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Gaming Places

Where We Play, Where We Learn (Column)

Gaming places are not simply a space for playing games, they are meaningful spaces where learning occurs and where players interact. We are not only playing in these gaming places, we are also learning. This column takes gaming places as its focus, developing ideas about such spaces, specifically as a venue for playing serious games, in order to better understand gaming culture in general. Through this lens, we can explore the constantly changing nature of gaming places and their meaning for gaming culture. In this context, "gaming places" are primarily defined as physical gaming places, for example PC bangs[1] (Korean-style internet cafés), board game bangs (board game cafés, or places for playing board games), *Jeonja-olagsil* (arcade-game centers), VR bangs (Virtual Reality (VR) gaming cafés), and PlayStation bangs as opposed to virtual gaming places.
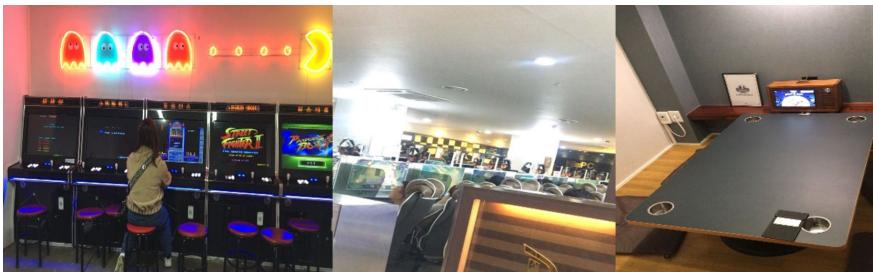
Figure 1. Various gaming places (December 2019, Seoul, South Korea, taken by the author)

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1 "Bang" means room in Korean.

Gaming Places

Every gaming place has its own distinct characteristics. These gaming environments affect players' experiences as at each location players interact in different ways. For some games, gaming environments are virtual spaces that do not necessarily exist at all in the physical world. For other games, physical gaming environments, for example PC bangs, VR bangs, board game cafés, *Jeonja-olagsil*, and other real-world gaming locations, become integral to players' lifestyles. In South Korea, players visit such places, especially PC bangs, often on a daily basis and they have important meaning to players and for understanding game culture, as some researchers have pointed out (see e.g. Lee et al. 2018).

Previous research has focused primarily on other aspects of games and has excluded consideration of gaming places. While some researchers have occasionally mentioned the impact of gaming environments (places) on digital game culture (Chee 2006; Jin 2010), physical gaming places have often been regarded as a trivial factor that has little bearing on shaping gaming culture, be it digital or physical.

However, gaming places such as *Jeonja-olagsil* and PC bangs have long played a significant role in South Korean gaming culture. I remember, for example, that arcade game centers were places crowded with people, a flourishing social scene. At the local arcade game center, we would watch the remarkable performance a *gosu*.[2] The strongest player of the time, the *gosu* was always surrounded by other children like us. They seemed to be able to play infinitely with only one coin, while for the rest of us arcade games were great money eaters as we played or competed for the highest score or the record for longest play.

Later, the younger generation's loyalties shifted to MMORPGs. When hanging out with friends, we would go to PC bangs to play together; we would even go to PC bangs near the university campus while waiting for our next class. PC bangs were cheap, open 24 hours, customers could order food (not only snacks), and they had wide screens with up-to-date computers that allowed us to immerse ourselves in the games. Each seat created a private space but was not so enclosed that we could not talk to each other whenever needed during gameplay. These spaces were simultaneously personal but public.

The most commonly played games in arcades and PC bangs are digital games. In East Asian countries and especially in South Korea, but also else-

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[2] In South Korea a *gosu* is an expert, superior, or highly skilled person; the term usually describes a person who has great skill in gaming.

where, these gaming spaces have a negative social image. They are seen as dangerous, violent places that lead gamers astray, resulting in poor school performance and social isolation. Due to this general negative perspective, games played at gaming places are often considered "bad games", in contrast to the "serious games" that are dealt with in the next section.

However, it is certainly not true that children who use these gaming places are necessarily troubled, despite the common perception that arcades and PC bangs are "bad" and "unhealthy" for the adolescents that make up the majority of their target population.

Serious games

Serious games (SGs) are games that are not solely designed for entertainment. Rather, these games have specific aims, such as education, training, healthcare, military training, or social change. The term "serious game" was introduced in 1970 by Abt, in his book *Serious Games*. According to Abt, we should understand the term "serious games in the sense that these games have an explicit and carefully thought-out educational purpose and are not intended to be played primarily for amusement" (Abt [1970] 1987, 9). While this definition of SGs is the most well-known and influential, other researchers offer different definitions (e.g. Michael and Chen 2006; Susi et al. 2007; Zyda 2005). Some researchers consider SGs to be any commercial off-the-shelf games that are used in educational contexts rather than for the simple fun of playing or entertainment (e.g. Gee 2003, 2005; Squire 2011; Prensky 2001). According to this definition, therefore, there is no significant distinction between entertainment games used as SGs and games that are specifically developed to change or influence players' knowledge, skills, or perspectives on real-world problems.

Some researchers criticize the term serious game. For example, Bogost (2007) claims that the term is misleading, since the two aspects, "serious" and "game" are not necessarily exclusive. Other researchers use the terms "serious play" or "serious gaming" instead of serious games. Issues surrounding defining, classifying, and categorizing SGs remain open, and, consequently, the term remains somewhat vague.

In South Korea, SGs are mostly used for education and the category includes so-called *ki-neung-seung* games, i.e. games that have a function and a positive effect. The typical image of an SG in South Korea is that of a single-player game that is no fun and that is used in educational contexts such as (cram) schools, in other words, outside the usual gaming places. On the other hand, in South Korea, games that are played at gaming places are, as previously mentioned, usually considered unhealthy and far removed from

educational SGs. It should be noted here that game addiction critics consider that all games are inherently bad. As touched upon earlier, digital games and gaming places are associated with issues of crimes and violence and digital games are often seen as being the source of these problems. Consequently, there has always been a social reason in Korean society to distinguish SGs from Commercial-Off-the-Shelf (COTS) games.

Changing SG gaming spaces

Recently, gaming places for SGs have been changing, due to the rising popularity of so-called Big Games. There are many descriptions of Big Games. According to Lee (2010), for example, Big Games includes both "real" experiences and digital technologies, and they are also known as "Urban Games," "Street Games," "Ubiquitous Games" or "mixed-reality games." Such games are often used to address local and regional social issues (Stokes 2020). The Korea Game Society defines Big Games as "[g]ames played in an alternative reality according to a complex program that intertwines both digital and virtual characteristics." Generally, MMORPGs allow more than 100 players to play simultaneously, but, in this case, playing includes physical places and actions.

The Big Game "The Code name, So-won" (*So-won* means "wish" or "hope" in Korean) was designed by UNIQUE GOOD COMPANY in 2019, as a project of the South Korean government to celebrate the "100th Anniversary of Korea's Provisional Government." The game was supported by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism and released as a free-to-play game. The player takes on the role of a secret agent working for the Korean independence movement in February 1919. Players download the app REALWORLD on their smartphone or mobile device before starting the game. They then go to the indicated real places and follow on-screen instructions. Most of the gameplay takes place in the Jeong-dong area in the center of Seoul. The uniqueness of this game is that players move around from place to place and are not limited to virtual spaces or to a single gaming area. During gameplay, as they cross back and forth between the digital and analog worlds (the in-game and real worlds), players visit actual historical sites. This format allows players to engage and immerse themselves in the game, learning and memorizing the history presented on screen. The gaming place of this SG therefore takes on an important role both in terms of gameplay and the learning process.

Although games like "The Code name, So-won," which bring together fictional stories and historical facts, can make SGs more fun and entertaining, in some cases this overlap has been the subject of controversy. These games purport to be based on "facts," so if they offer inaccurate knowledge, this may lead

Figure 2. Depiction of a game in the real world (Left: people trying to find a clue in a church using a toolkit and their smartphones; Center: the symbols within the toolkits; Right: the mission is to compare the palace with symbols by using the toolkit. June 2019, Seoul, South Korea, taken by the author).

to misunderstanding and confusion among players. This concern highlights the inherent conflict between the "serious" (education-related) and "fun" elements of SGs. Especially in serious games used for education, presenting an accurate reality inside games has become an important issue (Kwan 2014; Yang and Lim 2018). Indeed, "The Code name, So-won" was criticized by some players for its lack of accuracy, that is, the discrepancy between the game and historical truth. For example, the route that players visit during the game was not arranged in chronological order. Furthermore, while the person who provides the main clue that helps players to complete the mission was a real person, he was not actually someone who supported Korea's independence movement. Even if these imaginary or fantasy elements are necessary to keep players engaged, and make such games more interesting, there is a chance of players becoming confused about what does or does not correspond with the real history. I suggest, therefore, that serious games dealing with real-life issues related to real-world places have a greater responsibility to present real-life issues more accurately and sensitively than other game genres. As Jeon states, "serious games need to be based on players' real-life performance or truth and thus it is important to simulate historical truth accurately to achieve the purpose of the serious game" (Jeon 2012, 168).

The COVID-19 Experience in Gaming Places and SGs

COVID-19 has changed not only our lives but also the way we play games. Many gaming places have been closed or had their business hours restricted by

regulations. These changes have compelled individuals to find different ways to interact and connecting with one another.

New types of SGs, such as Big Games, have become more mainstream and more accessible than games traditionally played in closed gaming places. Playing board games via the internet, meeting friends virtually, and having in-game conversations online have all become common experiences.

Playing serious games is not just playing. Players learn how to play and learn how to learn. Players gain skills, knowledge, and are empowered to embrace new experiences. We play and we learn, not only directly, by playing the game itself, but also by playing in gaming places where players and physical environment intermingle and interactions are continuous, both inside and outside of the games.

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