Everything that was flattened in the war was rebuilt long ago in concrete, freeways, and television antennae. Still, Korea’s most intensive reconstruction in recent years has been virtual rather than physical. I had traveled to South Korea for much the same reason I had traveled to a dozen other cities across the world: to learn about video games. This was nevertheless a unique mission. I had come to the southern, Westernized portion of the Hermit Kingdom because there was too much secondhand information and speculation circulating about what was going on in the Internet cafés of Seoul. Blogging legend had it that Koreans played games en masse and that their most talented gamers were revered just like top sports players or TV celebrities are in Britain. The kind of geek stigma that existed in my world barely had a toehold out here. Provocatively, there were even reports of deaths, of obsessive gamers who played and played until their bodies simply gave out. There had even been rumors of amphetamines in the water supplies, keeping gamers un-
naturally wired for days at a time. I had heard so many outlandish things about Korean gamers that I needed to know for sure whether they were true. And I had to know, most important of all, what things were like for the gamers who lived here.

South Korean gaming culture’s most identifiably alien gaming idiosyncrasy is that it is powered not by consoles and handheld devices but by desktop computers. Unlike the rest of the world, South Korea’s gaming mainstream is not based on Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo products; it is powered instead by the humble, generic beige box. While the PC has faded into the commercial background in Europe and the United States, it is the major platform in South Korea. One even more radical feature of gaming culture in Korea is the fact that the most popular games are usually Korean products: Western games have had only limited impact on the South Korean gaming bubble. These commercial anomalies are intriguing in and of themselves, but when you combine them with the astoundingly high number of Koreans who are playing games online—an estimated 5 percent of the total population regularly play online games as compared to just 1.4 percent in Europe—then it becomes clear that something quite unusual is afoot.

As my ride from the airport entered the central districts of the vast, temperate metropolis, evidence of Seoul’s many gamers emerged. Huge advertising billboards featuring Korean games—Archlord, Lineage II, and RF Online—loomed overhead. Towering names in English were subtitled with Korean-language feature lists. These games have only recently been released in the West, and they met with an outstanding lack of enthusiasm. To Western tastes, they seemed not only ludicrously dull but often also bizarrely impenetrable. Most Korean games used the familiar EverQuest formula of online level-based goblin-slaying role playing but
boiled it down to the bare bones. They boasted most of the features of Western games but were also comparatively dull, with massive groups of players killing massive groups of monsters or massive groups of other players, for massive amounts of points and gold. The Korean online role-playing games took elements of games that Western gamers found tedious—such as killing endless swathes of beasts to progress levels—and reduced them to their bare essence. A fraction of Westerners seemed to derive satisfaction from this kind of gaming, but it couldn’t be the games that were to blame. The reason wasn’t so much the games as the way we had learned to play and where.

South Korea’s native gaming culture, which is fast becoming the model for most of East Asia, has always been markedly unlike its Western counterpart. Television makes the difference starkly apparent. Flick to a gaming channel and behold the spectacle as I did—many times. To a fanfare of Asian nu metal and the sound of a thousand screaming fans, a young Korean man entered a dazzling arena. Like an American wrestler at the heart of a glitter-glazed Royal Rumble, he strode down a ramp toward the stage. Adorned in what appeared to be a space suit and a large white cape, he stepped out to meet his opponent on the stadium’s ziggurat focus. Amid a blaze of flashbulbs and indoor fireworks, he clambered up the steps, to be exalted by the thronging crowd. Only 20 years old and with no less than half a dozen TV cameras tracking his progress, this bizarre figure seemed to be unfazed by his predicament. Diligently he waved to the crowd.

At this point, my interpreter, the amiable Mr. Yang, leaned forward. “To my brother he is a great hero. My brother can’t get enough of this. He has been to see him play many times.” “So this guy has a lot of fans?” I said, knowing the answer but nevertheless incredulous. “Hun-
dreds of thousands in his fan club,” replied Yang. “Impos-
sible to track the number of people who watch him play.”
This was impossible in part because the man on the stage
was on Korean television almost every day. He was about to
sit down and play what is close to becoming Korea’s na-
tional sport: StarCraft. The man’s name was Lee Yunyeol,
or, in game, [RED]NaDa Terran. He was The Champion. In
2004 his reported earnings were around $200,000. He
played the then six-year-old real-time strategy game for
fame and fortune, and to many Koreans, he and his col-
leagues are idols.

Every night, over half a million Koreans log on to Bat-
tleNet and make war in space, many of them with dreams
of becoming like Yunyeol. But NaDa Terran’s skill is almost
supernatural—running at a rate of several on-screen actions
per second. Few people who play all day long will be able to
claim a fraction of his split-second timing and pitiless con-
centration. Practicing eight hours a day, Yunyeol’s methods
and tactics are peerless. Well, almost peerless. In fact, two
or three other players are able to command similar salaries.
They might not have held the crown at the precise moment
I was in Korea, but they would soon. At that moment,
though, Yunyeol was king.

South Korea has five dedicated gaming channels, com-
pared to none in the United Kingdom. While U.S. and Eu-
ropean networks have made attempts to create shows about
games since the early 1990s, none of them (except perhaps
the bizarre youth game show GamesMaster) have really cap-
tured the popular imagination. American TV programmers
seem sure that games are the future of television, but the
ratings say otherwise. In the United Kingdom, late-night re-
view shows or the odd bout of industry news is about the
best we get, and game-related TV stunts have been mostly
forgettable. A U.K. television show recently used the epic
strategy title *Rome: Total War* to illustrate its series of historical battle reenactments, but little was made of the show's video game origins. Meanwhile, in Korea the aspirations of youth are mediated by video games and manifested through talk shows, games shows, and live broadcasts of gaming events. I took a few minutes to watch a show that pitted young gaming couples (who had met through playing *Lineage II*) against each other in a virtual battle arena. The smiling young Koreans commanded their sword-toting magicians with enviable proficiency. Their real faces were reduced to a corner of the screen as a commentator made the most of the blazing sword-and-sorcery action. Arcane energies fizzed, and the elegant game characters pirouetted in mimed death throes as the victors scored their killing blows. The winning couple were rewarded with a holiday to a very real beach somewhere in Thailand, and the pair cooed with delight as their spoils were revealed. The screen then returned to the studio, where a pop band waited to discuss their favorite video games with the bubbly silver-wigged presenter. It went on like this all day, every day. I flicked to another channel and watched intense young men controlling armies of tiny video game robots: the sport commentator's babble in the background was reaching a fever pitch. The pundits were amazed by the way a squadron of aliens circled a small blue valley. I jotted it all down as fast as I could in my spiral-bound notebook.

Out on the streets, there were even more palpable signs of gaming's hold on Korean culture. Thousands of Internet cafés are scattered throughout the city, and almost all of them are dedicated to gaming. When I wandered into a few of them in the early morning, I discovered exhausted-looking gamers already plugging away at mythic-looking dragons or swarms of flying eyeballs. I wanted to sit down and play, but I knew that few of the games supported an En-
lish option. This was where Korea’s gaming culture was being defined—in social venues, such as bars that sold caffeinated soda, posters, and lots of gaming time to their hordes of customers. While Western gamers stay at home to play on their expensive Japanese consoles, the Koreans go out in search of a seat in a “PC Baang,” one of their dedicated PC gaming cafés. A rented PC, a game of multiplayer kart racing, and perhaps a sly cigarette in the smoking section—these were the main ingredients for a typical evening. The combination has inspired a vibrant, youthful culture, where people go gaming to meet potential partners and where popular baangs have double-PC “love seats,” allowing partners to sit close and play side by side, brushing fingertips as they reach for the conveniently placed drink holder.

Some of the baangs were gloomy and intimidating, while others were bright and spacious places. They reminded me of bars back in London, each one with its particular personality and species of clientele. In the late evenings, they were crowded with thronging Korean youth. Far from carrying any social stigma, video games had become the crux of an Internet-savvy, technologically enabled Korean entertainment culture. If the Koreans wanted to escape from the looming cellular apartment blocks, the uniformly silver sedans, and the gray, gray coastline, then they had found the ideal place—colorful, social, affordable, and filled with play. It was as if the roles of our bar culture and our Internet cafés had somehow been reversed and exploded. I wished, for an adolescent moment, that I belonged there.

In fact, as an adult living in Europe’s alcohol-fueled nightlife, I often wonder about how different it must be to socialize in Seoul, where there seems to be no real drinking culture and few bars. What kind of radical cultural shift would be needed to bring that about in the West? Could games ever replace our traditions of getting horribly drunk
and stumbling in the gutter? Nursing a mild hangover and recalling Friday night’s transgressions makes me wish, at least temporarily, that they could.

CAFÉ KOREA

How had this unusual culture come about? In this modern age of global homogeneity, at a time when Japanese game consoles and American software developers seem to have shaped everything we know about gaming, how did such an independent culture emerge? The answer is partly political and partly financial. Most of the major innovations in Western gaming culture have come from Japan. Its arcade games and wave after wave of home gaming systems have defined what it is to be a Western gamer at the start of the twenty-first century. American and European consumers, as well as game designers and publishers, have embraced the Japanese way of doing things; and the personal computer, although a steady force in gaming, has taken a backseat to home consoles and arcade machines. This has not been the case in South Korea. Thanks to a long-standing rivalry between the Korean Peninsula and its Japanese neighbor and to long memories of acts perpetrated during World War II, Japanese imports into South Korea are heavily taxed. This meant that Game Boys and PlayStations were exceptionally expensive during the 1980s and 1990s, the period when those same devices were selling so well in the West. Korean gamers had to rely on something cheaper and more readily accessible: the generic IBM PC.

Korea’s commitment to the PC was also influenced by the networking potential of the average computer. While early consoles were solitary devices, unable to communicate or share information, PCs have long been able to hook up to larger networks. One of the most popular games in Ko-
rea, even to this day, is the 1998 sci-fi strategy game *Star-Craft*. This was the game I had seen treated like a spectator sport on Korean TV—a top-down map-based sci-fi battle game, where bases are built and scenarios won or lost in just minutes. Like many other PC games, *StarCraft* allows players to connect to other computers and play competitive games, either over a local network or over the Internet. This capacity for networked play helped to make *StarCraft* a surprise hit in Korea. Thousands of gamers got hooked by playing other Koreans—including the people they would meet out in the town.

When the first gaming cafés appeared, they featured rows of linked computers, each of them installed with games like *StarCraft*. Blizzard, the American company who produced the game, could not have predicted this niche appeal, and its popularity has not been matched anywhere else in the world. In contrast to Western youth, who were relatively slow to seize the opportunity provided by networked gaming, Korean young people got it almost immediately and were soon whiling away their evenings in competitive play. Strategy titles were only moderately successful in the West, with first-person shooters initially being more popular among American and European online gamers. Meanwhile, games like *StarCraft* became akin to a national sport for the multitudinous gamers of South Korea. Hundreds of thousands of people were drawn to play them, and thanks to the cheap and widespread proliferation of gaming through the baangs, they didn’t even have to own a computer.

Koreans’ desire to play *StarCraft* was further facilitated by the Korean government. The foresighted, tech-savvy administration was quick to grasp the significance of the Internet, and they worked hard to ensure that all urban buildings could be connected to high-speed data networks. At the
end of the 1990s, when much of the East Asian economy was depressed, South Koreans were searching for new ways to develop business: the combination of multiplayer gaming and cheap Internet connections provided them with the answer. Not only could you play the people sitting next to you, but it was also possible to play people right across Korea. The PC Baang had found its purpose, and the country’s gaming culture matured. The Internet cafés of Korea (of which there are now somewhere in the region of 16,000 in the greater Seoul area) were filled with people enjoying video games. These games were fast becoming the dominant form of leisure and entertainment in the nation as a whole.

Korean games have been adapted to the specific requirements of their audience, and this means that the companies that make them have adapted, too. For example, the fact that the studios do not have to write stories and script intricate action sequences has enabled them to concentrate on turning out endless levels and expansions for the multiplayer titles. Their online games might be vast and heavily detailed, but the designs only need to follow a few simple models that have already been fleshed out by the American companies that developed EverQuest and Ultima Online. Koreans also seem to enjoy player-versus-player conflict far more than do Western audiences, and designing games to incorporate this kind of mass conflict has been critical to games such as Lineage and Archlord.

The kind of challenging development and design that enables contemporary Western and Japanese games to feature believable characters and sophisticated AI was, in other words, unnecessary for the Korean model: real people filled the important roles, and the monsters fought by the players of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) could be the simplest of automatons. Several of the Korean
gamers I met in Seoul did, nevertheless, voice their dislike of native Korean games. One of them, a young Web journalist who wore Western gaming T-shirts, even described Korean gamers as “cursed.” All the while showing me pictures of his attractive girlfriend, he explained that because the local media was so narrowly focused on the Korean way of gaming, very few Korean gamers had any idea of the wealth of experiences to be had in American and Japanese games. As a journalist and a hard-core gamer, my contact was familiar with games from across the world, but the majority of Korean consumers, he lamented, were not. He wasn’t alone in his taste for more sophisticated games, but he was feeling lonely. Korea, he argued, had been left out of the international circus of gaming. Because of the monopolistic market, practically everything that had been sold to his contemporaries had originated in Korea and in the Korean model. Only California-based Blizzard, with their StarCraft and Warcraft games, had really broken through.

Thanks to clever marketing and their high profile in baangs, homegrown Korean games such as Crazy Racing Kart Rider and Lineage enjoyed massive success. These Korean games do indeed display a much lower level of technological sophistication than their Western counterparts, but that’s not always to their detriment. Their crucial attribute is not their complexity but their suitability for more casual play. Korean games provide this, and they provide ways for gamers to spend money without having credit cards. Being able to pay for aspects of the game in cash, over the counter in a baang, has been essential for a South Korean game’s success. Korean gamers don’t usually wish to own games, only to play them. They create accounts that allow them to sit down and play their favorite games on PCs anywhere in the country. Some titles, such as MapleStory and Kart Rider, are entirely free to play but can
be augmented and expanded by buying in-game items over the counter in your gaming café or online via a Web site. A few won buys your game character a new sword or a token for a marriage with another player, and you can access these things wherever a connected PC has the game installed. You simply sit down, log in, and play.

This is a model that is being copied in game systems across the world. Publishers entice the gamers in with free games and then encourage them to spend once they’re already engrossed in playing the game. It’s a concept that Sony is examining for the online service of their latest console, the PlayStation 3; and a number of Western games have already inveigled us with free samples, paid for by supplementary in-game costs. The free multiplayer platform game *MapleStory* has recently become Korea’s big international hit, with tens of millions of accounts created for the supercute adventure game. Of course, the Koreans have been using this kind of virtual backdoor finance for years. Ingenuity, if not innovation, seems to be the lifeblood of Korean gaming.

**SEOUL GAMERS**

As I explored Seoul, I met its gamers. I had expected the Korean gamer stereotype to be a little different from the Western one, and in some ways it was. In Korea, gaming is usually seen as hip, and the techno-nerd caricature that still permeates Western gaming has less traction, although baangs are often seen as seedy—perhaps something to do with the predominantly young male clientele. In fact, I learned that just a few months before my trip, there had been a demonstration march in the city for gamers wanting to “clean up” the baangs. If these outlets were better regulated, the marchers argued, then gaming would become
more of a family event. Making baangs cheerier and smoke-free was top of the agenda. It was as if the ubiquitous gaming world postulated by Alice Taylor (and which I described in “The Big Smoke”) had already come to be: a place where the label “gamer” connotes “person seeking entertainment” more than anything else.

Some of Korea’s young people nevertheless take gaming pretty seriously. They view it as more than a good time or a way to meet a partner: they’re looking for fame and fortune, too. On a Friday night, in a cinema complex in Seoul’s immense underground mall, the COEX, I attended a session of the regular live broadcast of the Ongamenet Starleague, one of Korea’s major pro gaming leagues. After pausing briefly at a row of public World of Warcraft booths (where, of course, my European log-in didn’t work), I headed underground to the oddly situated TV studio. The league was one of two cash-prize StarCraft competitions in which the top ten players in the country would compete for tens of thousands of dollars in prize money. At the front of the room, watched by a dozen cameras and several hundred pairs of eyes, two StarCraft players battled it out. The techniques of both players had been refined over hundreds—even thousands—of hours of play, but it was clear that the handsome, logo-emblazoned pro was soon going to vanquish his beleaguered, perspiring, amateur opponent.

I imagined how intoxicating it must have been to play games so competitively and so publicly. My experience of competition told me that the sheer act of gaming was thrilling enough to be endlessly compulsive, but when you factor in the lure of large amounts of money and the rows of young women who sit intently watching the games, it was not difficult to see why young Korean men dedicated themselves so completely to this eight-year-old strategy game. The top half-dozen Korean StarCraft players were on
national TV every day, and memberships in their fan clubs ran into the hundreds of thousands. These young gamers had made thousands of dollars from sponsorship and prize money, and their careers were only occasionally interrupted by Korean military service. It was an enviable life, one that few Western professional gamers will ever know.

Western pro gaming has also been going on for years, but its focus and audience are quite different. First-person shooters are the most significant games in European and American pro gaming spheres, and the majority of the action has remained with a steadfast hard-core niche who have a limited public following. Regular events around the world have spawned a series of minor gaming celebrities, including the well-publicized Jonathan “Fatal1ty” Wendell, who trains constantly to play games and relies on big sponsorship deals to pay the bills. But Western pro gaming nevertheless remains distant from mainstream pop culture. It’s hard to imagine it ever breaking into our TV schedules and our mainstream teenage obsessions, as it has done in Korea. The majority of Western gamers barely know of the existence of the pro gaming stars, much less watch them on TV. In contrast, the weekly newspapers I picked up from magazine stands in Korea were covered with photos of gaming stars smiling, talking, and accepting large signed checks.

Away from the corner, on one side of the room, I stood next to the Starleague TV producer, In Ho Yoon. We watched as the Zerg attack on the Terran base raised a cheer from the crowd. Ho Yoon quietly explained how TV had turned *StarCraft* into a self-perpetuating phenomenon. The very fact that it had started to show up on the TV shows organized by obsessed gamers meant that sponsors had become interested. Once there was money involved, more people had started to play, and the competition, in turn, became more demanding. The escalating numbers of
StarCraft enthusiasts also increased, encouraging larger sponsors to offer greater amounts of money. Now the game has at least half a million people playing online each night, and two of the five gaming TV channels feature obsessively dissected reruns of important games, day in, day out. Earlier in the week, I had watched the end-of-season championship on a tiny TV in the corner of a game developer’s office—the televised event took place in an indoor arena similar to a basketball stadium. Fireworks and thousands of screaming fans greeted the StarCraft masters as they ascended the stage to take to their keyboards and sponsored mice. Ho Yoon told me that people would camp outside the stadium for 24 hours before the event, just to get the best seats. I thought he might be joking. He wasn’t.

Later that evening, I attended the launch of a new game, Guild Wars. I sat at a large table with dozens of Korean game industry people and watched as pop stars and television hosts joked and jostled for the limelight. A “comedy” celebrity match served as a warm-up for the main event, in which the best Korean teams, who had been testing the game for months prior to the launch, would duke it out for a check worth tens of thousands of Korean won. One of the people sitting at the table with me tried to come up with Western celebrity equivalents for those unrecognizable Koreans on the stage. “You know Chris Evans?” he asked, to my enormous incredulity. “This man is the same.” My companion pointed at a guffawing TV presenter with glasses and dyed blonde hair. He was comparing him with Britain’s own off-the-rails megapopulist former TV mogul. (Evans, for the uninitiated, was the biggest thing on U.K. TV for about ten years—his endless cheer and zany concepts allegedly made TV “fun” again. He enjoyed massive fame and wealth before marrying a teenage pop star and crashing into drink-related scandal and obscurity.)
Later on in the proceedings, my companion produced a Sony PSP, the handheld console that had just been released and had found its way onto Korean shelves in rather limited quantities. I silently thundered through the perfectly realized, miniaturized highways of *Ridge Racer*, while the wizards and monks on the screens above me became embroiled in magical combat. The audience gazed upward, watching the fantasy conflict while they digested their booze and dinner. I gazed downward and raced into a caricatured Tokyo.

Perhaps it was the champagne fused with jet lag or the fact that I was on the top floor of a seemingly infinite shopping mall, but I felt as though I had stepped through a bubble. I was exhausted and nauseous. I caught a glimpse of my eyes in a mirror and saw raw red where the whites should have been. Too many screens, not enough sleep. I slipped out and got a cab back to the hotel.

**SIGNIFICANT TV**

For years now, I had noticed that some of the distinctive features of Korea’s gaming culture were emerging, albeit tentatively, in my own backyard. My conversation with Ho Yoon about the self-perpetuating relationship between *StarCraft* and television echoed another conversation that I had had a couple of years before with the creators of the bombastic American multiplayer shooter *Unreal Tournament*. One of their business masterminds, Jay Wilbur, postulated that broadcast television tournaments would be required for their game to really hit “the mainstream.” If anyone with a gamepad or a keyboard had a chance of making money or just being on TV, Wilbur reasoned, the audience would explode. All their North Carolina studio had to do, he supposed, was to make a good enough game. But this pre-
diction has not yet panned out: to this day, games have no significant TV presence in the West, and I think that this fact has little to do with the quality of the games themselves. *Unreal Tournament* has been consistently amazing, but it is possible that this kind of gaming simply isn’t suited to TV viewing. Or maybe it’s the audience themselves.

Korea’s televised obsession, *StarCraft*, is highly polished, but it’s hardly an example of the best that modern gaming has to offer. It’s a traditionalist base-building, resource-gathering top-down strategy game, of which there are dozens of examples. These games are meticulous, high-speed battles involving a large map and dozens of invented units. It demands continuous concentration over manufacturing and combat, with players making hundreds of decisions each minute. The tiny marines and crude aliens are tremendously ugly by contemporary standards, and the game has been surpassed in any number of areas by modern multiplayer strategies. It’s old, and it’s definitely not sexy. The most up-to-date versions of *Unreal Tournament* are, by contrast, feats of futuristic technology, with incredible visuals and faultless construction. Considering this, it seems unlikely that the reason why games have never acquired a TV following in the West has much to do with game design. The kind of cultural environment that has allowed games to flourish in Korea does not exist in Europe or the United States, and it is precisely that cultural environment that has enabled Korea to have multiple gaming TV channels and to become a mecca for professional gaming across the globe.

The international finals of the World Cyber Games (a gaming event that now has regional stages in 20 countries) are regularly held in Seoul, and the Koreans dominate the strategic categories. First-person shooters like *Quake* and
Counter-Strike are far less popular in Korea (partly because the average computer is less powerful and therefore unable to support these games and partly because of the lack of commercial presence by popular Western companies), so American and Scandinavian teams currently dominate these categories. These teams, usually consisting of young men between 18 and 25, are comprised of the most dedicated gamers the West has to offer. They play continuously in online leagues (topping the kind of competitions I used to dabble in as a Quake player) and regularly compete in sponsored competitions. Game publishers and hardware manufacturers tend to foot the bill, and lavish events are created for these teams of young men, to find out who is the most talented. These teams do not, however, have much of a following in their countries of origin. Westerners do not watch Counter-Strike on TV and are much more likely to be playing Quake than following the activities of its top professionals.

In 2005 I was briefly involved in setting up a professional gaming team in the United Kingdom, and one of my key concerns was whether or not the team would be able to automatically qualify for sponsorship to fly to Korea. Samsung, the sponsor at the time, would only provide flights for the top teams, and without a U.K. event and a winning team, we wouldn’t be automatically eligible. Paying for five men to travel to the other side of the world was not going to be cheap, but if the team was to be taken seriously, it needed more than a sponsor and a bank of expensive PCs: it needed to be seen in South Korea. It was almost as if South Korea alone legitimized what we were trying to do. Certainly, few people in the United Kingdom seemed to care. Our choice of U.K. teams was between an older group, who were young professionals with a team manager, and some kids who were barely out of school. We
chose to give the money to the younger, spottier team—plumping for the underdogs in a rather typically British fashion. I couldn’t help thinking that we would somehow be reinforcing the stereotype of European games nerds when those boys finally landed in Korea, but the joyous way that they received the news of their sponsorship made me simply not care.

Despite all the excitement that pro gaming has generated among gamers in South Korea and the money it has raised for pro teams in Europe and the United States, I am nevertheless skeptical of its “professional” status. The handsome young gaming pros of South Korea did not convince me that sponsored professional gaming is where the future of gaming lies. For over a decade, there have been gamers and games companies trying to promote video gaming as a sporting spectacle, but the truth is that it remains an awkward spectator sport. It’s an interesting avenue of possibility for a small clique of gamers, perhaps; but the low number of people who watch video games played by the pros outside Korea suggests that the most important aspect of gaming is its interactivity. I’ve seldom been as bored as I have been watching pro gaming tournaments, especially when they’re for a game I’m actually interested in playing. For these reasons, I believe that Korea’s televised Starleagues reflect a cultural singularity within Korea, not an indication of where global gaming will go in the future. Perhaps as we globalize, the era of pro gaming will be lost altogether. Then again, given the sponsorship money raised, maybe it will one day begin to self-perpetuate, as Wilbur suggested.

Still, I don’t believe that the future of games is in live competition, on television or anywhere else. Fragments of that future do nevertheless exist in Korea. I detected clues in a slender and bashful young woman called Lee In Sook.
Korea’s youth live in a conservative, family-orientated society. They are generally polite and often shy. Games are not their only outlet for rebellion and self-expression—the frequent outlandish sight of leather-clad bikers with boom boxes built into their motorbikes attests to that—but they are a cheap and convenient way for gamers to sink their energies into something other than schooling, work, or their family. Without the same bar and dating culture as the West, Koreans have dabbled in inventing their own youth social scenes, of which baangs have been a part. Korea’s youth culture is, in some sense, still an artifact of Westernization, but it is one driven by the quiet, inward-looking nature of the people of this quiet peninsula.

Lee In Sook seemed fairly typical of Korean youth. She was dressed casually but smartly, with hints of alternative fashion in the buttons on her bag and in the peculiar-looking fashion magazines she was carrying (featuring cover models with blue and green sculpted hair and plastic clothes). My meeting with In Sook was arranged by a games company, NCsoft—one of Korea’s largest. I had asked to meet one of their most hard-core gamers, though I had only the vaguest idea what this request meant. I thought perhaps it might be one of the leaders of warring Lineage II tribes, such as the beleaguered owner of a burger bar who I had read about in a U.K. newspaper. He had claimed he could not reveal his true identity because it would risk his actual life, so great was his in-game power. Game-playing thugs, the article claimed, could make his life very difficult, since he didn’t wield the supernatural power of his avatar in the real world. I imagined the hard-core Korean gamer being something like a nerdy mafioso: a wiry young man with an Atari T-shirt, a cigarette, and a punk attitude,
obsessed with maintaining power in a world that I would never see. But I was greeted instead by a small, bespectacled girl in pink and denim.

In Sook was a nervous, smiley Korean student in her early twenties. She didn’t seem to know why this scruffy journalist from the United Kingdom was asking her questions, but she indulged me nonetheless. We spoke through a translator, and I wondered whether my interest in her gaming prowess made any sense to her. Did she understand why I found it unusual? She seemed profoundly normal—like any girl I might meet on the street back home, with a canvas bag on her shoulder and plastic folder full of university course work under her arm. Like many young Korean women she had taken to the fantasy role-playing world of *Lineage II* quite easily and had rapidly become immersed in its massively multiplayer workings. She was in fact in a similar position to the one I had found myself in a few years earlier, as an experienced player helping novices to learn the game. She devoted many hours to her character and was one of the few people to have a *Lineage II* avatar whose experience level numbered in the seventies. At that time, this was no mean feat, since creating a character at that level required at least 2,000 hours of play (which, by my rudimentary calculations, means just under four hours a day for 17 months). Like me during my most intensive *Quake* days, In Sook was obsessed with her chosen game. She laughed that she didn’t go out to baangs enough and would rather stay at home to play, where there were fewer distractions and she could concentrate on the game. In Sook was engrossed and committed just as I had been a couple of years earlier. Was this really just a hobby?

The word *hobby* has peculiar connotations, and for that reason, I try to avoid using it in relation to games. But in this case, I could not. A hobby is a highly personal activity.
It is something we indulge in, spend money on, and care about despite—and perhaps because of—its nonessential nature. It’s the opposite of working for money. Yet the importance of hobbyist activities is easily overlooked, especially when hobbies create the kinds of community that we seem to crave. Like any other group of friends, formed for whatever reason, through whatever shared interest, In Sook’s small cadre of gamers were set to go on holiday together that summer. Most of them lived in Seoul, but they wouldn’t necessarily have found each other without the conduit of *Lineage*. In this way, games are creating new links, beyond those created by work, school, or local neighborhoods; and that alone makes them powerful and significant. These best of friends might simply have passed each other on the busy streets of downtown Seoul if it hadn’t been for their shared gaming interests. And the same could easily have been true for thousands of gamers across Seoul. Perhaps they had met as spectators at the *StarCraft* league or in a café while they competed at *Kart Rider*. Thanks to games, In Sook’s circle of friends had ended up talking, becoming close, and then making sure that they hung out at the same cafés to play at the same games. Online games create shared experiences that are unlike those we might have in the real world. This is a quality of the medium itself—players who might not excel in conversation might well feel confident in text chat. In Sook didn’t look particularly imposing, but her dedication to *Lineage* meant that she carried a great deal of power and influence in the game world. This paralleled my own experiences in some way: I could never organize a sports team, but I rapidly became an over-competitive dad when faced with playing *Quake*. Among In Sook’s gaming companions, as with the *EVE Online* fans I would eventually meet up with in Iceland, gaming had created an entirely new community within a community. These
were personal connections that might otherwise have been absent, here in the heart of this teeming Asian city.

The simple fact that so many people have been brought together because of hours spent at a screen and keyboard is fast becoming recognized as one of the most significant positive effects that games are having on society. A January 2006 article in Time magazine, written by Ta-Nehisi Paul Coates, described the author’s struggle to get anything done when he was obsessed with the online game World of Warcraft. I disagreed somewhat with his analysis of the situation (there’s a difference between the problematic effects of gaming and the difficulties of personal motivation), but he did make an interesting statement about what online games offer people like him—and perhaps it is true of the people of South Korea as well. “What I came to understand,” says Coates, “was that [World of Warcraft] was not necessarily an escape, but a surrogate for a community that is harder and harder to find in the real world.” Coates referred to that traditional genre of intimate, almost tribal community that modern life seems to have dissipated. But his article made me wonder if it was really the case that gamers had re-created that older-genre community or if they had instead produced something unprecedented and new. Coates thought gaming was a surrogate for lost “village”-level mentality, but the evidence for this is unclear. Online games are usually far more like teeming cosmopolitan cities than stable provincial communities: the mix of people is enormously diverse, and you often find yourself being ignored by passersby or even accosted with unsettling propositions. You aren’t sure who to trust, and many gamers will depend on previous acquaintances or real-world friendships as the basis for in-game socializing. Gamers are able to form random partnerships with complete strangers to complete very immediate objectives—killing a monster,
for example—in a way that contrasts utterly with village life, where sudden cooperation with strangers is both infrequent and unlikely.

Nevertheless, like safe, well-run cities, online games provide hubs where gamers can congregate, communicate, and connect. Discussion forums may generate some friendships, while the activity of the games themselves, perhaps especially the element of collaboration, may generate others. Online friendships might blossom into real-world relationships (as has happened for the countless couples who have married after meeting in online games), or they may stay as digital relationships. I personally have perhaps 40 or 50 gaming buddies whom I have never met and probably never will. There’s no need to meet them—no reason for our real-world concerns to collide. Our relationship is about getting games working and enjoying them as a team. We discuss games and play them, and that’s the limit of our interaction. Most of us don’t need the bother of extra real-world commitments.

Online games are not replacing traditional forums for socializing and bonding; they are instead providing new reasons to interact and exchange ideas. They represent new possibilities for human communication. And part of the appeal is their flexibility. The relationships you forge only need to be taken as far as you want to take them—unlike in a village or any other “real-world” social venue. In Sook’s gaming companions might have met and bonded to form a new network of real-world friends, but many more gamers will only indulge to play with other gamers online and will never choose to meet them or to take their interaction further. It is a matter of choice.

This, I thought, was why In Sook’s circle of friends, rather than the fierce competition of the professional gamers, was where the important future of games lay.
Games stand to change not simply individual imaginations or personal finances but the possibilities for interaction and socialization across our different cultures. This is no grand cultural revolution: it is a subtle wave, a gradual tectonic shift in the way we live, which will only make its true effects known over the course of many years. Games are growing, spreading, changing; and like the proliferation of TV, mobile phones, or automobiles, it's a change that will have far-reaching effects that cannot be easily predicted or defined. Chasing headlines that read “Games Are the New Sport” or “Kids Who Play Games for a Living” makes a crude statement about what really matters within gaming. The important changes will come from those smaller ripples that change how millions of people live, think, and socialize on a daily basis, not just the hard-core niches.

THE RISING SUN

It's impossible to say for certain whether Korea's kind of social café-culture gaming will spread to Europe and America, but at this point, it seems unlikely. And perhaps we Western gamers will never even feel its lack, since we'll have other gaming projects to hold our attention: a succession of dazzling manic shooters, artificially intelligent game characters that take us to dinner parties, or interactive genres of storytelling that far surpass Hollywood traditions—billion-dollar, seamless productions, costing us hundreds of dollars to play. It is also quite possible that Western stay-at-home-for-gaming tendencies could soon be a minority trend.

For now, North America remains the most heavily populated gaming market, but South Korea's neighbors, including megapopulous Indonesia and China, are rapidly accruing their own “PC Baang” culture and playing much the same kind of games as the Koreans. (There's even an MMO
involving Indian mythology in development, with publishers recognizing that the subcontinent might not be far off this kind of gaming event horizon.) Chinese gamers, encouraged by new business possibilities in China’s rapidly expanding cities, are setting up thousands of gaming cafés. Around 95 percent of all games played in China are played on desktop computers. South Korea could soon represent an early prototype of how video games will be played in the modern East Asian culture. Of course, it’s possible that this well will run dry and that gaming in Asia will turn inward and become domesticated, as it has in Japan and America, where gaming arcades are increasingly rare. But it’s arrogant to think that the Western model of video games as entertainment via expensive TV consoles is the only possible model. The way video games end up being used could be very different from how we currently imagine them, more like going to an exclusive casino or a bar than sitting in a shed, tinkering with tiny pixelated people. South Korea offers a glimpse of what such an extroverted video game future might be like.

Asia will of course find its own uses for Western products, too. The Western online gaming paragon World of Warcraft has approximately 3.5 million Chinese players at the time of this writing, and there will no doubt be many more by the time you read these words. The lovely Lee In Sook could one day represent millions of Asian gamers, for whom socialization through gaming is the norm.

In 2006 the creator of The Sims, Will Wright, observed that “computers have ended up being more about communication than computation.” It’s the ability to chat and obtain information via the Web that is most important to us, not the number-crunching power of our computer. If trends within Asia remain steady, then we might soon be able to say something similar about games: that they
ended up being more about people socializing and playing together than about snazzy graphics or sophisticated gameplay mechanics.

What really matters here is not the visual complexity or the gameplay design of the games themselves but the form of the technology that enabled them to bring people together in the first place: massively multiplayer worlds plug thousands into the same communicative sphere and do not necessarily require powerful PCs. The idea of having fun in a colorful fantasy world might be the lure, but it is the interaction with other people that provides the hook. The specific game is almost incidental: *Lineage* and then *Lineage II* just happened to be the biggest MMOs in Korea at one time, and many similar products, such as *World of Warcraft*, now provide similar opportunities for people across the world. What mattered in Korea was not so much the model of the game world, the (often rather dismal) activities on offer, or even the experiences of large-scale combat that they sometimes afforded; it was the fact that it needed to be played as a team that had to communicate to succeed. Playing alone, as I discovered when I found *Quake III*, can only keep us occupied for so long. Games might be interesting, but they're seldom as interesting as people.

There were millions of gamers worldwide by the end of the 1990s, and their numbers are still growing. But gamers are now awash in new ways to communicate. Blogs, Web sites, and forums offer gamers spaces in which to discuss games and indulge their interests, while the online games themselves provide new ways to meet, argue, interact, fight, and play. They even offer entirely new reasons to get upset or angry. As East Asia rapidly becomes Internet-enabled and increasing numbers of new gamers are online, they are also finding ample cause for criticism and concern. Gamers bring their own tastes and opinions with them,
and many of them demand games that reflect and reinforce their extragame lives. Like their neighbors in Korea, the Chinese are, for example, often keen to play games that are based on familiar, local themes. Adapted versions of foreign imports, such as World of Warcraft, are popular, but so are native games, like Fantasy Westward Journey (henceforth FWJ). NetEase, the huge and highly successful Chinese technology company that operates FWJ, has rapidly become one of the most popular—and most controversial—of Chinese online gaming companies. FWJ is popular partly because it only requires an Internet link and a low-spec PC to play it and partly because its theme (the eponymous westward journey) derives from classical Chinese myth and legend. At the moment, FWJ has around 25 million registered accounts, and up to 1.3 million people log on to play concurrently during any given evening. In the summer of 2006, the game was host to an unprecedented event in online gaming: a virtual protest involving up to 80,000 players.

The chain of events that led up to the in-game demonstration went something like this: On July 4, 2006, administrators of FWJ suspended a gamer with an anti-Japanese name. The gamer, who had already been playing for two years with the same moniker and who claimed to have spent around US$3000 on the game, refused to change his handle in order to comply with NetEase policies. The following day, NetEase dissolved one of the largest player alliances in the game, called The Alliance to Resist Japan. The company explained their actions by saying that they would not “permit any names that include those that attack, insult, or mislead with respect to race, nationality, national politics, national leaders, obscenity, vulgarity, libel, threat, religions, and religious figures” (www.zonaeuropa.com). This whole ordeal might all seem politically chaotic
to a Western audience, but some Chinese players simply saw sinister motives at work. Outspoken **FWJ** gamers had begun to circulate rumors that Japanese commercial influences were going to change things within their game. It was said that Chinese national symbols were going to be replaced with pigs and that Japanese iconography was being covertly installed by the developers. Meanwhile, players were said to be unhappy that one of the buildings within the game world had been decorated with a painting reminiscent of Japan's symbol of the rising sun. NetEase denied that it was being bought out by Japanese business or that it intended to change any patriotic content. They argued that, on the contrary, these were valid, China-friendly decorations. The argument spread, and even otherwise apolitical gamers began to congregate to discuss the problematic aesthetics. By July 7, the situation had become critical, and players assembled inside the game to protest at what they saw as an injustice. They wanted NetEase to withdraw the policy, change the decor, and allow anti-Japanese sentiments to be freely expressed. The protest started out with something like 10,000 players and ended up with 80,000—more than 60,000 higher than the game's average population at the time. Exactly how many of those players were actually protesting and how many had come along simply to witness the spectacle is impossible to say. But it was nevertheless an unprecedentedly large event for any virtual world.

The **FWJ** event demonstrates just how much Chinese gamers valued their game. They were closely enough identified with it to be moved to demonstrate, in massive numbers, against a perceived infringement of their rights and beliefs. This suggests, of course, that gamers do not compartmentalize gaming or dismiss it as trivial fantasy removed from real life. On the contrary, the fantasy is so
deeply significant that even apparently minor slights against Chinese patriotism provoked intense anger. To understand this anger, it’s worth remembering that Japan and China, like Japan and Korea, have had a troubled history that is essentially unparalleled in Western politics. Japan is still seen as an aggressor, although now an economic aggressor rather than a military one. The modern, technologically enabled Chinese are no less politically driven than older generations, and the desire for independence from Japanese influence remains strong. This trend has been exacerbated by the Chinese government’s efforts to use games to promote state-endorsed national culture. Gaming has been recognized as an official sport, and numerous government-sponsored companies in games development have begun to release dozens of “patriotic” games. This level of state investment can only have fueled the FWJ gamers’ beliefs that their game should be brought in line with accepted patriotic sentiments.

MIT media academic Henry Jenkins, who studied the FWJ incident, concluded that “the Chinese government’s efforts to regulate game playing—and to promote games as part of the national culture—have transformed what might have been a mere pastime into a more politically charged environment.” What was most significant, Jenkins noted, was that this was an argument about how the game fitted into the wider culture. The demonstration was not about some change within the game or some issue of game play (like the perceived weakness of gnomes that led to minor protests in World of Warcraft); it was about national character and China’s place in the world. Players and the games company were articulating the unique dilemma that has dogged online games in varying degrees over the past decade: namely, how to bridge the so-called client-server divide, by balancing the wishes of game creators, on the one
hand, and players, on the other. NetEase had one view of how the game should be, and the gamers had another. But how a game ends up is often a mixture of the two. In this case, NetEase wanted it to be politically correct, while players had a quite different view of how it should reflect their own patriotism, and the parties only came to a settlement after a fair amount of disruption. Like other games that I will go on to talk about later in this book, *FWJ*’s game world had become an idea that was continually being contested and influenced both by its creators and its players. This contest is an important illustration of how games affect the people who play them.

COMMERCIALY FUELED

The *FWJ* incident may have dwarfed any other online protests, but it is far from the only example of games becoming entangled with real-world issues. In Europe and the United States, where games are often far less conformist than in Asia, there are numerous cases of gaming becoming embroiled in political conflict, although the reasons for these conflicts vary from game to game. Perhaps the most obvious and predictable instances of this involve censorship or content boundaries, such as when the game *San Andreas* came under scrutiny for having a previously undisclosed sex-based subgame hidden in the code. The revelation that it was possible to hack the game on both PC and console formats to reveal the abandoned minigame caused many politicians to call for new controls on games, and there was some controversy over whether the publisher, Take Two, had dodged what should probably have been an adult-only rating for the game. That the controversy stemmed from a barely accessible and nonexplicit sexual minigame rather than from the game’s themes of casual ultraviolence or
prostitution is cause for knowing smiles among many gamers. Missing the point has been typical of most of the moral panics that have engulfed video games. The gap between gamers and the people who are trying to regulate them is wide indeed. A quick trip to YouTube.com and a search for “Daily Show” and “video games” illustrate that point with satirical clarity.

Occasionally the issues that flare up within Western gaming resemble those that surfaced in FWJ, such as when Blizzard, the company that runs World of Warcraft, came under fire for outlawing explicitly gay and lesbian in-game associations (some “guilds” of the game world had intended to recruit specifically homosexual players). For Blizzard, it was a matter of maintaining the fiction and reducing the likelihood of harassment. For the members of the gay and lesbian guilds, however, this was a matter of freedom of expression. Just as in China, the issues of the real-world and fictional world were not sealed off from each other in the minds of gamers. This was not a film or a book, where the fiction was packaged and complete; the game was leaky, acted on, and generally subject to the desires of the players who paid to play it. Eventually Blizzard conceded that they should not impose such limitations on their players, but it’s easy to see why they made such moves in the first place: the exact nature of the relationship between gamers, game world, and game creators has not yet been defined. The argument represents another instance of gamers feeling as if what happened in the game world was just as important as anything that might happen in day-to-day life. In cases like these, the wizened chestnut who suggests that “it’s only a game” seems misinformed and out of touch.

The FWJ protestors thought that the alleged pro-Japanese imagery was corporate propaganda and that they were therefore being illegitimately influenced. Gamers seem par-
particularly sensitive to the things that alter their gaming experience. They become so familiar with the game that even the slightest change can be detected. Usually our complaints are about some minor nuance of the way the game works—a slight change in physics parameters or the color of a hat—but the changes could equally be political.

Many gamers took exception to the gradual introduction of advertising into their game worlds. Recently, the online shooter *Battlefield 2142* became just one example of a game that had polarized opinion thanks to the inclusion of external advertising sold into its game environment. Reams of grumbling from gamers and fans of the series followed release, along with online guides on how to stop the ads appearing at all. This suggests that gamers (or at least some gamers) resent anything that unduly impinges on what they see as the pure experience of their game. Some play games precisely to get away from this kind of influence—whether political or commercial—while others revel in the indulgence of a particular belief. For the FWJ players, it was about the mythology of patriotic China, and for the players of a game like *America’s Army* (a first-person shooter developed by the U.S. military), it is about celebrating their military culture.

Of course, there is an obvious corollary to this observation: if gamers are so sensitive to the messages their games convey, what better way to reach gamers than through their games? It seems clear that the more gamers there are and the more culturally significant games become, the more external forces will to want to use games to influence gamers. Gaming will soon be just another weapon in the arsenal of political propagandists.