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Industrialization of Play:
Technology, Culture, and the Digital Economy of Korean Esports

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Informatics

by

William Charles Dunkel

Dissertation Committee:
Associate Professor Aaron Trammell, Chair
Professor Bo Ruberg
Professor Joseph Jeon

2025

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DEDICATION

To

my family and friends,
and the boy who only wanted to work with games

in recognition of their worth

an apology

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.
"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."
"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.
"You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."
-Lewis Carroll
Alice in Wonderland

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES v

LIST OF TABLES vi

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS vii

VITA ix

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION xii

INTRODUCTION: “A Perfect Night” for Esports 1

CHAPTER 1: A Brief History to Understand Korean Esports 33

- 1.1 Korea’s S-tier Gaming Culture 33
- 1.2 Korea’s Place in the Sun 37
- 1.3 Towards a Modern Korean Culture Industry 30
  - 1.3.1 (Pre)History of Korean Esports 43
  - 1.3.2 Proto-esports: The Korean StarCraft Leagues 1998-early 2000s 46
  - 1.3.3 The Empire Strikes Back: 2007-2012 47
  - 1.3.4 League of Legends, Overwatch Apex, and localized competition: 2012-2017 53
  - 1.3.5 China ascending and regional diplomacy 55
  - 1.3.6 A League of Our Own: The rise of the Overwatch League: 2016-2019 56
  - 1.3.7 Pandemic and the Collapse of the Overwatch League 59
  - 1.3.8 2023- Present Korea’s new place in the sun 63
- 1.4 Conclusion 64

CHAPTER 2: Entering the Machine: Esports as Process 67

- 2.1 Techo-Orientalism in Esports 75
- 2.2 Neoliberal Korea 78
  - 2.2.1 Korean Esports Labor as Neoliberal Commodities 81
  - 2.2.2 The Team Game House: A relic of Fordist, anti-communist, labor control 84
- 2.3 Affective Support in Korean esports 85
- 2.4 Conclusion 91

CHAPTER 3: Fan signs and Photocards: Gendered Fandom and Labor in Korean esports 93

- 3.1 Understanding Western Hegemonic Masculinity in Video Game Industries 99
    - 3.1.1 Women in esports globally 100
- 3.2 Organizations of Korean esports Labor, Fandom, and Etiquette 104
    - 3.2.1 Narrative Construction in Korean esports 106
    - 3.2.2 The Korean gender divide and esports 109
    - 3.2.3 Gendered engagement with esports 111
    - 3.2.4 Gendered fandom 113
- 3.3 Conclusion 116

CHAPTER 4: When Whales Fight, A Shrimp's Back is Broken: The Transnational Politics of Activism in Esports 118

- 4.1. Celebrity Activism and *Hallyu* Industries 121
    - 4.1.1. BTS and Black Lives Matter 125
    - 4.1.2. Esports activism/anti-feminism/anti-racism 128
- 4.2. A Tale of Two Incidents: 02 Blast's No Japan Boycott & the Blitzchung Controversy 132
    - 4.2.1. O2 Blast's No Japan Boycott 133
    - 4.2.2. The Blitzchung Controversy 136
- 4.3. The dual curse of Sinophobia/*Sinodeference* 139
- 4.4. Conclusion 143

CHAPTER 5 (Conclusion): That's not hallyu! Korean gaming as (non)culture 145

- 5.1. "Talon max E takes Ghost": Esports as political engagement 148
- 5.2. What to do about a problem like Korea? 150

WORKS CITED 153

ENDNOTES: 188

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

Figure 1 Korean Female esports fans holding fan signs 68

Figure 2 Scene from pre-match of 2022 Overwatch League Grand Final 94

Figure 3 Fans Interacting with Overwatch Champions Series 107

Figure 4 Female Fan interacting with esports player 109

Figure 5 O2 Blast No Japan Banner 135

Figure 6 Screenshot of Korean lawmaker's YouTube Live during 2024 Martial Law Crisis 150

LIST OF TABLES

Page

Table 1: Export Value of Korean Content Industry 2022 3

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VITA

William Charles Dunkel

Education

University of California, Irvine	Irvine, California
PhD. Dept. Informatics	2025
Korea University	Seoul, Korea
M.A. in Korean Studies	2016
Lafayette College	Easton, Pennsylvania
B.A. in Asian Studies	2007

Research Interests

Korean Games, Game Development & Design, UX, eSports,

Serious Games, Regional Game Studies, Digital Media, Korean Studies

Journal Publications

Dunkel, William**.** 2025. "Tifa is Best Girl: How FFVII Taught Me to Stop Worrying and Love the Game.", *Well Played* vol. 14(1)

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Book Chapters

2021 Dunkel, William & Trammell, Aaron: “Double Ventriloquism and *Aegyo* in Overwatch.” In *Media (as) Ventriloquism*, edited by Lerner, Fleeger, and Baron; Oxford University Press

Conference Presentations

2025 "“Anything to say to your fans?”: Gendered Fandom and Labor in Korean Esports"

2025 SNU International Conference for Contemporary Korean Studies, Seoul National University, Seoul

2025 ““I just want to show my support”: Female Labor and Fandom in Korean Esports”

12th *Korean Screen Culture Conference,* Leiden University, Leiden

2023 “Sushi Environmentalism and *Dave the Diver*” 10th *Korean Screen Culture Conference,* Monash University, Melbourne

2023 “Industrialization of Play: Technology, Culture, and the Digital Economy of Korean Esports” *Korean eSports Society,* Seoul

“2023 “When Whales Fight, A Shrimp’s Back is Broken: The Transnational Politics of Activism in Esports” *Association of Asian Studies,* Boston

2021 “Playing with Intangible Culture: Serious Gameplay about Korean Heritage” *Connected Learning Summit,* Boston/Online

2019 “Constructing Haenyeo: Defamiliarization and Sensemaking in the Game Design Process”

Connected Learning Summit, Irvine

2019 “Constructing Haenyeo: Iterative Reflexivity & Sensemaking in the Game Design

Process” *DiGRA,* Kyoto

2019 “Creativity Development in the Korean Creative Content Agency: K-Pop vs. K-Games”

AAS-in-Asia, Bangkok

2019 “Patches, Updates, and the Meta: Examinations of the Temporality of Digital Game Development and Play in Overwatch”: *Congress of the Canadian Game Studies Associations*, Vancouver

2018 “Nerf This: Localization and Pan-cultural Representation of *Aegyo* in Overwatch”: *AAS-in-Asia,* New Delhi

2017 “Eunuchs, Sexy Beasts, and Repeaters: Pre-colonial Haunting and the Crisis of Masculinity in Korean Romance Webtoons”: *6th Korean Screen Culture Conference*, Hamburg

2016 “Appropriating Koreanness: Orientalism, Authenticity, and the Mutated Authority of “Eat Your Kimchi”: *8th World Congress of Korean Studies*, Philadelphia

2016 “Welcome to Transnational Animation City: Identifying the Korean Aesthetic in *Legend of Korra*”: *5th Korean Screen Culture Conference*, London

2016 “The Virtual Wardrobe: The Suppression of Fashion Identity Among Korean Online Gamers”: *International Conference of NextGen Korean Studies*, Ann Arbor

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Industrialization of Play:
Technology, Culture, and the Digital Economy of Korean Esports
by
William Charles Dunkel
Doctor of Philosophy in Informatics
University of California, Irvine, 2025
Associate Professor Aaron Trammell, Chair

This dissertation examines the complex dynamics of Korean esports within a global context, exploring its historical development, cultural significance, and the challenges it faces in the contemporary landscape. Through a multifaceted approach combining historical analysis, ethnographic observation, and interviews, the study investigates the intersection of players, fans, and industry stakeholders in Korean esports.

The research begins by tracing the historical roots of Korean esports, situating it within the country's broader economic and cultural transformation since 1987. It then delves into the unique player-fan relationship in Korean esports, drawing parallels with the K-pop industry's labor organization and exploring how these interactions shape the competitive gaming landscape. A significant focus is placed on the gendered aspects of Korean esports fandom, highlighting the crucial role of women in organizing and supporting the scene. This perspective challenges Western norms and provides insight into how gender dynamics manifest in traditionally male-dominated spaces within the Korean context. The study also examines the transnational politics of esports activism, exploring how players navigate conflicts between industry interests and geopolitical tensions, particularly in the context of Chinese and American economic competition. Finally, the dissertation considers the position of esports within the broader framework of *Hallyu* (Korean Wave) culture, arguing that while often marginalized, Korean gaming culture offers a valuable lens for understanding contemporary Korean society and its global influence.

By synthesizing these diverse elements, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Korean esports as a cultural phenomenon, its impact on global gaming culture, and its potential to reshape perceptions of Korea's cultural industries. The study ultimately argues for the recognition of esports as a significant, albeit unconventional, aspect of Korean cultural exports and global influence.

Industrialization of Play: Technology, Culture, and the Digital Economy of Korean Esports

Introduction: “A perfect night” for esports

In the fall of 2023, a new single and music video was released on YouTube. The song “Perfect Night” describes a scene of young women on a night out on the town, their focus on enjoying the eponymous perfect night, filled with dancing, fun, and good vibes. The performance by Le Sserafim, a popular 4th generation South Korean pop idol group, was their first English release and demonstrated a serious investment by its label Hybe Labels to grow into international markets(H. Hong 2023; S.-Y. Yoon 2023). The video marked a collaboration between the music group and Southern Californian video game developer Blizzard, who used the song to promote *Overwatch 2*, its popular first-person team shooter. In the music video you see the group preparing to perform in concert while animated sections show five heroes from the game, getting ready to attend the Le Sserafim concert. Interspersed between the gaming animations, the K-pop group performs a dance choreography, which is then modeled and recreated in the game by the five female heroes, as they are dressed up in digital concert attire. Following the release of the video, fans of both the game and idol group could go and purchase digital skins, banners, and other cosmetic artifacts in the game, this was then followed up by a live performance of the female group at BlizzCon, the company’s annual flagship fan event (McWhertor 2023).

The partnership between K-pop groups and video game companies to create cross-promotional material has been a popular marketing and development practice for both industries since the mid-2010s (Y. Jin and Yoon 2021). Famously, *League of Legends* creator Riot Games created a virtual K-pop group K/DA in 2018, blending pop talent from South Korea, China, the

United States in advance of the League of Legends Word Championships, held that year in Incheon, South Korea. The group has released several singles, with the intent of promoting in-game artwork and skins, as well as promote the popular esports competition (Coll 2024a). The virtual group's debut single "POP/STARS", quickly attained viral fame, with more than 100 million views within a few days of its release(Pu 2018), at the time of writing, it has received over 620 million views, eclipsing views of the music video of K-pop mega group Twice's single "Yes, or Yes" by 200 million views, despite both being released within two days of each other. The outstanding success of both the traditional K-pop group, Twice, and virtual group K/DA, highlights how globally popular Korean popular culture has become over the past 15 years.

Hallyu, or the Korean wave, continues to demonstrate the viability of Korean culture as a global commodity. The successful intermixing of video game culture and pop music exposes how globalized fandom operates in this contemporary moment. South Korea, hereafter Korea, has a rich history of producing cultural content that resonates far beyond the domain of the Korean peninsula. Korean film auteur Bong Joon Ho's *Parasite*, dominated the 2020 Academy Awards, Korean Netflix drama *Squid Game* quickly became the streaming platform's most popular TV show ever (D. Y. Jin, Lee, and Hong 2023). In music, BTS was the most popular music group on the planet in the 2010s, creating fervor and fandom similar to that of Michael Jackson and the Beatles before. Korea content creators help to popularize and make mainstream the process of live streaming, making the concept of mukbang, where a broadcaster eats a large meal with their audience a common genre. K-pop dances became popular obsessions for youths as they filmed and recorded themselves recreating popular dance moves from K-pop to share on social media platforms, like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. Korean popular culture was uniquely situated to be able to capitalize on the digital turn of the 21st century. The Korean government was eager to promote these accomplishments (Saeji 2021), as well as linking these productions to the larger power of the Korean state, whose “Miracle on the Han river” lifted the country out of abject poverty in the 1970s to the forefront of technological and cultural production capacity. The state support for *hallyu* culture industries was clearly present, the success of the promotional strategies and support is very much unclear (Jungsoo Kim 2016; Saeji 2021). Yet, as Korean national pride was evident in celebrating the global value of *hallyu, t*he games industry was curiously absent from the groundswell of support for Korean culture.

At face value, it might look that Korean games and gaming culture was left behind in the boon of popularity, but despite the suddenly household name qualities of music groups like Black Pink, TV stars Yoo Jae-suk, Film actor Song Joongki[1] or film Auteur Bong Joon Ho, economically these culture industries lacked the impact of the most dominant Korean culture industry: games. In 2022, the Korean games industry accounted for 67% of all cultural exports, (See Table 1)more than the film, television, music industries combined (KOFICE 2024).

Table 1: Export Value of Korean Content Industry 2022

Hallyu Industry	**2022 Exports** (Unit: USD 10,000)	**% of Total Export Value**
Film	7,921	0.60%
Broadcasting	86,912	6.53%
Music	96,442	7.25%
Games	898,175	67.49%
Others	241,347	18.14%
Total	**1,330,797**	100**%**

Source: (KOFICE 2024), Estimated Values

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[1] Which doesn’t include the world class athletes that have been used to promote the concept of Korean culture, be it gold medalist figure skater Kim Yuna, or English Premier League Striker Son Heung-Min.

The ubiquity of global gaming indicated that other culture industries had more to gain from collaboration and transmedia production than games necessarily had to. Examples of Korean pop culture leveraging opportunities within the global games industry highlight this phenomenon, as savvy music industry marketers attempted to find meaningful inroads into the popular Korean gaming scene. Yet, I argue that K-pop provided something that the Korean games industry struggled to manufacture for itself, namely a human face and body, despite having a diverse representation both in areas of game design, and as we will examine in further detail, of professional gaming.

While games are continuing their rise as a globally practiced activity, the rise in access to online media platforms such as YouTube Gaming, Twitch, and SOOP (formerly AfreecaTV) helped to spur on a greater interest in professionalized video gaming. As a result of this, players and fans of games are able to simply and easily find communities that support the pursuit of gaming excellence. This increase in interest has largely been seen in the advancement and development of esports leagues that are, by their design sites of human-centric play that prioritizes elite skill and gaming prowess. Players in these esports leagues also suffer short careers as the skill-window for esports excellence is similar to those seen in other professional sports. In Korea, esports players face additional limitations to their careers since all male esports players must register and enroll in mandatory military service, which compounds the precarity for these youth players, as they often must interrupt their playing careers to fulfil their civic duty(Grantham 2025, 130). Yet, I draw attention to the brevity of opportunities for esports players to draw comparison to other culture industries which similarly rely upon youth talent or have small age windows in which most practitioners can easily practice their respective crafts.

While games are such a robust and dominant export of Korean culture (see Figure 1), esports is harder to categorize, as often the games that are most popular and developed are not of Korean origin in their development or design, as is seen in *League of Legends* (Riot 2009), DOTA 2 (Valve 2013), or *Overwatch* (Blizzard 2016). In spite of the direct export value being generated, which could be measured using standard metrics of area-specific downloads, downloadable content purchases, or subscriptions to games being played, esports is more difficult to measure its impact on raw export data. The Korea Creative Content Agency's 2022 survey of Korean esports fans has shown that live-offline play increases fan participation and interest in the events (KOCCA 2022). It is true to say that not all Korean games are esports in their nature, nor is all esports a Korean game, but it is important to understand how such a widespread and popular activity furthers the general objectives of the gaming industry as an exportable commodity. This dissertation argues that the Korean esports industry, despite its global prominence and economic significance, occupies a paradoxical position within the broader landscape of *Hallyu*. While esports embodies many hallmarks of Korean cultural exports, including the industrialization of talent, passionate fandom, and global reach, it remains undervalued in domestic and global cultural discourse. By examining the complex ecosystem of Korean esports through ethnographic and discourse analysis, this study reveals how the industry navigates tensions between local and global contexts, player commodification and activism, and gendered dynamics of fandom and labor. The research demonstrates that esports, as a uniquely Korean-pioneered cultural product, challenges traditional notions of *Hallyu* by showcasing Korea's capacity for cultural innovation rather than just high-quality reproduction. The result of which bears implications for a games studies environment that struggles to engage with non-Western contexts.

Understanding Esports as Culture

Esports, the professionally competitive arena of video gaming, has a history almost as long as video games itself. While in later chapters we will explore in more detail the breadth and scope of the Korean esports industry it is important to recall the early history of competitive gaming and esports. Early video game competitions stemmed from ad hoc arrangement of players seeking to achieve high scores on arcade machines. Proto esports competitions sprang up as games were being developed for the first time, with the “Intergalactic Spacewar Olympics” in 1972 at Stanford University, oft cited as the world’s first instance of esports (Billings and Hou 2019). The early history of esports was held almost entirely at arcades and parlors, both official and unofficial competitions being held by eager players and fans of video games. Following the popularization of console games and more importantly of PCs competitive gaming shifted in form and location. Whereas the arcade had been the most important cultural site for competitive gaming, instead play was instead shifted into online spaces with the advent of online gaming. This shift also promoted new focuses on preferred genres of play, that created diverging development paths for esports in the West and East (M. G. Wagner 2006).

Global esports culture and business, first dominated by Korea, has increasingly fallen into the domains of the United States and China (H.-M. Kim and Kim 2022). Esports represents a major sector of the global digital economy, in 2023 it was valued at over 1.72 billion US dollars (Fortune Business Insights 2024) and has produced a worldwide youth fandom that crosses traditional national boundaries. Much like traditional sports, esports receive support from communities worldwide in its development and organization, ranging from ad hoc local events to internationally broadcasted spectacle. As esports has developed as an industry, it has begun to receive recognition from world leaders as valuable sites of interaction (Young-nam Seo et al.

2018). South Korea, while having declined over the past decade remains a particularly relevant location in the esports world, being the first country to develop a national esports league, as well as developing public policy, schools, and broadcasting services all aimed at esports.

The popularity of esports transcends borders (Bihari and Pattanaik 2023) and age groups. Examinations into its historiography (Steinkuehler 2020; D. Y. Jin 2020; Summerley 2020), industry (P. Chung 2021; Tokbaeva, Horst, and de la Hera 2022), players (Poulus et al. 2022), law (Whan Tong 2017) and fan reception have become more popular in the past decade as it has continued to ramp up its production. Additionally, there has been an increase in scholarship focused on the medical hardships, and economies of esports. However, much of the research that has been undertaken follows a trend of focusing on American and European interactions within esports. Building upon Liboriussen & Martin (2016), and their push towards scholarship that identifies and highlights the area-specific nature of gameplay and development, this dissertation aims to recenter esports scholarship into one of its primary benefactors and original talent pools—South Korea. South Korea, has a long and storied history in esports, as will be discussed in more detail later. Yet, while Korean esports has been the subject of recent academic inquiry, it often eschews the local conditions and moves into the global impacts of esports. Through the course of this dissertation, I will provide insights into the gaps between Western and Eastern gameplay and professionalization.

Local Contexts for Gaming Cultures

While many words have been given to the study of games and their play, there has been an overwhelming focus on games that exist in the West. This is doubly true of examinations of players and fandom. In his analysis of *Resident Evil 5* Media Scholar André Brock breaks down the discourse of the game as being a vehicle for interrogating Whiteness and the subjugation of black bodies (Brock 2011). For Brock interrogating the representation and depiction of race yields important understandings of how it is constructed and utilized in transnational video games. Particularly, Brock argues that the unifying culture of the game is its commentary on Whiteness, even though it was designed by a Japanese game studio. These discussions are important and relevant to better understanding how games design and embed values into their structure. However, Brock's analysis is only part of the analysis that needs to be undertaken, despite and the transnational nature of Capcom, it is *Resident Evil 5* is still a product of Japanese design.

Bringing the local back to the center Communication Scholar Paul Martin argues that it is its value of being a transcultural Japanese text (Martin 2018) that is necessary to understand how *Resident Evil* demonstrates Japanese racial and colonial imaginaries. Martin continues detailing how the game does indeed traffic in Whiteness, racism, and colonialism "the game tells us little about Africa and not much more about European colonialism or North American racism" (570), instead it does express much about the Japanese subjectivities and imaginaries. Martin adds much to our understanding of game development, how Capcom creates play space where "non-White-male player to experience being a White-male subjectivity exercising control over Black and female bodies […], but it also opens up a space for this player to experience—from a non-White subject position—control over the White-male body" (577). It becomes important to understand not only how the game directly expresses themes and values, but also how social imaginaries that guide that theme reveal about Japanese anxieties about race and national identity. These embedded values must rely upon local understandings to expose the greater cultural interactions occurring within these technological artifacts. These two examples of analysis of *Resident Evil 5*, by Brock and by Martin depict twin understandings of game studies, the former understanding how games can impact communities outside of their local contexts, the latter reminding that local contexts are fundamental to seeing how they impact local communities. It is *those* local Korean communities that this study explores.

When examining the local, Korean gaming and esports industry communities, it is crucial to consider the local context that shapes its development and reception. Just as *Resident Evil 5* reflects Japanese perspectives despite its global reach, Korean games and esports are imbued with distinctly Korean cultural values, social norms, and historical contexts. This local specificity is evident in the structure of Korean esports organizations, the dynamics of fan engagement, and even the game design choices made by Korean developers.

The importance of grounding research within its local context is the driving force behind area studies which argues that by eschewing historical, cultural, and geographical understandings when examining the products of a culture leads to flattened experience of human conditions; one that ignores the lived experiences cultivated within those products. Drawing upon concepts found within area studies offers new opportunities for engagement with games, design, and analysis in several ways, specifically its insistence on situating games and their design within local contexts. Decontextualizing games, their design, and their incorporation into everyday society robs us of the ability to recognize the national, regional, and communal boundaries that exist locally. These boundaries have increasingly been made invisible by the flows of globalized capitalism that strives to enter and maintain strongholds in as many markets as possible.

Understanding that games encompass the values of their designers[2], players, and fan communities demands understanding of the local conditions in which they play. To do so I incorporate an area studies lens to examine Korean esports and their global positionality, Area studies is more than "'concepts' of geographical regions, divided by hard borders or liberated by semi-porous ones […]it as a rich field of human interaction, in which the appreciation of difference can be at its best – as a positive and energizing force"(Harrison and Helgesen 2019, 12). Breaking from traditionally underexamined areas of game studies allows "academia to acknowledge its own 'blind spots' and prejudices and to modify them with forms of knowledge that are rooted in other, non-Western philosophical traditions" (Ibid. 11).

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[2] Designer in this instance does not necessarily refer to the production studio or developer but rather speaks to the organizing architect of these esports competitions, organizations, and leagues.

The obvious question that needs to be asked is why should I be the one to lead this examination? I am not from Korea, or Asia, nor am I of Korean heritage. I was born and raised in the rural environment of New Hampshire, to a white American family. One might argue it could be as far from a Korean context as one might find. However, I look to Masao Miyoshi and his views on being "off-center" where relying on outside perspectives of a phenomenon as necessary to true insight (Miyoshi 1991) In other words, my original position as an outsider to Korean local conditions, leaves me unfettered by cultural restraints that might otherwise impact inquiries into the domain of the Korean games industry. Further, attempting to reposition Korean games as a separate domain than those of the Western games industry further allows me to explore how Western engagement with games, their design, fandom, and culture may overlook particular realities found in local Korean contexts. This 'off-center' perspective allows for a critical examination of how Korean esports players navigate the process of self-commodification within a globally influential, yet locally rooted industry.

In his recent monograph Christopher B. Patterson describes the state of how much of the discourse that surrounds regionalized understandings of labor roles in games when it comes to Asia. For Patterson, he rightly recognizes the imperial legacy that positions the hegemonic metropole, in this instance the United States, as the arbiter of creativity and design thinking in games, while Asia is subjected to the lowly craftsman labors of hardware and coding. This imperial legacy is at the heart of what draws me to focus on South Korea as a key site of interrogation into games, their design, and their global transmission. Korea has undergone subsequent imperial domination during the past 110 years, first at the hands of the Japanese empire, and then as part of the larger cultural-military sphere of the American empire. It is in part due to its colonized history that I find it important to understand the intersection of values between Eastern and Western civilization and thought, Furthermore it is important to look at how Korea finds itself situated in a position of power while still ultimately relying upon global flows and power disparities of geographic size and location, how those play out in game design as well as the reception of its gaming culture both domestically and globally. Understanding these connections will begin to influence how we understand how games are being designed for global consumption.

While the importance of the Korean media industries ties into the development of state economy it is important to note that the same was argument could be made during the 1980s and 1990s about Japanese media industries. Japan rose to the world's second largest economy on the backs of its heavy industries, manufacturing, and high technologies. The high-tech companies such as Sony, which was the largest, helped to position popular understandings of the country as cool, cutting-edge, and futuristic. The Japanese video game industry, and console industry, helped to build and maintain this culture of cool, yet it should be noted as argued by Media scholar Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) that Japanese economic importance trumped its cultural importance within the region. This meant that Asia as a region was able to use "Japan Cool", the branding slogan for Japanese media and exports, because of the need for Japanese investment.

Additionally, the state-led organization of the culture industries, in the Adorno sense, as a means for economic growth, advancement, and stability of the nation while eschewing traditional understandings of the “value” of art or culture, in the Marxist sense that it provides no immediate utilitarian value at all.

Korea remains a useful site for understanding the complex relationship that games have in a global context because in many ways they find themselves situated at the intersection between the global north and global south. They have a long and complex history of being colonized first by the East in Imperial Japan and currently by the West in America. Korea has positioned itself in a way to capitalize upon its leverage both regionally and globally, creating its own empire. The media industries of Korea have found ways to create inroads regionally and globally through the development of high production value content. Korea’s infrastructure has been developed to create physical and cultural spaces for gameplay and development and it exports these to the world (D. Y. Jin and Chee 2008). Korea's unique position illuminates the complex dynamics between local esports communities, global industry pressures, and state interests in cultural exports.

As noted, Korea has focused on the development of its cultural industries as not only a means of developing soft political power but as a cornerstone of its economic initiatives. Lee Myung-Back, the conservative President from 2008-2013 outlined how the culture industries were of pivotal importance for the future of Korea. During his inauguration speech he stated:

> The Korean Wave that is now well placed around the globe testifies to the advantage of skillful replications of such a long tradition. Modernization of traditional culture is useful for facilitating arts and culture and such attempts surely dignify the country’s economic prosperity. Now, culture has become an industry. We must develop our competitiveness in our content industries, thereby laying the foundation to become a nation strong in cultural

> activities. The new Administration will do its best to bring the power of our culture into a full blossom in this globalized setting of the 21st century.
>
> (Lee 2008)

The emphatic recognition of how culture industries will lie at the foundation of Korean progress and growth relies heavily upon the domestic games industry, which is far and away the country's largest cultural economic producer. Historians Ryoo and Jin (2018) argue that the reliance upon culture industries furthered neoliberal conceptualizations of globalization which opened domestic market spaces not only to foreign economic speculation but demanded that domestic industries reply in kind and equally penetrate global markets. This shift to neoliberal developmentalism underscores the relationship between the culture industries and the state. Korea operates in a unique manner in that "Korean governments have advanced the logic of neoliberal agendas, while structurally developing state-led developmental principles," (2018,11). In looking towards the impact that game design can have it is necessary to situate it within the larger confines of how it may align (or misalign) with state objectives, particularly as game technologies are precisely those that are quick to be disseminated and travel across traditional national boundaries.

Florence Chee's influential case study into game culture in Korea reflects the effects of how digital society can have serious blowback into offline worlds (2006). Chee reveals how Korean gamers establish online and offline communities, considering that the primary physical location for Korean game play being the PC Bang—PC Café—where children and adults alike spend countless hours sharing physical and virtual spaces. Primarily of note was the concept of *wang-tta*, a social outcast, and how desires to avoid awkward and negative social interactions would spur membership into these spaces. The interplay between digital and physical spaces and how they blend into one another is useful for framing how digital media becomes a part of the social fabric. For Korean gamers, specifically young boys, there are serious repercussions to not "playing the game" so to speak, much more than simply those attached to gameplay. The communities that form around digital spaces have tethers to the physical world and these connections and interrelations need to be better understood in the context of community care and social organization. It is through Chee's use of humanistic methodologies that blends with a localized account of gaming in real-life, that demonstrates how the play of video games can differ drastically from one region to another. These distinct local gaming practices have shaped the development of Korean esports, influencing player-fan interactions and the industry's structure in ways that differ from Western models.

Esports, much like traditional sports, has had support from populations and communities worldwide in its development and its organization. Of particular importance to the rise and success of esports as an organized form of play is South Korea, widely known as the capital of esports, or its Mecca (D. Y. Jin 2020). In detailing the rise to prominence, Korea utilized its Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure, localized labor in the form of players and coaches, and cultural influences to become a key player in the scene of esports. As T.L. Taylor describes "the story of South Korean esports highlight the ways culture, larger infrastructural developments, policy decisions, and economic activities have intersected in a fortuitous way at particular historical moment to support the formation of a new form of leisure and sport" (2015, 18). The area specific nature of these developments demands new means of inquiry into games, their development, and their play which is why an area studies lens would be useful for the future of game studies. Korea's pioneering role in esports highlights the need to center Korean experiences and perspectives as a part of the larger global esports industry.

Examining the ways that different regions interact with games in different ways, helps to define and guide new research into not only player behavior but also design intent. Looking at the Korean region, online games have proven to be a perfect match for Korean tastes. This is in contrast with the regions of North America and Japan, Korean gamers overwhelmingly prefer to play games as part of a group (D. Y. Jin 2010, 30). In what Jin refers to as “mass play culture” Korean gamers prefer to join together, often in an internet café (PC Bang) they do not want to be alone but instead play in groups against each other(ibid, 30), in what is known as player versus player games, where the objective is the elimination of other players. The collective group play dynamic is especially important in Korea where, console and PC games were less popular among gamers, due to the absence of or limitations in group play”(Chan 2008, 188–90). We can see that structurally different regions interact with games in different manners, from the PC Bang and mobile games more favored in Korea to console games in Japan and the United States.

As we continue to investigate the role that culture plays in the development of games it can often become imbricated in larger cultural and political work. Looking at *Overwatch* (Blizzard 2016), Dunkel and Trammell identified how the games can communicate separate and potentially conflicting values and messages through its audio presentation (2021). Examinations such as these highlight the value that area studies focused analysis provides for game studies. Through cross-cultural and transnational analyses, we can see how non-Western cultures and industries develop relationships and promote meaning-making with games. The values, and politics, which are embedded within game development, design, and play showing the transnational qualities of global games. This transnational approach, grounded in local Korean contexts, will guide our examination of how Korean esports has developed its unique characteristics while also shaping global gaming culture.

A Problem like Korea

At the center of this dissertation project is the question of: how do esports become industrialized as part of the larger practice of a culture industry? To explore this question, I examine a particular regional subsection of the global esports industry: Korea. Korea has been very successful at manufacturing a labor force capable of meeting the global demands of industrialized play, yet despite overwhelming critical and popular success at esports, Korean professional players find themselves on the outside looking in when it comes to the recognition and security that such success would traditionally guarantee. To better understand this phenomenon, I look at the local conditions of the Korean esports industry to identify how play becomes industrialized, as players engage in the process of developing world-class skill as a path towards security, yet in the process of self-commodification retain aspects that work *against* that very commodification. This examination into the esports culture industry showcases interactions, highlighting both division and coalition, between professional players and fans, professionals and industry, and professionals and the state.

In order to address the main question, I detail above, I propose the following sub-questions that are relevant to this inquiry:

- *How do Korean esports players self-commodify, turning their lives into discrete products of the global esports industry?*
- *What does esports in a Korean context teach us about globalized fan interactions in esports?*
- *What happens when players act against the interests of industry and the state?*

My examination of the South Korean esports' scene looks at the cooperation between players, private organizations, and government agencies aimed at promoting and maintaining Korean gaming culture. For my dissertation, I am interested in examining how Korean esports operates as a part of *hallyu*[3] soft power. Specifically, I wish to explore how play is industrialized, commodified, exported and received, as well as how esports emulates other *hallyu* industries such as pop music, film, and television. The Korean esports industry is similar, if not more successful, to its other culture industry partners, yet fails to capture the same positivity and prestige currently being cascaded upon drama, film, and music. This being despite the overwhelming dominance and success of Korean esports players in a litany of different gaming genres. To much of the gaming world the word Korean is synonymous with skill(Lam and Kuen Wong 2024). This disconnect between the product (esports talent) and domestic reception then plays itself out where parents hope their children grow up to be pop stars, actors, or film directors, but rarely, if ever, esports players. The undervaluing of esports aligns with the general Korea reception to the game industry as a whole, where its more viewed as slothful and fear of addiction as opposed to lauding over accomplishment and opportunity. To better understand this phenomenon, I pose the question: Why is it such a recognizable and economically viable industry, yet misunderstood? More directly, I ask how does the games industry of Korea systematize its human capital as industry? Where does Korean esports emulate commodification from other *hallyu* industries? Where does it reimagine them? In what way does the state respond to its human capital when these industries create friction with their larger ambitions?

Methods

While it is vital to understand the human component of esports, it is also necessary to examine the physical and digital platforms that function as sites of play. These sites are the main location where players and fans interact and as such my research will examine physical esport competition sites, such as the *Overwatch* Championship Series, *Overwatch* Contenders Korea, the *Overwatch* World Cup, and the Korea e-Sports Games. However, much of esports spectatorship takes place digitally (D. Y. Jin 2021) therefore I a observe tournaments on both domestic and international streaming platforms, such as AfreecaTV, YouTube, and Twitch.

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[3] *Hallyu,* roughly translated as the Korean wave, refers to the production and dissemination of culture as a means for development of the Korean nation state. For more see (Dunkel and Trammell 2021).

As a socio-technical phenomenon, esports demands an understanding of its own underlying human interactions, as player development, labor conditions, and fan support impact the industry's potential as much as its game technology and platform. It is necessary to examine esports' socio-technical values against those of the state, as these values may align (or *mis*align) with state objectives. Owing to the fact that game technologies and streaming platforms are precisely those that are quick to be disseminated and travel across traditional national boundaries, examining these values helps us understand how new media and the digital economy circulate information. Many of the world's game industries, including those in esports, rely upon—and look to domestic Korean infrastructure when it comes to developing their own local esports leagues, competitions, and industries. It is my aim to examine these local networks and how labor, technology, and policy work together towards a common goal of manifesting Korean dominance in esports.

Examining esports demands many diverse types of analytical framing, previous studies into the Korean esports scene have looked at tournaments (Rea 2016), health conditions(S. Lee et al. 2020), burnout (H. J. Hong, Wilkinson, and Rocha 2022), educational potential (DeArmond, Shelton, and Hsu 2021). Each of which required a varied mixture of methods to best capture the scene on the ground. My research incorporates that same dynamic approach to understanding that is seen in examinations of other major culture industries. In Suk-young Kim's *K-pop Live* (2018), she argues that the Korean pop music industry (K-pop) is more than a genre (or collection of genres) of music, but that it is a multimodal experience that occurs across a spectrum of digital and analog sites. Understanding the K-pop industry and its fandom necessitates engagement with the concept of "liveness," where the practices of the industry and its audience revolve around the interaction with multiple modes and avenues of interaction and interactivity. For the K-pop industry, it is important to note that fan (and for that matter idol) experiences traverse traditional modes of interaction, such as concerts and fan meetings, but now also incorporate digital and other technologically mediated practices and as a result traditional practices of analyzing such events can prove to be insufficient. This new mode of culture organization results in a need for "hyperpresence" where such a state is "not about losing one's sense of self but about the simultaneous experience of both being in an experience and witnessing it" (Prentice 2022, 147).

Methodology: Field Work (i.e., Participant observation, interviews,)

One of the key components of my examination of the Korean esports industry is both a whole organic entity, but also how it is a legion of moving parts reliant upon complex and varied human relationships and values. I look to Stephanie Choi's inquiry into the K-pop industry (2023) as useful for organizing and mechanizing this study. For Choi, examining an industry as culture is a composite of both top-down and bottom-up methodologies. Drawing upon Keith Negus's (1999) study of genre cultures in the British music industry of the 1970s and 1980s, Choi agrees with the criticism of utilizing Fordist terms to understand the historical specificities of a culture industry and instead views the K-pop industry as a "critical site in which diverse social relations are created, subverted, and negotiated"(2023, 140). Choi utilizes field work as a lens for understanding how particular practices of the K-pop industry functions, as it allows access to information that can only be accomplished through "participant observation, interviews, and personal networks in the field"(2023, 140), these particular methods act as the opposite to top-down methods of media-based cultural studies[4].

Korean esports organizations follow similar patterns to those found in the pop music industry. Looking at the organizations that compile and gather human talent to support the local and global esports industry allows an avenue to understand the particular specificities that occur in esports. To accomplish a bottom-up approach to examining Korean esports, I look at the players and organizations that provide both the human capital, but also structure to the pursuit of professionalized play.

This methodology will rely heavily on open-ended interviews, player observation, and the development of networks with prospective esports players (amateurs) as well as current esports players (professionals) to identify motivations and interest in participation of the global esports industry. The latter will look at the collegiate level of esports and will examine players in the esports College League, the former will highlight professional esports players at domestic esports organizations.

Methodology: Global Ethnography and Deep-Hanging Out

Understanding how global esports as an industry, is fundamentally, or rather foundationally, Korean industry helps us to better situate its power to influence transnational engagement with the medium. To achieve this demands the development of perspectives that embrace locality at the outset. Two works that successfully achieve this are Michael Burawoy's

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[4] Choi clearly describes the need for field work as a means of obtaining access to those "thinkers who question capitalist principles that alienate laborers and reject human-essential capacities, discuss the laborers' calling and raison d'être in economic activities, and take actions within and beyond the given social structure of the industry" (ibid, 140). For Choi, examining culture industries requires different lens precisely due to them not operating under the schemes as Fordist industries, but also as a means of demystifying the complexity of the K-pop industry.

global ethnography and Clifford Geertz's *deep hanging out,* both of which employ ethnography in their own ways. Burawoy, whose insight in the games that American factory workers play on the factory floor as means of engagement are brought their logical conclusion in the trade of esports, trade, developed a concept of "global ethnography." Being critical the hyperlocal turn of ethnography as losing its relationship to larger globalized understandings writing: "As sociology became more established, its ethnography became more confined - first burrowing into the urban metropolis, and then into the interstices of organizations. It too lost sight of its national framing let alone, its original global moorings" (Burawoy 2001, 148).[5] Burawoy highlights that to understand the conditions of globalization, it becomes necessary to examine the conditions of the local.

To re-center, or perhaps more clearly redefine our understanding of esports labor, I wholly focus on the development of professionalized play within Korean contexts[6] as a precursor for understanding globalized esports. I accomplish this through a combination of interviews with Korean esports players, Korean broadcasters, Korean organizations, observations of online Korean productions of esports, and Korean offline tournaments. Inspired by sociologist Michael Burawoy[7], I focus on Korean contexts as a means of understanding how the local manifested within the politics, infrastructure, fandom, and social organization of esports simultaneously is the production of the globalized esports industry allowing us to understand how "the global as produced in the local… is the production of (dis)connections that link and of discourses that travel" (Burawoy 2001, 158).[8] The implementation of this methodology allows for me to situate my lens of analysis on the local Korean players, fans, and esports community before bringing this towards the larger geopolitical and transnational understandings.

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[5] Burawoy went further in his support of the value of ethnography's capacity to make sense of conditions, local and global, expressing: "global ethnography opposes itself to the abstract schema of globalization with what we might call a study of 'globalization from below'. Here one studies the *experience* of 'globalization', to insist that the effects of globalization, however understood, are not homogeneous and ubiquitous but specific and concrete. Only in the locality - the ethnographer's hearth - can one study these concrete effects of globalization."(Burawoy 2001, 149)

[6] As Larissa Hjorth noted about her experiences in 2005 about Korean esports spectatorship: "I remember experiencing gradiations of perpetual "outsiderness" across a variety of levels… as someone who didn't understand e-sports, had only just moved to Korea, whose Korean language skills was child-like, and didn't know the particular players and their star-status apart from gauging via screaming fan girls. Was it the gender, racial or general cultural politics making me feel like an outsider?"(Hjorth 2013). While it has been 20 years since that initial inquiry, there has remained a dearth of examinations into the Koreanness of esports.

[7] Sociologist Michael Burawoy criticized the hyperlocal turn of ethnography as losing its relationship to larger globalized understandings. For Burawoy local conditions were not so neatly contained and impacted conditions both up and downstream.

Since I am interested in the role that Koreans players take in global esports, I use a variety of methods, many of which draw from anthropology and ethnography. Of most import is the practice of "deep hanging out" coined by Clifford Geertz (1998), where the research is "localized, long-term, close-in, vernacular field research". Deep hanging out should prove useful as many of the players that I am engaged in observing make themselves present across a multitude of locations, both offline and online. Streaming platforms such as TwitchTV, an American social media platform, and its Korean domestic counterpart, AfreecaTV are home to broadcasts by many esports players in their spare time.

I draw upon ethnographic methods to co-locate myself alongside the lived practice of esports players. In his examination of Korean corporate culture in the late 2010s, anthropologist Michael Prentice engaged in long-term observational and ethnographic research. Of particular importance to my own research was his breakdown of corporate after-hours meetings, locally known as *hoesik*. *Hoesik*, is a common occurrence for Korean workers, where after-hours drinking, singing, and socializing with coworkers is used as means of improving office cohesion, camaraderie, and tension.[9] Prentice, as part of his observational methods, took up the hobby of screen golf, a common activity done by white-collar office workers in Korea. During office sponsored screen golf, office workers found themselves in a site where "distinction and participation became entangled in one's immediate team relations, where new distinctions, normally individualized in formal settings, can become collective activities"(2022, 153). This examination of leisure as a site outside of formal work but viewed as central to path office workers must navigate as part of becoming successful employees has its own corollary in esports, via streaming and game broadcasting. For many esports players streaming is a common activity that occurs in the downtime when not practicing or participating in direct industry activities. During these streams players interact with their fans, play video games, watch videos and typically, are more relaxed and winding down from work.

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[8] Further, Burawoy challenges the notion that globalization is only conducted within developing nations: "It implies that we can and must study the United States from the standpoint of globalization no less than Burkina Faso. Immigrant communities, Silicon Valley, and the New York Stock Exchange are affected by distant locales just as they affect locales in other parts of the world. Global ethnography thematizes these processes(Burawoy 2001, 157). Where Korea becomes a meaningful standpoint of analysis on the process of globalization.

Shaw(2014) further demonstrates a methodology that I utilize during this research. Shaw criticized overreliance upon text-based analysis as the sole lens of understanding and research into games and gaming spaces. Noting how a new field game studies has the opportunity to draft and employ new approaches to knowledge creation. For Shaw that included co-playing games with her interlocuters, as well as observing while they played alone or with their preferred co-players. I employed a similar tactic in researching the physical play/fan spaces of Korean esports by participating as a fan/researcher, cheering and queuing to meet the players, chatting with fans about their expectations and hopes for the teams as I would with any other form of fan media as a means for learning how games and esports fit into the process of youth in Korea.

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[9] Coincidently, *hoesik* is often viewed as major cause of disrupting office cohesion(Çakar and Kim 2016), as well as reinforcing masculine hierarchies in the office (Prentice 2020).

It is my intent to utilize these similar methods of "deep-hanging out", and observation by locating the after-hours site for fan engagement and personal brand development, that of the digital stream. It can be difficult to find access to players who have very limited free time, which is why many of the ways I engage in "deep-hanging out" is via digital interactions. Many professional and amateur players already publicly stream their free-play, and I participate in their streams as an observer/community member. Accessing these personalized streams of esports players, and amateurs, provides deeper understanding of the professional and personal obligations that players adopt in their quests to become success stories in their own field.

Methodology: Discourse Analysis

The final method I employ during this research project is that of discourse analysis (Rose 2001). Discourse analysis draws itself from Foucauldian methods of analysis where images, texts, and all forms of talk and texts that can be organized into a formation for understanding that discourse. For Rose, discourse analysis is broken into two separate methodologies[10], where the former is focused on "the notion of discourse as articulated through various kinds of visual images and verbal texts than it does to the practices entailed by specific discourses" (2001, 140) and the latter "tends to pay more attention to the practices of institutions" and "to be more explicitly concerned with the issues of power, regimes of truth, institutions, and technologies."(ibid. 140). I will be relying more upon the second composition of discourse analysis than the first as my examination of the Korean esports industry requires direct inquiry into the various gaming institutions that provide player labor to the global industry. My interest in Korea’s implementation of soft power in the esports sphere necessitates an approach where I will examine larger thematic, and structural applications of discourse.

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[10] However, she agrees that many research projects combine the two practices into a larger discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis is a fitting method for my second chapter, where I examine data that ranges from field notes I collected back in 2019, during a field visit to the Korean Contenders Season 2 Final through to the *Overwatch* Champion Series (OWCS) 2025 campaign. As I am curious in looking at both the individual responses to two distinctive cases of esports activism, as well as the larger structural and institutional power that becomes levied during moments of unrest/activism. To assist in this project, I intend to build upon the methods of media critic John Fiske. Fiske (1992) who draws upon Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital (1986) is useful for me as esports, in spite of its economic and popular success, is seemingly failing to drive similar reception and engagement as more popular cultural activities (i.e. music, film, and drama). At its surface esports players find themselves mired in what Bourdieu calls “the proletariat,” unable to benefit economically or culturally from their labor. Fiske examined how fan communities created a “shadow cultural economy”(1992, 30), which involves the appropriation of the products of the larger cultural economy while also providing for the production of its own products and output, which might involve the remixing/rewriting of the original texts. This analysis of subordinate culture I feel is useful to my own inquiry as I examine what is effectively a subcategory of the shadow culture industry of games, where amateurs similarly ape the actions and activities of esports players in attempting to make a successful career. Discourse analysis seems a useful lens for examining this rupture between the individual and the esports system, and how players find themselves acting against their “best [financial] interests” of their labor.

Critical discourse analysis helps unveil the mode of power-discourse relations that reproduce dominance. Drawing upon van Dijk's (van Dijk 1993, 250) account of dominance as the elite group's exercise of power that generates social inequality, this study focuses on 'the "bottom-up" relations of resistance, compliance, and acceptance'. Considering that power and power abuse are often 'jointly produced', media texts must be understood in the context of 'power, counter-power, and discourse'. My analysis of gendered fandom in Korean esports, looks at female fans (who are marginalized actors in traditional sports and esports spaces) have constructed their identities, narratives, and discourses in their fandom, and how their creative fan practices have simultaneously (re)produced and challenged the pervasive discourse of women and esports in Korean society.

The Korean esports industry, much like its musical cousin, relies upon a contingent of experiences and presences from witnessing the act of play, attending fan meet-ups, digital streaming, internet message boards, social media, and broadcasting. As a result, the methods I use to understand industry, as well as the human capital that it relies upon requires similar flexibility. In the following section I outline the organization of the remainder of the dissertation.

Chapter Structure

Chapter 1: A Framework to understand Korean esports in a Global Context

In the first body chapter of the dissertation, I unpack the historical beginnings of the Korean esports industry. To do so I will briefly introduce Korea first by situating its position regionally and then examining the transformation that the Korean state and economy has undertaken since its transition to a democratic republic in 1988. By situating my analysis from the Korean shift to a culture and technology focused economy will demonstrate how esports found fertile ground among the local populations, and how Korean esports became to be known as the mecca of competitive video game play. This will also allow us to understand what challenges those Korean esports faces as a culture industry.

Chapter 2: Entering the Machine: Globalization, Commodification and Community

This chapter examines the intersection of players and fans by looking at live esports events. In Korean esports, players are directly available to their fans and exist within robust communities of support. Drawing upon observational data from tournaments, post-match meetups, fan signings, and player interviews, I explore how play is elevated and then understood by players and fans as a complex labor relationship. Korean esports organizes its labor in similar ways to how the K-pop industry organized and collected its own labor force. K-pop has relied upon a particularly clear direction on identifying its pipelines of talents esports mirrors this organizational structure. This chapter also looks at the enormous relevance Korean players have to the global esports industry. I draw upon observational data that I gathered attending offline esports *Overwatch* 2 competitions held at WDG Studios in Seoul. Spanning from September 2023 until March 2025, I attended 4 separate major competitions, the first entirely consisting of professional players; the *Overwatch* League Season 6, with the remaining competitions consisting of open-tournaments including non-professional players, Flash Ops Holiday Showdown, and the Overwatch Championship Series Korea season, and Stage 1 Finals. Following the collapse of the Overwatch League, competitive *Overwatch* 2 esports was forced to undergo a major shift in organization, switching away from a franchise model and back to local and regional competitions. The shift back to local competitions and the uncertainty of the professional capacity of *Overwatch* esports could prove challenging to players and fans alike. Drawing upon participant observation of competition, conversations with fans, analysis of postgame broadcast interviews, and fan-player interactions I examine how players and fans coordinate to create productive communities in service of esports competition and how players and fans interact with one another in Korean contexts.

Chapter 3: Fan signs and Photocards: Gendered Fandom and Labor in Korean esports

In this chapter, I examine how Korean esports fandom is gendered, arguing that women maintain an important position within the Korean esports scene. Contrary, to western fan norms that typically sideline or marginalize female participation Korean women are active participants within these esports communities and often the driving force behind the organizational efforts locally. Through participant observation of esports offline competition, fan interviews I explore how Korean esports fandom is gendered and supportive of alternative participation to this traditionally hegemonic male space, but also how female participation within these spaces does not remove them from contemporary issues in Korea.

Chapter 3 goes further into examining the fan-player dynamic of Korean esports, focusing on how gender roles and expectations manifest within these fan spaces. Contemporary Korean society is grappling with major gender issues that are often highlighted in online and offline discourse. Korean esports provides opportunities for many actors, male and female to operate and cultivate their interest of the sport. In striking contrast to how esports fandom operates in western contexts, esports fandom in Korea relies greatly upon female participation. Combining interviews with esports staff, broadcasters, and fans, I highlight how gender roles are imagined and processed within Korean esports spaces. Through conversations, interviews, and observations I explore how feminine attitudes, values, and behavior structure interaction between fans and players, but more gender lends organization and purpose to the contemporary esports industry.

Chapter 4: When Whales Fight, A Shrimp's Back is Broken: The Transnational Politics of Activism in Esports

In this chapter, we examine how esports players find themselves at odds with the industry, and larger geopolitics. I draw upon fan responses, media coverage, and Congressional reports to argue that esports activism is subject to larger political hegemony. As Chinese and American capitalist interests come into conflict, differing national interests are swept up and aside in the clash of titanic economies. Esports, while dominated by South Korean influence (K. Y. Bae 2021) remains reliant upon transnational labor, fandom, and platforms, finds itself situated between the "whales" of American and Chinese diplomacy, leaving little space for counter-hegemonic activist movements. Understanding how esports in Korea operate against the will of industry and the state. Utilizing Elfving-Hwang's concept of a Hallyu "code of ethics", a practice which demands (individual) adherence to capital and doesn't allow for behavior that goes against the economic goals of the culture industries. (Elfving-Hwang 2018). As esports players activism goes against the "best practices" of the industry, it will be beneficial to understand how players navigate these turbulent waters.

Conclusion: That's not Hallyu! Korean gaming as (non)culture

I end the dissertation by looking back at the position of esports vis-à-vis *hallyu* culture. Drawing upon conversations with esports stakeholders, players, and fans, I contend that Korean gaming culture while unrecognizable serves as a useful lens to understanding Korean culture. While games in Korea have long been held at the margins, the ubiquity of play and the increasing global significance of professional game labor situates Korea at a crossroads. While it has been under threat from larger hegemonic interests Korea still boasts political, economic, and social capital within the gaming world. While much of the industrial capacity of *hallyu* has been focused on identifying global trends, rapidly following, and reproducing with a high focus on production quality, esports in many ways represents the antithesis of such organization, as being the one major culture industry that Korea introduced to the world. At risk is more than simple first-mover status, but a deeper understanding of how games are situated within the daily lives of youth, not only in Korea but globally.

Korea is good at esports…So what?

I recall early on in my graduate career while attending a conference for the next generation of Korean scholars, historian Michael Robinson was giving the keynote, and during which he advised all the attendees to think long and carefully, about the directions they were planning to take their research. Playing to the younger crowd he advised "It is never overlooked areas of research, but always *new* areas as there may be a good reason for being overlooked", the advice while scathingly appropriate has stuck with me since then, as I have often thought about why is it that there hasn't been more research into the gaming culture of Korea. As one scholar told me, "We keep waiting for them to arrive on the scene, but they never seem to show up to the station." While it made a certain sense that games studies as a new area of study would take time to find its footing within the study of Korean history or culture. I was continually surprised that as the years went by the engagement with games failed to materialize. When interest in Korea exploded over the past 15 years, and Korean culture left the shadows to become a globally dominant player, games discourse somehow did not follow. The work that I do in this dissertation is an attempt to change that course.

In the process of correcting that course I recognize another issue, namely "Why is it that we need to understand Korea at all? What is relevant for a general game studies audience to better understand esports"? I argue throughout this dissertation that in order to see how esports has risen in prominence, responding to the changing needs of societies that are more fully embracing the digital on the daily, a thorough examination and understanding of Korea is necessary. Not simply, because the roots of contemporary esports are Korean, nor that some of the most talented players are Korean. Rather, it is because with the ascendency of Korean popular culture as mainstream and a global phenomenon, deeper awareness of the cultural, political, and historical events that shaped Korea *continue* to guide Korea as it maintains its global media relevance. When it comes to esports, Korean organization remains the standard, maintaining an outsized influence on all manner of organization—labor, fan culture, or media—demanding those of us that are interested in esports familiarize ourselves with the conditions of life on the Korean peninsula. For the reasons above, I argue that if we are to understand eSports then we must understand Korea first.

The Korean esports industry has positioned itself as the premier global player labor force, fans follow the careers of players as closely as any idol or sports superstar. While school children dream of growing up and becoming esports players, the government establishes esports festivals, promoting and celebrating the players as national heroes. The work that I do in this dissertation is the culmination of my many years of living in Korea, participating in not only Korean esports communities but also the mundane and ordinary of regular game communities in Korea. I have highlighted my desire to employ field work and ethnography as core methodological components of my analytical lens into the world of Korean esports locally. The fact of the matter is that in many ways I have been hybridized by my extensive experience living in Korea. At some point I positioned myself in that “off-center” role that Masao so urges, American but Korean trained, hopefully with enough distance to really demonstrate how esports, as socio-cultural practices allow us to better understand not only the conditions of play, competition, and collaboration, but also how these spaces provide a glimpse into the conditions on the ground, and are more than simply the start of a “perfect night.”

Chapter 1: A brief history to understand Korean esports in a Global Context

Korea # 1!

- A *common refrain in various esports communities*

"You can never go wrong with a Korean flex support."

-FunnyAstro, *British Professional esports player*

1.1 Korea's S-tier Gaming Culture

Korea is punching above weight, frequently being the site of the most profitable, competitive, and complex esports networks. Korea has one of the leading esports industries, but what does that mean for the players and systems that are in place around them? Esports has been a major focus for Korea since they developed the world's first national level esports association in 2000, the Korea e-Sports Association, then called the 21st Century Pro-Game Association, (hereafter KeSPA), which has been instrumental in developing policy and regulation for the industry. Korea's infrastructure has been developed to create physical and cultural spaces for gameplay and development and it exports these to the world (D. Y. Jin 2010). Korean players are also a major demographic throughout the global industry, with an estimated 5,211 players and as of writing 128 million USD in prize money, which would be the 3rd largest prize-winning pool, behind only China and the United States[11].

Through the utilization of its Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure, localized labor in the form of players and coaches, and cultural influences, Korea has become a key player in the scene of esports. Media scholar T.L. Taylor describes "the story of South Korean esports highlight the ways culture, larger infrastructural developments, policy decisions, and economic activities have intersected in a fortuitous way at particular historical moment to support the formation of a new form of leisure and sport" (2012, 18). Korean leadership in the esports industry has led to other countries emulating its policies (H.-M. Kim and Kim 2022), ICT infrastructure development (Jiang and Fung 2019), and business strategies (Summerly 2021). The importance of Korean esports as a cultural institution has been examined, anthropologist Stephen Rea explored the growing popularity of esports in Korea during the 2010s, focusing on how the culture of esports gameplay in Korea had a significant impact on Korean culture as well as the development of the global esports industry (Rea 2016). The intersection of ICT technology and culture created opportunities for youth to engage in play.

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[11] These statistics were obtained via www.esportsearnings.com a repository for global esports statistics.

Culturally, Korea has been a hotbed of esports activity and competition for decades, often being described as the "Mecca of esports" (H. Yu 2018; T. L. Taylor 2012) denoting its outsized influence on the global industry. Korean esports culture has benefited from particular ICT developments such as the proliferation of "PC bangs" or internet café's (Huhh 2008). From a young age collective and competitive gameplay has been a mainstay in youth culture (F. Chee 2006). Korean professional players have been sought after by various international leagues, while their training methods and styles have been made to the competitive standard (K. Y. Bae 2021).

Korea is a useful site for understanding the complex relationship that games have in a global context because in many ways they find themselves situated at the intersection between the Global North and the Global South. They have a long and complex history of being colonized by the East in Imperial Japan and then rebuilt and modernized with Western influence by the United States (Y. Cho 2016). Korea has positioned itself in a way to capitalize upon its leverage both regionally and globally creating its own cultural empire. As media scholar Keung Yeun Bae describes "South Korean esports exists in deep connection with other esports scenes in the US, China, Europe, Japan, and so on, not merely in terms of players connecting with each other at international competitions, but also in terms of labour flow, power dynamics, and racialized and nationalized identities" (2021, 207). The media industries of Korea have found ways to create inroads regionally and globally through the development of high-production-value content. Online games have proven to be a perfect match for Korean tastes. In contrast with North America and Japan, Korean gamers overwhelmingly prefer to play games as part of a group (D. Y. Jin 2010, 30). In what Jin refers to as "mass play culture," Korean gamers prefer to join together, often in an internet café they do not want to be alone but instead play in groups against each other (2010, 30), in what is known as player versus player games, where the objective is the elimination of other players. The collective group play dynamic is especially important in Korea where, console and PC games were less popular among gamers, due to the absence of or limitations in group play" (Chan 2008, 188–90). We can see that structurally different regions interact with games in different manners, from the PC Bang—Korea's internet café—and mobile games more favored in Korea to console games in Japan and the United States.

The political and economic importance of culture industries has been at the forefront of contemporary Korean politics. Since at least 2008, during then, Korean President Lee Myung-Bak's inaugural address where he emphatically recognized how the culture industries lie at the foundation of Korean progress and growth, declaring "[South Korea] must develop our competitiveness in our content industries, thereby laying the foundation to become a nation strong in cultural activities." This growth relies heavily upon the domestic games industry, which is far and away the country's largest cultural economic producer. Esports celebrity and cultural appreciation has also manifested at national level for decades, when professional StarCraft player Lim Yo-hwan, was recognized as a “cultural celebrity” in the 2003 Blue House Cultural Industrial Policy Report (Rea 2016).

While esports has been able to rise to the level of (inter)national celebrity, much of the focus in Korea has been on the complex relationship between Korean values and gameplay, where it has often been viewed as an addiction or social deviancy (Y. Sang, Park, and Seo 2017). Support among youth for careers in esports necessitated a deeper understanding of the motivations of esports players. Kim and Thomas (2015) looked towards a socio-cultural analysis of esports players motivations and trajectories, identifying a need for the development of education and learning techniques to support education for 21st-century youth. There is a need to better understand the process of youth esports engagement as it leads beyond employment and into the realm of celebrity where it can act as a driving force of culture development.

The study of esports is a new focus for many disciplines, including game studies, informatics, and HCI scholarship, yet few studies have examined how the esports industry operates as a cultural industry (Reitman et al. 2020). While esports is being examined as a global phenomenon, more research on the local and area specific cultural components of the industry is needed. In the field of game studies, new scholarship pushing towards “re-centering” and “de-colonizing” our understanding of game technologies and cultures is becoming more prevalent (Patterson 2020; Martin 2018; Consalvo 2016; Mukherjee 2017). The research bridges the gap between game studies, informatics, and area studies through situating the practice and development of esports within the cultural, historical, and political realm of Korea.

1.2 Korea's Place in the Sun

Korean historian Bruce Cumings, in his book that this section bears its name--*Korea's Place in the Sun*—wrote of Korea and its people "Korea is not a well-known country, and the rest of the world is only now discovering the talents of its people"(2005, 538). Korean esports is in many regards the proud legacy of Korean ingenuity when it comes to advocating for play. It is also the legacy of Cold War division, Anti-communist authoritarian rule, of financial collapse and rebirth, of intervention of Neoliberal fiscal policy, and the push towards globalized celebrity and icon via soft-power culture industrial supremacy. In all of these things Korean esports, its players, fans, managers, and stakeholders, is resolutely Korean, exactly the same as what Cumings says of Korean history "the real story is indigenous Korea and the unstinting Koreanization of foreign influence, not vice versa" (ibid. 2005, 538).

To understand the importance of esports within Korea, and potentially the world at large, I will examine the historic, political, and systemic conditions that led it to be considered such a major influencer in the esports industry. In this section, I examine particular events that took place to help understand the discussion and lesson on empire and Korea that exists within Korean esports, how these particular developments are part of a larger more coordinated process of utilizing Korean labor and culture as a means to operate its global objectives. Essentially Korea creates a quasi-gaming empire via its Korean esports development, but those challenges to this hegemony result in divisive plans on how to move forward have led to a particular difficulty in capturing meaningful ways forward. This is all to highlight how these decisions organize the esports industry as a culture industry and one that represents Korean values.

While I argue about the importance of understanding Korean development of technological modernity vis-à-vis esports, it would be wrong to not accept that the development of this mode of interaction is simultaneously the process of modernization, globalization, and intervention, as Shin and Robinson note, “Nonetheless, non-European modernity[…] did not develop in isolation from Western Europe — it was influenced by the model of the Western nation-state and affected by power politics and economic relations in its transmission(2000b, 10). As we will see through this examination of Korean history it is its relationships with hegemonic powers that set up its position to be the arbiter of the esports industry. To do so we need to examine some of the complex histories of Korea to properly contextualize not only how Korea was positioned to capitalize on this particular culture industry, but also how its development is meaningful as a lens in understanding the role of games and esports outside of the geographical proximity of East Asia. This history is relevant to help us understand why Korea is such a meaningful actor in the realm of games and esports, as well as to understanding how Korea has been able to create its own form of hegemony through its reliance on its superior labor and organization of esports and gaming talents. What I hope will become clear is that through the dialectic of Korean development and modernization that it has seized upon the opportunities that were uniquely made available to Korea. Nevertheless, in spite of the outsized success of the Korean tech industries to create viable conditions for the development and potentially profligate of esports it still must navigate itself as a semi-colonial subject under the auspices of American hegemony. The difficult position of Korea has been exacerbated by “the hegemonic competition between the United States and China…Korea is geographically and culturally close to China, and China is Korea’s biggest foreign market. At the same time, the United States has been Korea’s ally since World War II.(H.-M. Kim and Kim 2022, 179). The delicate maneuvering necessary to navigate the space between larger economic and cultural titans has forced Korea to adopt strategies that please both larger countries often at a risk to its own developing industries(ibid). Yet, despite these challenges, Korean esports produced new value and possibilities for cultural expression, economic engagement, and technological prowess.

What has yet to be said in this examination of Korean history is it is contested space. Looking at the contemporary history of the Korean peninsula forces us to interact with the legacy of Cold War division, and the bifurcation of a people, culture, and land. The division of Korea into North and South, Communist and Capitalist is even less a subject of inquiry of this dissertation, but the conditions of that fissure resonate in *all* the developments of contemporary Korea, both North and South. While Korea can be said to be haunted by the ghosts of colonialism and the spirit of imperialism(K. Chung 2014), as concerns of being lost to the powers of empire existed since at least 1920, those feelings have not subsided, but have been amplified since the division. The clash of these competing visions for Korea played out in a myriad of complex ways, that still are being untangled and navigated to the present day. Suffice it to say, the process of colonial subjugation as a "price" for its modernity shaped the direction of Korea for decades since its liberation in 1945.

This preamble aims to establish the conditions that South Korea was subject to as it advanced through the 20th century, at various times under authoritarian rule, before achieving representative democracy in 1988. It is important to recognize that Korea's colonial history differs from that of other countries colonial experiences[12](G.-W. Shin and Robinson 2000a; Cumings 2005; Fedman 2020; Eckert 2003). As has been discussed at length, the process of Japanese colonialism played out very differently from the imperial projects of Western Europe and the United States, where Japanese dominion included massive structural investment among other attempts to assimilate the Korean people. Tracing the path of media industry in Korea prior to its ICT turn in the 1990s exposes the relationship that these industries had with their own government as well as how it was part of a larger organization of media technologies at the forefront of the Cold War. The connections between Korean media, Japanese and American imperialism lays bare how Korea has envisioned its own culture industries would operate as a part of the state. This unfolds in state investment in ICT infrastructure, promotion of Korean celebrity via high production value media, and dogged pursuit of global excellence in global competitions. What follows below is a truncated history of Korean culture and media industries viewed through the lens of modernization, sovereignty, and authenticity which explore how Korean infrastructure promoted the development of a burgeoning games culture, market, and industry.

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[12] Historians have pointed out that the conditions for colonialism in Korea were markedly different from those colonial projects that were conducted by Western powers. In contrast to the perception of western imperialism being almost exclusively about resource extraction, Japanese colonialism in Korea is more pervasive in its attempts to assimilate the Korean people in addition to monopolize their natural resources. For example, the Cumings highlights how the Japanese imperial government was heavily invested in the development of infrastructure in the Korean peninsula(Cumings 2005). They focused building and codifying public education for children as well as installing thousands of miles of railroad, to where the Korean peninsula had half as many miles of track as China, despite a fraction of the landmass.

1.3 Towards a Modern Korean Culture Industry

The following section explores the development of the modern-day culture industries, looking at how historical events from as early as the Japanese Colonial period laid framework for contemporary Korean relationships with modern media. These developments ultimately transformed into larger, more complex, and robust culture industries that were meaningfully *Korean* in their design, before they diffused outwardly into globalized markets and regions. The histories of technological development of Colonial Korea through those of modern-day South Korea tell the origins of global esports. The seeds of Korean modernization—from a primarily agrarian state to a fully developed industrial state modeled after Westernization—in many senses relied upon the development and support of the Japanese empire and their investments into infrastructure and media expansion. Yet, that is *not* to say that Korean modernization is the product of Japanese occupation and intervention, *rather* that the Korean people adopted these new technologies and utilized them to suit their own cultural and domestic needs, in effect Koreanizing them. Michael Robinson points out that it was “a gross oversimplification to assert that Japanese radio was just another in a series of coercive, modern technologies imported to Korea to further Japanese political control and, ultimately, assimilation”(Robinson 2000, 69). The role that Japan played in the modernization project of Korea laid the groundwork for new interactions with popular media, he goes on to say “Radio, like other Japanese “investments” in colonial Korea, became part of a dynamic system of new cultural forms, technologies, and habits that transformed cultural life in Korea between 1910 and 1945. These had tremendous power and shaped, while Japanizing, the structure of an emerging Korean modernity. But within selected spaces of autonomous development, Koreans struggled to make part of that modernity their own. (Robinson 2000, 69). The development of Korean modernity would unfold along these lines for decades, often in opposition to the colonial conditions, then in response to Cold War division and occasionally in supplication to its Western ally, the United States of America.

Modernization becomes a site that highlights how development of media technologies and media industry takes center stage in contemporary Korea. To understand the conditions that Korean esports is operating within it becomes necessary to track the economic and social precursors that in many ways originated during Japanese colonial occupation. That these industries were mostly destroyed during following the American “mandated” division of the peninsula following the Japanese colonial period. As condition of Japanese surrender, Korea was divided and the competing visions for history were directly put into conflict. These conflicts would result in the Korean War, the first large-scale proxy war during the Cold War, as the United Nations under the support of the United States “defended” the South against Northern incursions. The results of this conflict was the wholesale destruction of the Korean peninsula, and the loss of millions of lives. This intervention by American military forces established a de-facto police state where authoritarian Korean leadership was able to violate human rights while providing “security” for American interests in the region. One example of this protectionist policy making was the 1948 Act for Punishing Anti-National Activities[13]: which among other things, banned all foreign cultural products deemed against the national interest(J.-C. Kim 2015). This law was predominantly Japan focused and indirectly led to later Korean failures to accept Japanese cultural technological developments, notably the Nintendo entertainment system. Hyun Ok Park highlights how the transition from authoritarian rule to representative democracy fundamentally maintained its reliance and support of capital as it underwent threats of social, political, and economic crisis (2015). The reconstruction of South Korea under the auspices of authoritarian rule promoted particular conservative practices with regards to the development of culture and art(J. Seo and Kim 2015). The Yushin constitution, as enacted by Authoritarian President Park Chung Hee, further centralized power in the executive branch and led to sweeping conservative policies despite their unpopularity locally.

In the 1980s, video arcades spread rapidly across the country as Korean youth began regularly frequenting them. The rapid rise of these establishments caused concern among the public and the government was quick to prohibit adolescents from entry. However, this did little to curtail youth play in such locations as, most arcade rooms were already operating illegally, and as such loathe to draw attention from the government(Yang 2018). The moral panic that surrounded the use of these rooms led to many attempts by the Korean government to crack down on their use. The result of these regulations greatly impacted the growth potential of the domestic arcade and video game industry of the 1980s. Relationships between industry and the government were strained, and despite the widespread popularity of these rooms, resulted primarily in black market use. While the government would relax its enforcement of regulations banning the use of arcades, the government failed to adequately appraise the economic and cultural value of arcades further limited the growth of the Korean console game industry. Paradoxically, it was the lack of serious development of arcade and console game industry, outside of arcade infrastructure that would preserve Korean interest in PC and online gaming, and what would eventually develop into what is best known as esports[14] today.

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[13] 반민족행위처벌법

1.3.1 (Pre)History of Korean Esports

In the introduction we examined the origins of esports[15], and their relationship to physical spaces. Before we can examine the conditions of contemporary Korean esports it is necessary to briefly cover the modern history of Korea. Korea's transformation from abject poverty in the post-Korean War era, through the economic advancements dubbed "The Miracle on the Han River" under the authoritarian rule of Park Chung Hee in the 1970s. This economic development coincided with a long and bloody popular democratic movement as Korean citizens organized for a free democratic nation. The rapid economic and cultural development is frequently referred to as a "compressed modernity" (Chang 2010) as Korea rapidly transformed its economy, society, and cultural norms from more localized rural and agrarian origins to industrialized urban spaces. These drastic changes taking place over a matter of decades where Western nations took centuries, in many ways laying the groundwork for Korean society that demands rapid progress as a necessary component of daily life. American Capitalist hegemony made itself present frequently in the 1970s and 1980s, as Korean aid in the Vietnam war allowed to prosper under the economic investment of the US cold war policy apparatus, as part of developing satellite nations in the ideological fight against Communism. But, as Cumings points out, The internal systemic failures of socialist modernity induced the leader states of the capitalist bloc to seriously reconsider the political utility of subsidizing the capitalist modernization process of numerous client nations (1998). The process of capital influx furthered the development of an industrialized and technologized Korea, as is represented by the transformation of an agrarian Korea beginning to industrialize and democratize during Japanese annexation leading through the Korean war and democracy movement of the 20th century.

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[14] Esports, of course is not limited to PC or online play, mobile and console esports are widely popular, but it was PC gaming practices that first enabled widespread participation in Korea.

[15] Ad-hoc competitions, held to see who could garner the highest score in games like *Galaga*, *Space Invaders*, and *Pong* garnered great attention and fandom in the United States. These competitions developed into a more organized, loose though they may be, systems that allowed players to gather and showcase their skills and passion for playing games. These competitions would be held across the United States and could be viewed as the prototypical versions of esports that we see contemporarily. At this stage of its development esports was largely dispersed, isolated and loosely organized. It would not be until the early 2000s that the esports industry would make grand leaps to become what it is more recognized as today. Korea has a major influence on the development of that stems from its infrastructural advantages as well as the cultural makeup and organization of its densely populated citizenry.

Following the 1987 democracy movement Korea relied heavily upon its manufacturing industries as the cornerstone of its economy, but large-scale shifts to the organization and makeup of the economy were underway as high-tech industries and cultural industry grew in prominence. This chapter explores the conditions that set Korea up as a site for culture industry expansion, and more importantly as the fertile grounds for game industry, culture, and play. The history of Korean esports is intertwined with that of Southern Californian video game industry, as well as American foreign economic policy and trade.

1990s The Jurassic Park Moment and the International Monetary Fund Crisis

Korea's transition from a material export economy to include culture-based goods in the 1990s can be seen from the Jurassic Park moment of 1993, where then president Kim Young Sam upon realizing that the proceeds from the American film Jurassic Park equaled the sales revenue for 1.5 million Hyundai cars began to value the power of cultural production." Much of the success of esports in Korea can be laid at the feet of ICT transition following the 1997 International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis[16]—a severe economic downturn that hit South Korea and other Asian countries, leading to a sharp devaluation of the Korean won, widespread bankruptcies, and a bailout from the IMF that came with stringent economic reforms and restructuring requirements. As Korea was modifying its economy to focus more on the potential of the culture industries, the local game scene saw a particular boost in the development of infrastructure. This infrastructure included thousands of internet café's, locally known as PC Bang, these internet café's provided high-quality, affordable, and easy access to games(Huhh 2008). As the ubiquity and popularity of these 3rd places grew they became a key site for Korean youth development and culture(F. M. Chee 2023). Chee points out that the PC Bang became a place of great meaning and importance to Korean youth, but also a place of discrimination, and turmoil. Youth as it would appear used these locations to further the schoolyard activities and these behaviors can ultimately be seen unfolding in the professional spaces of esports that demand so much from young Korean talent.

In 1997 the IMF economic crisis resulted in the Korean government requesting loans for its debt. Under the conditions of the loan the Korean government and ICT industry underwent major changes to the structure of employment, as well as opening the country up to foreign investment for the first time. However, Korea was able to mobilize its citizens to collaborate and collectively pool its resources to rapidly pay down the debt from the IMF loans in only three years, and in under 20 years since its need for large-scale IMF capital investment became a solvent state(H.-M. Kim and Kim 2022). While the IMF crisis would lead to massive upheaval and changes in Korean ICT infrastructure, particularly the development of nationwide broadband, it also led to an explosive growth of PC bangs(D. Y. Jin 2020), the physical spaces where Korean esports would emerge from.

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[16] Also known as the 1997 Asian economic Crisis.

1.3.2 Proto-esports: The Korean StarCraft Leagues 1998-early 2000s

Korea began to pioneer the way the methods that would come to dominate the organization, broadcasting, and celebration of modern esports in the early 2000s. To understand how esports was organized, let's look at the release and popularity of the American Real-time Strategy (RTS) title *StarCraft* (Blizzard 1998). The sci-fi military RTS game was an overnight success in Korea, as players were attracted to the game's high speed and quick game times. As the popularity of the game exploded Korean broadcast executives were keen to create opportunities for broadcasting and spectator development(D. Y. Jin 2020). This led to the creation of broadcasts of the *StarCraft League* in 1999, these broadcasts would rapidly expand into a full-scale production channel, with the development of the OnGameNet, as well as the development of physical infrastructure of stadiums dedicated to esports(D. Y. Jin 2010). The focus on esports as a broadcast medium firmly entrenched Korea as a first-mover into the esports space(H.-M. Kim and Kim 2022). Korea began to corral private and public funding and support for the development of esports leagues, hosting the World cyber games, creating online and television broadcasting of esports and ultimately achieving a "golden age of esports"(H.-M. Kim and Kim 2022, 4). While the capital and social development of the local esports was flourishing in the 2000s, larger political and economic decisions made at the state level were being put into motion that would greatly impact the future stability and organization of esports in Korea.

The combination of a population thirsty for access to games was aided by the boost of ICT technologies and infrastructure that boomed in the late 1990s. Korean players and esports fans codified competition and began to organize play into offline leagues and play sites(D. Y. Jin 2020), admittedly focusing on developing networks of offline interaction. While esports would transition globally through their reliance upon online play, it was these fertile offline spaces that established the initial opportunity for rapid growth (Ibid).

The immense success of the StarCraft League came from its popularity and support locally. Hye Reong Ok, describes how esports play and fandom was widespread and normalized(2011), games furthermore were viewed as providing opportunities for youth socialization and development (F. Chee 2006; Um, Kim, and Kim 2005). But despite the efforts of the local Korean community, Blizzard identified and pursued ways to recapture control over broadcasting and direction of the newly formed esport. In 2009 they sent requests to the Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA) that it end all broadcasting operations of its game products, following the attempts of KeSPA to sell broadcast rights to local Korean media outlets (Rea 2016, 24). This begins the transition of Korean esports as a decisionmaker in the industry and instead re-positions into a support role. As Korean media companies scrambled to maintain their position within the industry esports continued to be a major focus and interest for youth looking to participate in the vibrant world of games.

1.3.3 The Empire Strikes Back: 2007-2012:

In the late 2000s American corporations began to “correct” their mistake and find new ways to capture esports surplus value they also work to create new “safer” modes of esports labor. This can be seen during the formation of the Overwatch League, 2016-2023, the highest tier of esports competition in the game of *Overwatch* (2016). By reorganizing local esports into a global franchise model players are given wage floors to protect their interests. However, as would often happen in practice, this demarcation would only further separate the haves from the have-nots when it came to financial security and absence of precarity in the global esports scene.

The great disparity in consumption, and production value is centered when examining the new organization of Korean esports amid global video game development and broadcasting. In their book *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter present video games as located within "fractured economic order', where both consumption and production has been globalized, albeit in an uneven and twisted fashion (2009, 23). For Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter they examine how modes of biopower are geographically located and shaped, using the example of Chinese gold farmers in the massively multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft.* In this example, Chinese players are organized into largescale gold mining/farming operations that acquire in-game currency, like gold, and items and then sell them directly for offline currency, in a direct violation of the terms of service provided by the developer Blizzard. The authors expand the original Foucauldian definition of biopower; the practice of modern nation-states and their regulation of their subjects through numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations, to also encompass the ways in which game developers police at 'virtual and actual levels'. Keung Yeun Bae goes further describing how the framework of biopower as introduced by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter is emblematic of the same ways that Blizzard wrested control of Korean esports(K. Y. Bae 2021). What unfolds in in this scenario is biopower at play, esports finds itself with a scenario that capital is attempting to subsume control and value in all ways, and as such is creating new ways to organize labor to better serve capital. Even though it is the players and fans that make esports, it is the leagues that are making all the money.

As noted earlier in the chapter, following the IMF crisis and massive expansion of ICT infrastructure domestically led to Koreans leveraging its domestic telecommunications infrastructure to create broad communities of participation in the activity of competitive gaming. Florence Chee describes the importance that video games had for Korean youth, and how PC Bangs operated as areas for social development and playful organization (F. M. Chee 2023). As gaming accrued incredible social capital participation within competitive gaming became a meaningful site for youth participation. What began to unfold as Korean esports matured from ad-hoc organizations to a full-blown industry, replete with teams, organized competition, broadcasting and fame. The development of a global esports labor force can be seen as the process of capitalist meritocracy in action. As Bae notes: “The general perception is that video games are a place where structural barriers and disadvantages vanish, and what remains on the battleground is pure, unadulterated skill, be it lightning-speed reflexes, superior aim, or strategic game sense” (K. Y. Bae 2021, 219). However, despite this being a relatively uncontested value in competitive video gaming, Bae continues on to challenge such assertions. In the case of Korea, we see that it is not so much a meritocracy that determines the winners and losers in esports but that there are several structural competitive advantages that Korean players utilize to train and excel in esports, most notably the PC bang. The PC Bang also helps to diminish class barriers to esports participation, in ways that are much more difficult in other international settings, where players are typically reliant upon their own computers and consoles to be able to participate in esports. It is in the PC Bang that Bae describes the ways in which Korean players utilize Korean infrastructure as “the physical locus of disruptive biopolitical productivity”(2021, 222) to counter Blizzards control over the esports ecosystem.

2007 US-Korea Free Trade Agreement

While Korea was reaping the benefits of a healthy and strong interest in esports, there were mixed opinions about the progress of these domestic leagues on the other side of the Pacific. The overwhelming success of the game and the support of by the masses were cause for celebration for the developers at Blizzard, but simultaneously there would be those who saw these advancements and formations with a growing concern, specifically at the amount of surplus value that was being created without being realized. (Partin 2018). However, as the Korean StarCraft leagues were gaining popularity, developing fan communities and infrastructure there was little that Blizzard could do legally to rectify the situation(Burk 2016). Blizzard executives were more than eager to find ways to recapture that value to better serve American corporate interests and found the opportunity during the 2007 Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Korea and the United States. As a major component of this FTA Korea would support the intellectual property rights of American institutions as one of the results of the FTA.

To fully recapture the value created by the Korean government, fan bases, and private industry Blizzard reorganized, restructured, and restricted access to play its various game franchises. With the release of *StarCraft 2* gone was LAN functionality, where players could locally host and play with one another, instead all play required access to Blizzard-owned servers. This fundamental shift in rights of play came to a head in an international lawsuit the 2010 KeSPA v. Blizzard Broadcasting Rights lawsuit, which was a resounding victory for American property rights, and ultimately, I argue led to a restructuring of how Korean esports would organize and operate from then on. Instead of being the site of international competition and the main locus of esports offline games, Korean esports would find itself subject to the dominion of American and Chinese corporations that owned the underlying IP of the esport in question. Denied its right to be a broadcasting center Korea instead refocused its resources to become the global labor resource of esports. It would be this decision that ultimately may have doomed Korean esports labor to second tier status, in spite of their overwhelming distinction as being the most skilled and capable esports players worldwide.

2010 KeSPA v Blizzard Broadcasting rights dispute.

The 2010 conflict between the Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA) and Blizzard Entertainment over *StarCraft* esports broadcasting rights marked a pivotal moment in the history of Korean esports. This dispute not only reshaped the landscape of professional *StarCraft* but also had far-reaching consequences for the entire Korean esports ecosystem. KeSPA's role in this golden age cannot be overstated. With government backing, it had established a structured league system, negotiated sponsorships, and effectively professionalized gaming in a way unseen anywhere else in the world. *StarCraft* tournaments were drawing large audiences, both online and in person, with events filling stadiums and attracting mainstream media attention. When the conflict between KeSPA and Blizzard came to a head in 2010, it sent shockwaves through the Korean esports scene. Blizzard's decision to partner with GomTV for *StarCraft 2* broadcasts effectively created two parallel and competing ecosystems within Korean esports with KeSPA-run leagues, continuing with the original StarCraft while GomTV-run leagues, featured the new *StarCraft 2*.

This split had several immediate consequences: Professional players and teams were forced to choose between the two ecosystems. Some remained loyal to KeSPA and the original *StarCraft*, while others saw greater opportunities in *StarCraft 2*. This division of talent weakened the overall competitive scene. The Korean esports audience, previously united in their support of *StarCraft*, was now split between two games and two broadcasting platforms. This fragmentation led to decreased viewership for both sides. Compounding the issue was sponsorship uncertainty, as companies that had invested heavily in *StarCraft* esports were now unsure about where to allocate their resources. The split market made it more difficult to reach the same large, unified audience they had previously enjoyed access to.

As the dispute dragged on and was finally resolved in 2012, its effects on Korean esports became more apparent. Prior to the dispute, Korea was the undisputed global leader in esports, with *StarCraft* as its flagship game. The fragmentation of the scene allowed other regions and games to gain ground, diminishing Korea's dominant position. The over-reliance on *StarCraft* was exposed as a vulnerability. In the aftermath of the dispute, Korean esports organizations began to diversify, investing more heavily in other games like *League of Legends* and *Overwatch*.

Additionally, this marked a remarkable shift in the Korean relationships with foreign game developers, as the dispute highlighted the power that game developers held over esports ecosystems. Korean organizations became more cautious in their dealings with developers, seeking clearer agreements and partnerships from the outset. The conflict exposed the need for more professional management in esports. Korean teams and organizations began to adopt more sophisticated business practices, including legal counsel for negotiations with game developers and sponsors.

The Korean government, recognizing the economic and cultural importance of esports, became more actively involved in supporting and regulating the industry to prevent similar disputes in the future. The uncertainty caused by the dispute led many players to reconsider their career paths. Some retired, others switched games, and a new generation of players emerged who were more adaptable to different games and ecosystems.

While the immediate aftermath of the KeSPA-Blizzard dispute was challenging for Korean esports, it ultimately led to a more resilient and diverse ecosystem. The lessons learned from this conflict helped shape a more mature industry, better equipped to handle the complexities of game developer relationships, intellectual property rights, and the rapidly evolving nature of esports. The KeSPA-Blizzard broadcasting dispute stands as a watershed moment in Korean esports history, marking the end of the era dominated by Korean local broadcasts and audiences, and the beginning of another, one more globally focused at its outset. Its impact continues to shape the industry, serving as both a cautionary tale and a catalyst for positive change in the ever-evolving world of competitive gaming.

1.3.4 League of Legends, Overwatch APEX, and localized competition: 2012-2017

In the wake of the 2010 KeSPA v. Blizzard broadcasting dispute esports in Korea found itself at a crossroads. While the popularity of esports had made firm inroads into everyday society, esports leagues began to shift towards more competitive and corporate organization, which while it established a sense of security for the player base as the corporate sponsorships guaranteed salaries and greater financial security coincided with a general falling of interest in the esports with the less than successful release of Blizzard's *StarCraft 2*(Y. Lee 2020). The success of the Korean broadcasting companies OnGameNet and MBC Games was threatened by the lack of popularity of the successor, and as a result MBC Games folded while OnGameNet reduced a significant portion of its esports broadcasting. It wouldn't be until after the release of Riot Games' *League of Legends* (2009) (LoL) building off of the success of early esports competitions in Europe that game broadcasting in Korea would rebound and grow.

The Overwatch APEX League was a groundbreaking esports tournament series that played a pivotal role in shaping the competitive Overwatch scene from 2016 to 2017. Organized by

OnGameNet, a renowned Korean esports broadcaster, Overwatch APEX quickly became the most prestigious *Overwatch* competition of its time, and a direct precursor to the larger and more international Overwatch League (2016-2023).

Overwatch APEX featured a unique format that brought together top Korean teams and invited international squads, creating a melting pot of talent and strategies. The tournament ran for four seasons, each lasting several months and culminating in high-stakes playoff matches. This structure allowed for the development of compelling narratives and rivalries that captivated fans worldwide. The league showcased some of the most talented *Overwatch* players and teams of the era. Legendary organizations like Lunatic-Hai, EnVyUs, and RunAway battled for supremacy, with many players later transitioning to become stars in the Overwatch League. Overwatch APEX served as a crucial proving ground for both individual talent and team strategies, significantly influencing the meta and playstyles of *Overwatch* at the highest level.

Known for its exceptional production quality, Overwatch APEX set new standards for broadcasts. The tournament featured elaborate player introductions, in-depth analysis, and high-quality gameplay coverage that enhanced the viewing experience and helped legitimize Overwatch as a spectator esport. APEX played a crucial role in establishing Korea as a dominant force in Overwatch, with Korean teams consistently outperforming their international counterparts. This success laid the foundation for Korea's continued excellence in the Overwatch League and other international competitions. Despite its relatively short lifespan of just four seasons, APEX left an indelible mark on the Overwatch esports landscape. Its legacy lives on through the players, teams, and memories it created, and it is often remembered nostalgically by fans as a golden era of competitive Overwatch.

1.3.5 China ascending and regional diplomacy

As China re-emerged on the world stage as a global power, in the early 2010s Korea found itself trapped in a delicate position between the Communist China and Capitalist America. Korean cultural products found themselves suddenly subject to restriction and embargo. The tense environment in regional politics overflowing into the domain of cultural and economic issues[17]. Chinese influence over Korean markets, domestic and international necessitates careful action by the Korean state as part of its exercising its sovereignty. As was noted earlier in this chapter, Korea's greatest trade partner is China, and it has much longer historical and cultural ties to China than it does to the United States, who remains it's most important security ally. How this has unfolded for the modern South Korean state is an attempt to placate two masters[18]. The inclusion of Korea under the umbrella of the US Missile Defense Agency and deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (more commonly known as THAAD) system resulted in adverse events for sectors of the Korean economy(H.-M. Kim and Kim 2022). Specifically, China enacted restrictions on the import of a wide variety of goods, notably in the cultural sector including music, dramas, films, and games. The easing of some of these restrictions only occurring in 2023(K. Lee 2023). This timeframe coincided with growing interest by Chinese fans and players in domestic, regional, and international esports competitions.

As Chinas titanic player base was activated into esports, Korean regional supremacy was suddenly under threat. Following after Korea, which first recognized esports as an official sport,

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[17] For example, in 2012, tens of thousands of Chinese citizens demonstrated their outrage and frustration with Japan in a territorial dispute over the Diaoyu islands in China and Senkaku islands in Japan resulting in boycotts, protests, and the destruction of Japanese property. In response to this Japanese Adult Video star Sora Aoi, whose popularity has coined her the Sex Ed. Teacher of the nation(Wang 2018), posted a message on Chinese social media, Sina Weibo urging friendship between the two nations and an attempt of quelling their rage(Ng and Han 2018).

[18] This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 4 where esports player activism directly interacts with both China and the United States.

China recognized esports as the 99th professional competitive sport in the country in 2003(Szablewicz 2020). However, it would not only be the rise of Chinese competitors that challenged Korean positionality within global esports imaginaries, Chinese game developers and esports organizations increasingly began to utilize their economic advantage to establish legitimacy and competitive advantage. Korea's deep pool esports labor became a resource for Chinese teams and organizations to utilize, where they were often able to entice players with higher salaries and access to a larger domestic streaming market(Deesing 2014). As Korean players found labor opportunities outside of the Korean peninsula, Korean values around esports, play, labor, and organization travelled with them.

1.3.6 A League of Our Own: The rise of the Overwatch League 2016-2019

As esports developed as an industry, it started to receive recognition from world leaders as valuable sites of interaction (Seo et al. 2018). South Korea, while having declined over the past decade remains a particularly relevant location in the esports world, being the first country to develop a national esports league, as well as developing public policy, schools, and broadcasting services all aimed at esports.

All of this up to a point has been to describe one particular outcome of the Korean esports industry, focusing on a single studio Blizzard Entertainment and a single esports game. While the case of the Overwatch League, its rise to fame and subsequent Icarian fall from glory highlights the positions of Koreans within the larger contexts of the global esports industry. What we can learn from the rise and fall of the Overwatch League and how it has since been replaced in part by deliberate and meaningful action of Korean stakeholders among other interested parties. Korea has benefitted from its investment in esports infrastructure, including purpose-built infrastructure such as arenas, academies, and domestic festivals, but also from ancillary and tertiary infrastructure where esports development, both labor and fan, has Curb-cut effect[19](Blackwell 2016), where investment in internet technology, bandwidth, and computer accessibility in private and public spheres led to the creation of a massive, talent-laden, labor force eager to participate in the burgeoning new industry of esports.

Korean esports players have had a profound and enduring impact on the Overwatch League since its inception. Their relevance is evident in their dominant presence, with Korean players comprising a large percentage of Overwatch League rosters, often outnumbering players from other regions. Many teams have adopted all-Korean or majority-Korean lineups due to their exceptional skill and synergy. This prevalence is backed by consistent high-level performance, with Korean players and teams frequently achieving success at the highest echelons of competition. Korean players are widely regarded as among the most mechanically skilled and strategically adept in the league, often setting the standard for play in their respective roles. Their influence extends beyond individual performance, as Korean players and coaches frequently pioneer new strategies and compositions that shape the Overwatch League meta—the optimal way to competitively play the game(Kokkinakis et al. 2021), which in turn foster further belief in Korean esports talent. The capacity to identify or influence the "meta" of a game gave a particular first-mover advantage with regards to in-game success, as it was frequently Korean players or teams that mastered these changing conditions it positioned them as effectively Kingmakers within the league.

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[19] The Curb-cut effect refers to the concept of how particular laws and programs that are designed to benefit vulnerable or discriminated groups can have downstream beneficial impacts for other areas of society. The initial example of how curbside ramps designed with the intention of providing easier accessibility to sidewalks for those with disabilities resulted in providing those same accessibilities to scores of other communities, (e.g. travelers with luggage, parents with strollers, workers with heavy deliveries etc.).

The influx of Korean talent has also had a cultural impact, influencing team communication and prompting many non-Korean players to learn basic Korean to improve teamwork. Furthermore, Korean players have cultivated a large, dedicated global fanbase, contributing significantly to the Overwatch League’s popularity. The talent pipeline from the Korean Contenders league continued to be a major source of new players for OWL teams, ensuring a steady influx of skilled competitors. Many Korean players have also transitioned into coaching and management roles, further extending their influence within the league. The competitive legacy of top Korean players, many of whom built their reputations in pre-OWL tournaments like APEX, brings a high level of prestige to the league. Lastly, Korean players have demonstrated remarkable adaptability to different team environments and playstyles, further cementing their status as a cornerstone of the Overwatch League's identity and success.

Esports fandom in Korea is so robust and advanced that industries not commonly associated with video games have attempted to attract and maintain connections to the scene. For example, the Korean bank Shinhan Bank, a major sponsor of LCK League of Legends esports team DRX offered a variable savings product that provided different interest rates depending upon the success of the team in LCK as well as international tournaments(Y. Jin and Kim 2025). While this could be viewed similarly to American credit cards that are sponsors of major traditional sports franchises, this banking product offered an experience that was similar to gambling.

The domestic popularity of Overwatch in Korea led to a tremendous amount of participation by young Koreans eager to participate in esports. The exceptional skill of these players came to be the key labor resource for the development of the Overwatch League, which attempted to capture global audiences by the nature of its organizational make-up. The presence of Korean esports players in this league demonstrated the global technical appeal of Korean modes of play. However, while Korean esports players have achieved this particular notoriety within the domain of esports, it has struggled to make similar inroads as cultural commodities for Korea.

1.3.7 Pandemic and the Collapse of the Overwatch League

The collapse of the Overwatch League represents a significant moment in esports history, serving as a cautionary tale about the challenges of establishing and maintaining a franchised esports league. Launched in 2018 with great fanfare and substantial financial backing, the OWL aimed to revolutionize the esports landscape by adopting a city-based franchise model similar to traditional sports leagues. However, a complex interplay of factors led to its eventual downfall, culminating in the cancellation of the 2024 season and leaving the future of professional Overwatch competition shrouded in uncertainty.

From its inception, the Overwatch League was an ambitious project. Blizzard Entertainment envisioned a global league with city-based teams, home and away games, and a structure that would appeal to both hardcore esports fans and casual viewers[20]. The league's inaugural season featured 12 teams, each representing a major city, with the goal of expanding to more locations in subsequent years. Korean players dominated the ranks of the league, with many of the teams in the league consisting entirely of Korean players. Youth academies and esports pipelines sought to find the next great players all across the country, with new franchises wholly purchasing the contracts of domestic Korean teams and bringing them into the league as complete team products. While the dominance of Korean player culture was secured within the League, of the 6 championship squads, half were full Korean rosters, with the remaining winners consisting of predominantly Korean players[21].

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[20] The first two seasons of OWL was held predominantly at the Blizzard Arena in Los Angeles California. From the 3rd season onward play was to be held at offline sites in the franchise cities of teams, however the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic ultimately led to the majority of homestands being cancelled and play being held almost exclusively online.

At the outset of the Overwatch League launch was the significant financial investment required from team owners. The initial buy-in fee was set at $20 million, a figure that would later increase to $30-35 million for expansion teams in subsequent seasons(Cooke and Kitt 2023). This steep entry cost was justified by promises of revenue sharing, media rights deals, and the potential for local market monetization. However, this high upfront investment also placed immense pressure on team owners to generate revenue quickly, a challenge that would prove difficult to overcome.

The league's first season in 2018 showed promise. Viewership numbers were strong, with peak concurrent viewers reaching over 350,000 for the grand finals. The production quality was high, and the league successfully attracted major sponsors such as Toyota, T-Mobile, and Coca-Cola. This initial success led to optimism about the league's future, with plans for expansion and localization in the following seasons.

However, cracks in the OWL's foundation began to appear as early as the second season. While the league expanded to 20 teams, viewership numbers started to show signs of decline. The novelty of the league had worn off for some viewers, and the complex nature of Overwatch as a spectator esport made it challenging to attract and retain casual viewers. The financial strain on teams also became more apparent. Despite the high buy-in fees and operating costs, many teams were reporting significant losses. The promised local market revenues were slow to materialize, and the global nature of the league made it difficult for teams to build strong local fan bases.

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[21] Only the 2019, 2020 San Francisco Shock and the 2023 Florida Mayhem had any non-Korean players on the Championship roster.

The end of the world (Pandemic/COVID 19)

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 dealt a severe blow to the Overwatch Leagues plans. The league had intended to implement a home-and-away format, with teams hosting matches in their home cities. This was seen as a crucial step in building local fan bases and generating venue-based revenue. However, the pandemic forced the cancellation of all live events, and the league had to quickly pivot to an online-only format. This shift to online play had several negative consequences. It eliminated the potential for ticket sales and local event revenue, a key part of the league's business model. It also impacted the viewing experience, as the excitement and atmosphere of live events were lost. Additionally, the online format exposed issues with server latency and competitive integrity, particularly for matches between teams located in different regions.

Another significant challenge came in the form of a platform switch. In 2020, the OWL moved from Twitch to YouTube as its exclusive streaming partner. While this deal was reportedly worth $160 million, it led to a noticeable drop in viewership. Twitch had been the go-to platform for esports content, and many viewers did not follow the league to YouTube. This decline in viewership had a cascading effect, making the league less attractive to sponsors and advertisers.

The transition from the original *Overwatch* game to *Overwatch 2* in 2022 brought its own set of challenges. While intended to reinvigorate interest in the game and the league, the switch caused significant disruption. Overwatch 2 introduced substantial changes to the gameplay, including a shift from 6v6 to 5v5 matches. This not only required teams to adapt their strategies but also alienated some longtime fans who preferred the original game. The transition period was marked by confusion and frustration among both players and viewers, further contributing to the league's struggles.

Throughout its run, the OWL also faced issues with talent retention. Many high-profile players retired or left for other esports titles, citing reasons such as burnout, lack of competitive drive, or better opportunities elsewhere. The grueling schedule of the league, combined with the uncertainty surrounding its future, led many players to reconsider their careers in Overwatch. Similarly, popular casters and analysts departed, taking with them their expertise and fan followings. This exodus of talent diminished the league's appeal and made it harder to maintain a consistent narrative and star power.

Compounding these issues were the controversies surrounding Activision Blizzard, the parent company of Overwatch. In 2021, allegations of workplace misconduct and discrimination led to lawsuits and investigations against the company(Paul 2021). These controversies had a direct impact on the OWL, as several major sponsors, including Coca-Cola, State Farm, and Kellogg's, suspended or ended their partnerships with the league. This loss of sponsorship dealt a severe financial blow to the already struggling teams and league.

The culmination of these factors became increasingly evident in 2023. Several prominent teams announced their departure from the league, including organizations that had been with the OWL since its early days. The Chengdu Hunters, Paris Eternal, and Florida Mayhem were among those who decided to exit, signaling a loss of confidence in the league's future. These departures not only reduced the league's size but also damaged its credibility and global reach.

The final blow came in October 2023, when Activision Blizzard announced the cancellation of the 2024 OWL season. This decision effectively marked the end of the league in its current form, leaving players, staff, and fans in a state of uncertainty. The announcement cited the need to "reimagine" the Overwatch esports ecosystem, suggesting that while professional

Overwatch competition might continue in some form, the franchised league model was no longer viable.

The collapse of the Overwatch League has had far-reaching implications for the esports industry as a whole. It has raised questions about the viability of franchised esports leagues, particularly those built around a single game. The Overwatch League's failure has made investors and organizations more cautious about entering similar ventures, potentially slowing the growth of structured esports leagues in other titles. For the players and staff involved in the Overwatch League, the collapse had been particularly devastating. Many had built their careers around Overwatch, and the sudden end of the league left them facing an uncertain future. While some may find opportunities in other esports or in streaming, others may be forced to leave the industry entirely. Korean players who had spent years developing skills in the game faced an uncertain future.

1.3.8 2023-Present Korea’s new place in the sun

The Overwatch Championship Series (hereafter OWCS) became the spiritual successor to Overwatch League. Following the collapse of the Overwatch League, new and extant local organizations came together to re-establish the league. WDG studios became the central organizing party for new competitions in Overwatch esports. They established physical offline tournaments that had been the staple in early esports and still viewed as a particularly special and pivotal site for the development of esports in the future. What’s more is that WDG had attempted to establish a broader understanding of the role of esports within the Asian Pacific region, and looked to replenish the ranks by allowing young students to participate within esports competition in ways that had not been allowed under the official auspices of Blizzard’s Overwatch League. Focusing on leagues that draw from adolescent and teen player bases described a robust understanding of how player/labor pipelines work within the esports industry. Overwatch-based esports would still be reliant upon Korean players but also find themselves subject to larger issues of global geopolitics and labor movement. According to esports news website Liquipedia, at its apex the Overwatch League was using Korean nationals to provide 57% of its player-labor force[22]. Following the collapse, most of the players no longer had the legal capacity to live and work within the United States, where the majority of teams were located, and as a result most of these players repatriated back to Korea. Canada, with its more accepting visa laws, provided safe haven for players who now had nowhere to ply their trade.

1.4 Conclusion

Korean esports finds itself in a potentially undesirable position, as it is under threat from China, where they are attempting to recreate the model of labor and players base that will be used in the global esports industry. At the same time, Korea is lacking support from America as it continually sees American corporate interests as not aligning with those of the Korean state, and unfortunately for Korea may leave them on the outside looking in.

While Korea proved to be a center for esports labor and fandom, it found little success on the IP front as most games that became popular as esports were developed in the United States. Two notable exceptions to this were Kart Rider and Player Unknown's Battleground, more famously known as PUBG. Despite commercial and cultural success games operated within a tenuous position in Korean society. Moral panics still surrounded gameplay, most notably with legislation being implemented to protect children from excessive access to games. The 2011 Youth Protection Revision Act, also known as the Cinderella Law, was one such law aimed at protecting children from the potential dangers of video game play, competitive and otherwise. This law banned access to video games, PC games, and console games to children aged 16 and younger from the hours of midnight to 6 am, as well as forced them from being present in PC bangs after the hour of 10 pm. Implemented to help children make healthy decisions regarding sleep, and to protect their health it emerged at time when Korean society was hotly debating the addictive qualities of video games and game addiction was seen as a societal issue. Youth media usage shifted greatly, since the Cinderella Law's implementation in 2011, these shifts coinciding with changes to game environments, specifically the rise of mobile games which were not subject to the same curfew, resulted in the repealing of the law in August 2021(Bahk 2021). The existence of this controversial law points to the precarious position of games in Korea, where they are lauded for their capacity to bring prestige via globalized competitions, but feared for their perceived corrosive quality to the lives, and well-being of Korean youth. In an industry that is so dependent upon young players, with most successful esports players ageing out of competition by their mid-20s, Korean leadership as to the validity and respectability of such professions was mixed at best. This becomes further complicated when compared to the lack of moral outrage and restrictive policies when it comes to other Hallyu—Korean Wave—industries, such as K-pop which also relies heavily upon youth investment and participation in the development of its "idol" led industry.

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[22] In 2018, Koreans represented 45% of the player pool. 55% in 2019, 56% in 2020, 57% in 2021, 59% in 2022, and in the final season 57% of all professional players in the league.

Esports is still largely reliant upon Korean fandom, labor, infrastructure, and innovation to operate as an industry, but it is continuing to be the practice of precarity and exploitation. Esports is viewed as an economic opportunity for the Korean government, and has been the site of major international competitions, leagues, and events but the government seems to much rather provide human-capital over economic-capital, and finds itself under threat from various challengers, from labor perspective (China), spectacle (Saudi Arabia), and platform (USA). However, as capital infuses itself within esports and attempts to capture capital and surplus value it runs afoul of globalized economies. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been viewed as not the ideal nation to bring forth esports into the 21st century, as it has been accused of sportswashing—a form of reputation laundering in which public sporting events are staged as a way of rehabilitating an actor's reputation(Zidan 2022; Ettinger 2023), while they have demonstrated a strong financial commitment to the development of global esports their global image as authoritarian inhibits the potential of such capital investment. Korea on the other hand has demonstrated itself simply as high-tech and cool, but perhaps not Western enough for the rest of the global community.

Chapter 2: Entering the Machine: Globalization, Commodification and Community in Korean esports

"…under neoliberal capitalism, one owns oneself as though one is a business, a collection of skills, assets, and alliances that must be continually maintained and enhanced"(Fletcher 2020, 2675)

"I don't really know what to do, this is the first time I have ever had the chance to meet the fans." Kim "Donghak" Min-sung (OWCS Player)*, during conversation at a post-match fan meeting.*

As the last of the confetti had fallen from the sky, and the stage trophy had been handed out, at the edge of the stage Crazy Raccoon, the winning team of Stage 1 of the Overwatch Championship Series Korea (OWCS Korea), sat down to talk with the still almost capacity crowd, as the fans surrounded the players in a half-circle. The lights dropped, and suddenly a video began playing. The video consisted of players of all the teams that had participated in the OWCS Korea, sending messages to the fans. "Everyone recognizing who I am, and making my name known, is all thanks to the fans. I am always grateful because of you, I'm able to continue my pro gamer career" mentions Kim "Proper" Dong-hyun the former Overwatch League (OWL) 2022 Regular Season MVP.[23] Another expresses gratitude: "Thank you so much for always coming to support me, encouraging me even when I lose, and cheering me up, thank you always!" The messages interspersed with vignettes of players fooling around with teammates, playing to the crowd, alongside clips of fans preparing their cheering placards (See Fig 1), singing songs, and interacting with the broadcast creates a feeling of a tight-knit community. Watching the video, I overheard a fan express how it reminded them of an end-of-the-year graduation video, while they quietly cried. In my fieldnotes, I jot down: "The feeling of thanks and nostalgia that permeated the arena would be more common at a graduation than the final of a major esports event." What transpired that Sunday evening in the WDG Stadium[24], in the Hongdae university district of Seoul, was not uncommon outside of the awarding of a trophy. What was uncommon was how these Korean esports fans and players established a community of respect and care, trying to forge support in a system that typically situates competition as the main method of socialization. This is true not only in the arena of esports, but also in the larger space of neoliberal Korean society.

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[23] Proper's accolades are legendary in the professional Overwatch community, where he was the only player in the League's history to win Season Most Valuable Player, Rookie of the Year, and Role Star in a single season. He also was a member of the O2 Blast team during the 2019 No Japan Boycott that is discussed further in Chapter 4.

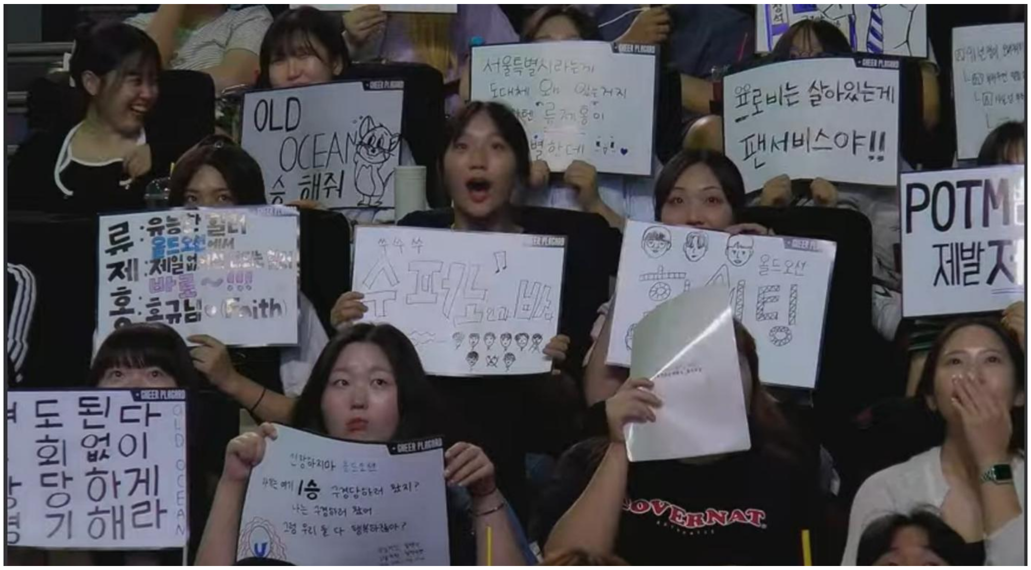

Figure 1Korean Female esports fans holding fan signs.

Esports, the competitive professionalization of video games has rapidly risen to prominence over the past two decades. Esports is now found in many different areas of scholarship, from examinations of its investment capacity, sports management (Scholz 2020), to its impact on health (Giakoni-Ramírez, Merellano-Navarro, and Duclos-Bastías 2022; Dowdell et al. 2024).

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[24] WDG Stadium is operated by the WDG (더블유디지) *Deoburyudiji*, originally stands for We Design Game Culture, and is the main Korean broadcaster and venue for Overwatch Esports in Korea, as well as key regional player in Asian OWCS esports.

As players are trying to determine if they have what it takes to master the in-game skills there are similar desires for organizations, teams, and financial stakeholders to properly evaluate the quality of an esports prospect (Jonghyun Kim, Dunkel, and Lee 2024). The pressure to succeed in the game as it leads to success in the industry becomes a challenge that consumes much, if not all, of esports players' attention and daily activity. However, while there exists a bevy of literature that examines the roles of players as they accommodate themselves to the conditions of professionalization(T. L. Taylor 2012; T. T. Sang 2025), conditions that are similar to those in seen in traditional sports (Wagner 2007; Witkowski and Harkin 2025), as well as the pursuit of celebrity (Yuri Seo and Jung 2016), the ways in which players condition themselves within the larger globalized understandings of the esports industry via their domestic development is less examined. As was highlighted in Chapter 1, Korea in many ways acted as the proto arena for the development of esports, both as a spectator sport as well as an industry. Following the immense success of esports domestically, it was largely exported and expanded into larger regional and global contexts. However, as examined by Jin and Adamkovič, despite the historical and present-day importance of the Korean region to the esports industry "academic discourse has been kept mostly within the 'nations' boundaries"(Y. Jin and Adamkovič 2023). Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to turn the lens back on the Korean cradle of esports development, play, and player-fan relations to better understand how it is that the players become enmeshed and potentially entrapped in the industry.

While many Korean players may ultimately dream of becoming a globally recognized sports icon, stardom is possible without leaving the country simply by participating in local and domestic leagues. These skilled Korean players first encounter play within the contexts of Korea and Korean society, before they can be exported around the globe as the valuable commodities they are, while the opportunity to "make it" without leaving the motherland remains viable for players of moderate to prodigious skill. Once they are brought outside of their local conditions, and subjected to global esports media conditions, they often suffer the same fate as nearly all foreign media and foreign celebrity, where they scrubbed of their "cultural odor"(Iwabuchi 2004)[25] to become more accessible by local markets. However, as Gottesman reminds us in his analysis of Korean animation, "Korean labor is already present in 'Japanese' and 'American' animation, now generalized into a global system of production" (Gottesman 2025, 313). The same is true of esports, where despite the games frequently being made outside of Korea, the Korean players and management systems are frequently mined for their competitive talent, vision, and labor.

The reliance upon Korean labor as a necessary component for greatness in the esports industry underpins the value that is provided by Korean players, managers and fans. To date, most researchers are more curious about how skill, culture, and values are understood through a transnational lens (K. Y. Bae 2021; T. T. Sang 2025). These globalized analyses of esports play are, of course, relevant to situating esports among research of transnational media, race, and power. However, for our purposes, these researchers fail to understand esports as a product of *Korean* values towards labor, play, celebrity, and industrial development.

The Korean industry of esports follows the path of many other Korean culture industries, such as the film, television, and music industries, where it has marketed itself as an industry replete with world-class production values and skill with an eye always towards regional and international distribution. For example, K-pop has a long history of drawing upon American hip-hop (Oh 2024) and has modeled itself off American music through celebrity, production of music videos, and extensive touring practices. The American music industry reciprocates cultural hybridity via the adoption of non-American fan and industry practices in music, perhaps best highlighted by the social media dance crazes that employ K-pop choreography. These transnational flows of paths of cultural hybridity demonstrate how power, influence, and culture do not flow in a singular direction, but rather are multidirectional (Iwabuchi 2002). The global focus of Korean culture industries can be seen as a result of the 1997 International Monetary Fund Crisis (IMF) crisis[26], John Lie argues that prior to the crisis, the Korean music industry had been "resolutely domestic in orientation and consumption" (Lie 2012, 353). The impact of the 1997 IMF Crisis upon fashioning Korea into a neoliberal state, as is discussed later in this chapter, had a tremendous impact upon all of the hallyu—Korean wave—industries[27], the rise and development of Korean esports proving no exception.

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[25] For Iwabuchi, the process of making of cultural odor, was "the way in which cultural features of a country of origin and images or ideas of its national, in most cases stereotyped, way of life are associated *positively* with a particular product in the consumption process" (Iwabuchi 2002, 27). While esports players are not simply products, the conditions under neoliberalism promote a mode of self-commodification that forces individuals to consider themselves more than human but also as branded entities. This unfolds in practice in esports by equating "Koreanness" to be synonymous with any concept of skill.

The post IMF Crisis culture industry economy led to an emphasis on the development of high production value content, especially in K-pop, as a means to generate profits regionally and globally to help further Korean soft power objectives (Anderson 2018). It is this easy palatability of Korean cultural products that has led to the transnationalization of Korean cultural media (D. Y. Jin 2019) products, referring to "a condition in which people, commodities, and ideas cross national boundaries and are not identified with a single place of origin"(Watson 1997, 11). Yet, to return to esports, all too often, esports is organized within contexts directly at odds with this concept of transnationalization, as much of the highest levels of competition directly rely upon national boundaries as a necessary component of play. This is seen in the context of worldwide leagues where players and teams across the world come to play in individual tournaments (e.g. Tekken, Hearthstone), or fashioned into regional leagues that come together to crown a world champion (e.g., League of Legends World Championship, Valorant, OWCS) (H.-M. Kim and Kim 2022; Fisackerly and Hwang 2024). The standard structure for professional team-based esports is one that follows a regional format, interspersed with multiple major events throughout the year, typically concluding with a cross-regional competition. For example, the League of Legends World Championship, also known as LoL Worlds or simply Worlds, consists of teams from five major regions, Korea (LCK), China (LPL), Europe (LEC), Americas (LTA, split into North and South), and Asia-Pacific (LCP). These regions each host competitive seasonal play before qualifying teams join to participate in the Mid-Season Invitational and Worlds for cross-regional play to determine an annual "World champion."

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[26] The impact of the IMF crisis on Korean society and esports is discussed in greater detail in Chapters 1 and 2.

[27] Hallyu industries refers to the multiple culture industries; film, music, televisions, games, etc. that impart Koreanized values as part of larger public and private partnerships for developing Korean soft power and capital.

The Overwatch League attempted to challenge the regional to global structure of play by creating a system of competition that was globalized from the outset. Franchises from Asia, North America, and Europe were grouped into a single league of play. Similarly to many traditional sports leagues these franchises tethered themselves to geography as much as any particular commercial brand. Teams with names like Paris Eternal, London Spitfire, Shanghai Dragons, Boston Uprising attempted to brand themselves through historically or culturally significant symbols of the domain they were representing. The early seasons of the league were located in Southern California, before expanding out to the cities of their namesake for homestand competitions. The plans for a fully globalized esports league were largely thwarted by the onset of the pandemic, national border closures, and quarantine that accompanied the COVID-19 global pandemic as ambitious plans for worldwide *Overwatch* esports play had to be scrapped and moved from offline arenas into the realm of online lobbies and broadcasts. An added bonus to globally organized play is that it "fulfils the promise and myth of esports, which has always been that it is a meritocracy" (K. Y. Bae 2021, 217), a core component of global neoliberal capitalism. Put another way, this indicates that nations and regions are at the center of the global esports industry. The choice to situate this study is deliberate, as mentioned above, how esports is quickly wrested from any of its Asian or Korean origins and reconstituted as a manner of understanding how Asian bodies are valued and understood in globalized media settings, this process is frequently ascribed as a form of "techno-orientalism" (Ueno 1999). Building upon Edward Said's work on Orientalism, which itself refers to the process in which the West others civilizations, culture, and people from the Middle East as inferior to those in the West (Said 1978). Both Orientalism and techno-orientalism reflect the geopolitical anxieties of the West in the eras in which they respectively emerged, yet focus on geographically different and distant "Orients," where Orientalism concerned itself with the great moments of the past, whilst techno-orientalism rather examines the realms and issues of the future (J. H. Lee 2024).

This chapter will explore how techno-orientalism is practiced to evaluate Asian participation in esports before returning to Korea to discuss how Korea operates as a neoliberal state where players are expected to embrace all forms of commodification, not only willingly, but with fervor and zeal. After situating Korean esports within the larger conditions of Korean neoliberal society, this chapter examines the process that players engage in to manifest themselves as esports players within the industry, noting specifically how particular player-fan interactions provide an inherent protection against the isolating aspects of micro-celebrity and hallyu cultural labor. The fan-player relationship that is fostered by conditions created by Korean esports enables relationships that provide affective support and community to push back against purely neoliberal commodification. In ways that are different from the distant celebrity of Western esports, Korean players engage in more direct, culturally specific interactions with fans. This creates spaces of mutual care and respect that help players navigate the pressures of competition and celebrity while they still grapple with these insecurities. Through the process of professionalization, and cultural playbor, esports players can also be understood as product of Korean culture/identity that places great emphasis upon community.

In Korean esports, players are directly available to their fans and exist within robust communities of support. I explore how Korean esports promotes player behaviors that prioritize interpersonal relationships, community building, and accountability, muting values that would harm fan-player interactions by drawing upon observational data from tournaments, post-match meetups, fan signings, and player interviews. The data I gathered from attending offline esports *Overwatch 2* competitions held at WDG Studios in Seoul. Spanning from September 2023 until March 2025, I attended 4 separate major competitions, the first entirely consisting of professional players; the Overwatch League Season 6, with the remaining competitions consisting of open tournaments including non-professional players, Flash Ops Holiday Showdown, and the Overwatch Championship Series Korea season, and Stage 1 Finals. Following the collapse of the Overwatch League, competitive *Overwatch 2* esports was forced to undergo a major shift in organization, switching away from a franchise model and back to local and regional competitions. The shift back to local competitions and the uncertainty of the professional capacity of Overwatch esports proved challenging to players and fans alike. Drawing upon participant observation of competition, conversations with fans, analysis of post-game broadcast interviews, and fan-player interactions, I examine how players and fans coordinate to create productive communities that are semi-resistant to the self-commodification demanded in service of esports competition, highlighting the supportive relationships between Korean players and their fans.

2.1 Techno-Orientalism in Esports

Orientalism, as introduced by Edward Said (1978), represents a complex manifestation of spatial and cultural power dynamics embedded within the capitalist world-system. It functions as a discursive apparatus that geographically and ideologically demarcates the 'Orient' from the 'Occident,' more simply, the Middle East from the West, serving to naturalize and reinforce uneven development on a global scale. This hegemonic construct operates through multiple, interconnected processes of knowledge production, cultural representation, and political-economic domination, effectively commodifying and abstracting Eastern cultures for Western consumption and control. Said's critique unveils the dialectical relationship between power and knowledge in shaping geographical imaginations and material realities. Orientalism in the traditional sense bifurcates the East and West, and highlights how the latter projected values of inferiority, barbarity, and backwardness onto the former as a justification for their colonial ambitions. Media scholar Toshiya Ueno writes that techno-orientalism "is set up for the West to preserve its identity in its imagination of the future. It can be defined as the Orientalism of cybersociety and the information age, aimed at maintaining stable identity in a technological environment" (Ueno 1999, 95), while Roh, Huang, and Niu define techno-orientalism as "the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hyper-technological terms in cultural productions and political discourse" (Roh, Huang, and Niu 2019, 2).

Examinations of esports furthers this narrative, especially that in the Korean context suffers from particular techno-orientalist tropes, where the predominantly male players are fetishized for their talent, but concurrently chastised for their perceived "lack of personality" that can be easily commodified to the benefit of an American internet esport broadcast production(K. Y. Bae 2021; qu 2020). Another barb thrown at the feet of global esports is that in spite of their global meritocratic protestations, their overreliance upon Korean labor makes them fundamentally less so, as Bae blithely questions: "Why do these global leagues not look that, well global?" (K. Y. Bae 2021, 217). While Bae correctly describes the conditions of global esports as being Korea-dominated, a condition which she notes has been examined extensively in media and fan discourses—one that all too often on draws upon xenophobic and racist fears—the reality is that esports was Korean before it was global. The transformation from local to global sport as highlighted by the path of Korean esports resonates with histories often seen in the colonial examinations of sport. Christopher Patterson describes how in esports this process continues, stating thusly: "As Esports reproduces this tradition by centering East Asians as the inheritors of this [Esports Imperial Empire], on one hand, and in how most esports games are American made. Metaphorically, the United States dictates the rules, while East Asians are the stars" (Fickle et al. 2021, 25). However, unlike baseball or other sports that came from the West to Korea(Y. Cho 2016), Korea is the dominant player. While the game development studios have control over the "playing field", the visibility of Korean esports talent means that Korean values are going to be demanded by global fans who want to see gameplay at its highest level.

As Allen Guttman (Guttmann 1994) writes in *Games and Empires*, sports are often seen as exported from the empire to its colonies, so that its players appear deific, and the colonized must accept the colonizer's rules and play styles to meet them on an equal field. Looking at the collapse of England's once powerful cricket teams, Sports author Mike Marqusee provides a rationale that shows how sports emerge from conditions of colonial imperialism, to depict relationships between sport and society. In cataloguing the newfound cricket dominance of historically dominated colonies, like the West Indies over England, Marqusee lays bare the remnants of nationalism and Western imperialism in sport, as British society attempts to adjust to the transformation of decline. The racism, classism, hypocrisy, and elitism that pervaded English cricket in the 1980s and 1990s echoes similar relationships between the nation and its former colonies (Marqusee 1995). CLR James, in his seminal autobiography of about cricket and life in colonial Trinidad, notes: "Cricket, had plunged me into the world of politics long before I was aware of it. When I turned to politics I did not have much to learn"(James 2013, 65). For James, cricket provided the necessary lens to understand the ways in which racism, classism, and colonial hegemony was still unfolding in daily life for Trinidadians. In noting how class and race segregated teams would play cricket matches amicably, supporting one another, with a sense of equality, would return to their allotted class stations, with all awarded privilege or necessary deference following the conclusion of a match, pointed out the hypocrisy of colonial conditions of the island.

Examinations into Korean esports can be said to follow a similar pattern as to those of Trinidadian cricket, where conditions found in the arena, the lobby (both game and physical), establish rules of etiquette, respect, and compassion are subject to the same expectations of Korean social norms regarding celebrity-fan interactions. However, it is these norms that falter the further afield from play they occur. As one Korean esports star disclosed to me:

> Korean manners demand a type of distance and respect in ways that manners in the United States couldn't allow for. When I am with a Korean fan, I know that they are going to be nice and give me space, they may ask for a picture or want to know something about my day, but they won't overstep the boundaries. When I was in the US, fans didn't act in the same way. (Shu- Crazy Raccoon)

A team manager for Generation Gaming described how differences in player-fan interactions are major hurdles for players to adjust to when they find themselves working in the United States:

> Player and fan interaction behavior in Korea is clearly determined, with all parties agreeing to the condition of informational access in exchange for respecting personal space. When players arrive in the United States they aren't given the same respect and it can cause a fair amount of stress and confusion for them, so we try to educate them about how players are going to be treated outside of Korea. We have to tell them that fans might get involved anywhere they are seen, whether that is a restaurant, the stadium or at the airport they might be mobbed by fans demanding selfies or signatures. (H. Kim 2019)

What this indicates about Korean esports, and its players are the complex layers of interaction that exist between players and fans. The training that its celebrity players undertake to participate in global esports hint at the distance that Korean players must cross to be able to effectively operate outside of Korean esports locales. Yet, despite similar conditions of Korean and Western fandoms when it comes to neoliberal social conditions, there remains a chasm that can only be understood through awareness of Korean cultural sensibilities. A complexity that is further understood through the examining Korea's Neoliberal turn. All of this is to return to the idea that to understand global esports demands an examination of its local Korean origins.

2.2 Neoliberal Korea

Journalist George Monbiot describes neoliberalism as a system that "sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations," in which citizens are viewed not as constituents or civic partners in society but rather as consumers. Their choices are inextricably linked to market exchanges, "a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency […] inequality is recast as virtuous. The market ensures everyone gets what they deserve" (2016). I agree with Monbiot in the ways in which the drive to have the market and competition be the arbiter of morality, success, and societal planning, has led to particularly fraught social conditions, widespread anxiety, and greater inequality. Marxist Geographer David Harvey goes on to define it as a, "theory of political economic practices that proposes human well-being which can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2005, 2). Conditions in contemporary Korea are marked by its political economy as it has embraced neoliberal values that have come to dominate all aspects of society. Korean historian Namhee Lee, describes the shift towards a more idealized neoliberal society as it has transformed in the post-1987 era of a Democratic Korea (N. Lee 2022).[28] As this shift has occurred, the impetus to push towards individual values over collective became more common within Korean society. The neoliberal turn of Korea is attributable to the Asian Debt Crisis[29] (1997-2001) during which traditional labor structure was reorganized to promote new modes of interaction, new neoliberal welfare possibilities, and a larger more insidious concept of how "a good life is earned" via the self-commodification and development of skills as means of selling oneself. Media scholar Se Young Kim reminds us that, esports in Korea has always been a product of neoliberal policies and development (Fickle et al. 2021). President Kim Dae-jung's administration (1998-2003) enacted sweeping reform and institutional changes in building nationwide ICT infrastructure following the aforementioned Asian Debt crisis.

In 1997 the government eliminated the long-term monopoly of Korea Telecom, at the time the nation's only telecommunication company. As the Kim Dae-Jung government viewed broadband connection as a foundation of advancing the information era, promoted the Internet as the future of Korean life. Hanaro Telecom[30], was given temporary rights to develop broadband infrastructure without interference from Korea Telecom. These reforms established broadband internet connection as the future for Korean productivity, but it was the perceived necessity of broadband speeds to play the recently released real-time strategy game *StarCraft* that drove the demand to implement nationwide broadband (Huhh 2008). The popularity of StarCraft fueled the development of the games industry as online games became the dominant form of gameplay in Korea. The proliferation of PC *bang* (PC internet cafes) built upon arcade culture, alongside the release of Blizzard's *StarCraft* (1997) provided the necessary conditions of infrastructure and labor (players) to establish the nascent esports industry.[31]

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[28] 1987 is a major transformation point in Korean history as following massive nationwide protests transitioned into a full democracy after finally dismantling the military authoritarian leadership that had dominated life in the country since the formation of the Republic of Korea in 1948 (N. Lee 2007).

[29] This event is also commonly referred to more broadly as the Asian financial crisis, or locally as the 1997 Korean Financial Crisis, or the IMF Crisis, refers to the regional economic crisis following the collapse of the Thai baht that severely impacted the economies of countries in the region and triggered fears of a larger global economic meltdown.

[30] Current day SK Telecom.

Korea is more neoliberal today than it was at the turn of the century. Korean youth find themselves mired in the stagnation of a looming Lost Decade,[32] where opportunities are few, risk is high, and failure hangs over everyone like a veil, or fog of war hiding ever greater problems around the bend. Abelmann, Park, and Kim describe the conditions for youth thusly:

> Today's youth face a transformed South Korean economy in which full-time, secure employment is harder to procure; state and local protections and services are curtailed; the reproduction of the middle class is fraught with uncertainty; and the vagaries of transnational capital figure profoundly. (Abelmann, Park, and Kim 2009, 231–32)

The conditions resulting from such hardships has led to locals to pejoratively describe Korea as "Hell Joseon", referring to the picture of a dystopian South Korea as a hellish feudal society (Dunkel and Trammell 2021). As the safety nets and security once provided by the state have evaporated the demands to embrace new means of self-reliance further take their toll on Korean youth. Online gaming and Esports becomes a means to escape both the pressures of daily life for

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[31] The development of esports in Korea is covered in much greater detail in Chapter 1.

[32] The Lost Decade(s) typically refers to Japan's economic stagnation from the 1990s to the early 2000s. Following the burst of an asset price bubble in 1991, Japan experienced prolonged economic slowdown, deflation, and minimal GDP growth. Characterized by banking crises, reduced consumer spending, and government attempts at stimulus, this period saw Japan's global economic influence wane.

Korean youth, but also an opportunity for a career in an environment largely devoid of opportunities.

Conditions under neoliberalism worldwide broadly, and in Korea specifically have positioned youth under ever more precarious positions. In Korea, we see that this has led to a particular driver behind ever-growing distances between the haves and have-nots. Locally, the concept of a dirt spoon [33]*,* (*heuksujeo*)*,* signifying lower class origins typified by a lack of safe and lucrative base from which to launch a career or life from. This is countered by descriptions of gold or silver spoons that indicate the class identity of wealthy youth who have been less impacted by shifts away from social support and access to safety nets. Korean pressure to succeed, "gain specs"—certificates, achievements, and other forms of formal accomplishments—dominate professional life (Prentice 2022). For Korean esports players they are similarly under pressure to succeed, earn accolades, win championships, all while maintaining appropriate decorum and etiquette. As will be explored later, it is the demand for success that in many ways opens up the opportunities for fans and players to co-create spaces of relief from those same demands.

2.2.1 Korean Esports Labor as Neoliberal Commodities

The process of players being turned into cultural commodities, looking at the infrastructure in place to develop and morphing players from talented prospects into esports celebrity. Players understood the responsibility of growing their brands and sought out ways that they could gain attention or public recognition, as one broadcaster explained to me:

> But the players in general, the Korean players, and the Western players for that matter, in *Overwatch* League, if Blizzard and the Overwatch League were like, hey, do you want to do a segment with us? Do you want to come on our analyst desk and talk about the game, or do you want to come do this funny bit with us? The players were always like, oh,

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[33] *Heuksujeo* (흙수저)

> absolutely, yes, I want to be on the big stage. I want to actually get closer with my fans and talk smack.
> (Schröder 2024)

The players understood the requirements of self-branding, and participating within fans was not only expected by the broadcasts but offered opportunities for to manage and control narratives around their brand identity. The players were also cognizant of the fact that they were communicating across multiple arenas of fans as global commodities, that while the liberty provided by some fan communities incurred costs in others. Navigating these issues as a manner of organizing their career were additional skills they needed to perfect, far and away from simply being good at a game, as the broadcaster continued to inform me about:

> A lot of the players like to get out there and trash talk a little bit. And I think it was for a lot of Korean players, the culture of the Western fans allowed for that a lot more than what you could do in Korea. You couldn't be as disrespectful, even though the intent was not to be disrespectful. It's just to have fun and talk a little smack. Right? But doing that in Korea, the fandom doesn't appreciate that as much. So I think it was very liberating for a lot of Korean players while also allowing them to kind of build their brand outside of Korea to come on stage and do that kind of stuff and be a little bit more active.
> (Schröder 2024)

During my observation of player-fan interactions, the players would frequently describe their desire to do right by their fans, to find ways to maximize their exposure. While the demands by the local fans to succeed was always present, in practice many of the fans that attended the offline competitions were much more amenable to the constraints that the players were under.

One such example is the fan favorite organization of RunAway, an organization that captured the hearts of many Korean (and global[34]) esports fans in their initial inception back in 2016. RunAway gained a special notoriety for their hot pink uniforms, and the particularly bold presentation by their team owner Hyuna “Flowervin” Lee, and her co-owner/husband, himself an Overwatch esports talent Dae-hoon “Runner” Yoon. While the team had officially disbanded after successfully earning all of its members positions in OWL from 2021, they resurfaced following the collapse of the Overwatch League and the rise of the new regionally organized Overwatch World Championship Series (OWCS). While they were entirely consisting of former standout players, their success in OWCS was limited. I recall from my field notes on March 28, 2024, following a loss in the OWCS Stage 1 Last Chance Qualifiers, which dropped them to the brink of elimination the quasi-press conference they gave to their fans in the lobby of the WDG Stadium:

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[34] For more about the global appeal of Team Runaway see (qu 2020; Y. J. Jeon 2017; E. “Premier” Shin 2018)

> There is a crowd of fans waiting on RunAway to make it down from the dressing room, the vibe is decidedly downplayed, while the almost exclusively female fanbase stand patiently in a line to take pictures with players. As the team comes down the escalator the players are similarly dejected, if not defeated, their heads down and the disappointment of their poor play written across their faces. Their manager, Flowervin, ever the showwoman directs her team to an area marked off for press conferences. The players begin to apologize to the gathered fans expressing how they will rededicate themselves to improving and that better outcomes will follow the next match. The fans, to their credit, are visibly supportive and begin to chant “It’s okay! It’s okay,”[35][36] before the players disband and head out of the arena.

While fans frequently demonstrated their desire to support and care for the players regardless of the outcome of a match or tournament, players equally understood it was their responsibility to atone for failing to live up to the expectations laid upon them, both internally and externally. To help support the local esports community, the players would often spend hours following matches to make themselves available to their fans. All of this is part of their expected responsibilities of being in the position of microcelebrity.

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[35] (Gwaenchana 괜찮아)

[36] This chant is a common phrase used in many social situations in Korean culture but is also quite frequently used in sporting events by fans to show their continued support for teams and players.

While esports players embraced their roles as microcelebrity it is useful to return to Joseph Jeon's concept of "subsistence faming" which describes a belief among Korean youth, particularly within Korean punk subculture, where the pursuit of (micro)celebrity is a worthwhile practice under the conditions of neoliberalism, as it represents the only meaningful alternative to poverty, though it fails to provide financial security (J. J. Jeon 2019). Esports players in Korea accept their roles as minor (occasionally major) celebrities by playing their role in the fan-player relationship.

2.2.2 The Team Game House: A relic of Fordist, anti-communist, labor control

Esports in Korea attempted to organize its labor in a similar manner to how the K-pop industry organized and collected its own labor force. K-pop has relied upon a particularly clear direction on identifying its talent pipelines in esports mirrors this organizational structure. Many Korean esports players participate in the self-commodification process of their living environment, as they frequently live in shared living spaces that promote team-centric activities. We can see this in the concept of the team house, where training for the team is confined to a single home where players have access to computers, lodging, and a kitchen to promote team cohesion, unity, and further structure team activities. The standard practice of housing players in a single dormitory or house in team-based esports is one that attributes its origins in the heyday of StarCraft in the 200s:

> Most teams have their own dormitories and practice rooms in Seoul, where most professional games take place, and pro gamers live in their team's dormitory. […] Professional teams support players by providing dormitories and practice rooms because some players come from areas with no money, and the boarding house system makes it easy for team managers and companies to manage team training and scheduling.
>
> (D. Y. Jin 2010, 91)

However, the practice of using group housing barracks has been common for training of athletes by the government since the 1970s(Myung 2017). The practice, known as *hapsukullyeon* (bootcamp training) was used to improve players capabilities to perform in international competitions. The same practice is common in for K-pop trainees who, after signing contracts with Korean music labels, are housed in labor barracks as means of facilitating training, using “a Fordist approach to the creation of idol groups, prioritizing profit over human rights”(Venters and Rothenberg 2023, 466). The organization of labor into such housing groups bares a great resemblance to the “barracks control” system during mass industrialization of Korea. The barracks control system “was an extreme type of Taylorism…which squeezes workers through long working hours, low wages, harsh working conditions, and treats the human being (the worker) as but a part of a production machine” (W. Kim and Ham 2009, 43). The value of such housing provided a boost in production and economic activity, as well as the ability to maintain the country’s staunch anti-communist ideology.

The team game house accomplished a similar mission promoting team unity, increased play opportunities, greater control over training activities and all while maintaining a sense of bodily control over the player.[37] This manner of player organization is a widely accepted industry standard for global esports training(Swettenham and Whitehead 2022), but has its origins in anti-communist, and Taylor-Fordist industrialization practices. It is these team houses that act as sites that recreate the historical Korean labor organization, remade to best suit the demands of Korean neoliberalism. A system that has placed increasing emphasis on the export value of cultural products, in this case the esports players skill.

2.3 Affective support in Korean esports

While I have discussed the aspects of labor, industry, and ideology which have come to decenter the presence and value of Korean players in the global esports industry, I feel it necessary to discuss the many ways that this process has become endemic in not only the esports industry but also in academic and media analyses. Akil Fletcher wrote of the lack of prominence and support afforded to black esports players: “Profit and exploitation while salient, cannot explain the dearth of prominent black figures alone. After all, it is this very focus on profit which serves to recreate these rigid identities” (Fletcher 2020, 2673). There exists an analogous belief in decentering or obfuscating the Korean origins of the industry insofar as it means something to the esports industry of today that it found its base outside of a purely Western value system. But to understand its positionality only as threatening to American or Western dominance neither captures nor addresses how local relations manifest through the play, labor, and fandom(s) that drive participation in Korean esports. While examining race and exoticism as afforded by analyses of either techno-orientalism or cybertypes as singular proof of hegemonic power imbalances are modes of argumentation to which I am sympathetic, I find them lacking when used to examine conditions on the edges or even outside of that same hegemonic sovereignty. Thus, in the remainder of the chapter, I wish to build upon my previous argument as to how local Korean conditions create responses to Korean relationships with neoliberal commodification.

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[37] For more on game houses see (franzò 2023; franzó and Bruni 2023)

As mentioned above, the condition of labor and life in neoliberal Korea are especially fraught with conflict, competition, and general concerns over how to manage or pursue a life worth living. The esports industry in many ways embodies the struggle of neoliberal competition and makes it manifest as sport. Just as how conditions of cricket in colonial Trinidad underscored larger issues of colonial life on the island, esports play, and fandom fashions a similar set of identities. While the industry is driven by larger global marketing objectives, as one broadcasting executive described the ultimate goal of building an esports broadcasting empire in the image of the NFL or NBA:

> …it's just like watching NBA over KBO [Korean Baseball Organization] or okay, KBL [Korean Basketball League], yes. And you know, there's a Canadian Football League, but no one really watches that, right? People watch the NFL, so think of it like that way. It's sports, and since Korea is a good at it, good at most of esports, the world's actually paying attention to the Korean eSports culture. (M. Kim 2025)

Attributing the success of Korean esports singularly to the quality of the talent, eschews the other modes of value that are packaged within culture and media. Conversations with fans attending offline matches challenged the narrative that quality of skill was the sole reason for engaging with esports as a fan. One fan disclosing that they got interested in esports initially because they had played *Overwatch* with friends, but they stayed involved in the game because of the relationships that were formed with other fans, the players, and even broadcasters. While esports exists within digital and physical spaces, the player fan relationship spans those same divides, and streaming has been identified as a major site of affective labor (Woodcock and Johnson 2019), as broadcasters engage in activities that rely upon affective engagement with their audiences, and audiences create personalized relationships with players that they build upon when they show up at the stadium.

Research has shown that Korean esports players face incredible amounts of stress and pressure to perform well in competitions(H. J. Hong, Wilkinson, and Rocha 2022; H. J. Hong 2023). Sports scholars Hee Jung Hong and Seung Han Hong interviews with retired Korean esports players examined how players managed stress and precarity following retirement, pointing to uncertainty in the job market leading to greater levels of financial and job insecurity (H. J. Hong and Hong 2023). Under these circumstances, and immense concerns over their future in and out of esports, I was able to witness great levels of support and community provided by the fans and players.

From conversations with players, it became clear that Korean esports players are fully aware of the difficulties they were facing in contemporary Korean society. Former OWL player and current member of From The Gamer Jun-Woo “Vindaim” Park, expressed that he had no clue as to what was going to happen with his career following his time as a player, but that he wanted to be able perform his best anyway. These worries played out, not only in the realm of competition in the games, but also in the (and to a degree their interactions with fans) forced particular neoliberal expectations to be consumable commodities for their fans. However, the tensions that exist where these young players and their fans demonstrate a desire to create co-constitutive spaces where celebrity is meaningful to provide space for growth and against precarity that plagues so much youth labor. Within the context of Korean esports, the communal relationship between Korean esports fans and players is what provides the opportunity for these players to overcome such difficulties. As the global esports industry demands a greater influx of young players who devote their time, skills, and energy to the playing of games, Korea has established a particular strategy on the development of players.

What is happening in the site of Korean esports is that players find themselves embracing the neoliberal identity that has been placed before them as a “natural” outcome of local conditions. These male players essentially have found ways to maximize their skills via the lot that was afforded to them from their class(Jonathan Lee 2020). While they have similar ambitions to be successful entrepreneurs that is so common among contemporary Korean youth, they understood that there is no easy path to that place. The skills that are most important for an esports star are not those that would facilitate or guarantee success in the cutthroat competition of hell Joseon. What remains is a digital arena that despite the high levels of competitive skill required as a basic component for participation, matter little outside the “magic circle” of competitive esports. The sacrifices necessary to attain such skills; long practice hours, inconsistent sleep patterns, and interpersonal relationships remind us that esports are not games of moral victory.

While the players develop their skills and hone their abilities, the fans participate in a similar sense of adding "specs". Drawing upon their intense passion for sport and community, the fans self-organize and establish modes of conduct that prioritize partnerships and understanding between the players and fans. As Wolf "Wolf" Schröder, an American esports analyst who has covered Korean esports locally since 2012 described to me:

> I think Korean esports in general, not just [with] Riot[38], but all the way back to the early 2000s, has always empowered that sort of really, I don't want to say aggressive, but really passionate fandom. And I think that because people were able to become regulars and there was even a goal you could be like, I want to be one of the biggest fans. I want to be like, the one isn't in the Naver cafe who gets to decide who gets to do the fan cheers and stuff like that, right? There was almost like a progression. You could have a hierarchy. I think that the more devoted you were, the more sometimes you could even become popular because you're like, I'm the biggest fan. So much so that I make the best tweets or I'm the best photographer of these players, so I can keep posting these really high-quality photos. And there's a large fan base that wants to see my photos of fake or my photos of owner or whatever, my photos of flash, for example, in StarCraft. And I always felt like because everybody was super into that fan culture all around, it just kind of continued to grow.
> (Schröder 2024)

The fandom simultaneously engages in the process of turning fandom into a sense of competition, which is replete with particular social hierarchy. This social hierarchy serves as a function to organize and direct fan attention, ultimately furnishing opportunities to project care and support to the players who strive to succeed. One fan told me that they used the hard work by the players to motivate her own interaction with the game, noting that "if they can push through so much, I can't help but support their goal". The outcome that unfolds is a scenario where both players and fans are earnestly engaging in the process of play, albeit from separate sides of the same coin.

The relationship between the players and the fans follows similar behavior between a connected albeit distant form of esports, that of challenge running. Challenge running is the practice where players organize and develop complex systems of play surrounding a player versus game engine, more commonly known as PvE. PvE is the other side of the competitive gaming coin of PvP esports, most typified by games like *League of Legends*, *Overwatch*, *and Hearthstone*. Challenge running can range from professionally organized events such as Games Done Quick, a popular event showcasing players who compete to finish a game in the fastest time possible, to less structured individual streams of play. As a component of these challenge runs players and their communities often cooperate to overcome a game through collective support, where the player draws upon the emotional, tactical, as well as financial support to overcome the self-selected challenge (Dunkel 2024). The relationship between the players and the fans is the foundation of the narrative of the sport, players routinely manage expectations of not only themselves but also of their supporters. While this is a common refrain seen in many traditional sports, in Korean esports these expectations often are more visible than those that deal with team and player success.

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[38] Riot Games, developer of the most popular Korean esport League of Legends.

The culture of supportive fandom, as established through Korean conditions, blends into the larger global esports community. Global fans would look to the tenacity of Korean teams and their drive to overcome professional adversity as a way to situate their own precarity. As bonnie qu, esports reporter wrote about her fandom of RunAway: "I think, to many, RunAway represents what we all want to see from an esports team: a group of young and restless players somehow managing to overcome every obstacle that comes their way and make it to the top together. At their best, they were living proof that anyone could make it, so long as they had the drive and the talent. They were the ideal"(qu 2020). In what would become the last broadcast of the Overwatch League, the main host, Soe Gschwind, echoed the sentiment, highlighting how the league had transcended a simple "gaming community" but a family that supported each other through shared vision, ambition, and care (Gschwind 2023). In a league that was dominated by Korean players, seeing the voice of the professional *Overwatch*, expressing the same desires as seen in local Korean fan-player contexts underscored the relevance of Korean esports to global esports industry and fandom.

The reality for youth struggling to make it has been marked by tensions, as has been noted about "the juxtaposition of post-industrial and industrial ethics and the tension between the individual, entrepreneurial self and the collective self in the neoliberal subjectivity put the youth under a double burden – they have to negotiate with too many things to dare to enjoy the pleasure and freedom promised by post-industrial and creative work" (H.-K. Lee and Zhang 2021, 533). However, while the Korean esports players and fans I interacted with are suffering those same burdens through the development of mutual care and shared goals in the pursuit of professional success, fashion networks of support that help to buttress against those often-crippling anxieties that swirl throughout life in Korea.

2.4 Conclusion

The development of Korean esports cannot be separated from Korea's broader shift towards neoliberalism, particularly following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. The esports industry emerged as part of government-led initiatives to build ICT infrastructure and create new economic opportunities. For young Koreans facing precarious employment prospects in "Hell Joseon," esports offers a potential, if risky, path to success through self-commodification of gaming skills. While Korean players are highly valued for their talents globally, they often face techno-orientalist stereotyping that strips them of cultural specificity and personality. The global esports industry tends to decontextualize Korean labor, obscuring the local conditions and values that shape players' experiences and identities. This echoes colonial dynamics seen in traditional sports, where rules and play styles are dictated by Western powers even as Asian players excel.

The Korean esports ecosystem, from training structures to broadcasting, reflects distinctly Korean approaches to talent development and fan engagement. While aiming for global appeal, it remains grounded in local cultural norms and expectations around labor, community, and interpersonal relationships. The failure of globalized leagues like OWL to properly leverage Korean talent points to a fundamental misunderstanding of the cultural contexts that shape Korean esports. By trying to fit Korean players into Western frameworks of celebrity and fandom, such efforts miss the communal values and support systems that underpin Korean esports' success.

Korean esports represents a complex negotiation between global industry demands and local cultural practices. Players must embrace certain aspects of neoliberal self-commodification while also drawing on distinctly Korean modes of community and fan interaction for support. Understanding this interplay is crucial for grasping both the global reach and local rootedness of Korean esports. Future research should continue to examine how Korean esports navigates between local and global contexts, and how player-fan dynamics evolve in response to industry changes. By centering Korean perspectives and experiences, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of esports' place in both Korean society and the global media landscape.

Chapter 3: Fan signs and Photocards: Gendered Fandom and Labor in Korean esports

"Just like every other day the female fans dress as if they are about to go clubbing or out for a formal date, Balenciaga, Louis Vuitton, and Chanel are just as commonly seen as Nike."

Fieldnotes from the Stage 1 2024 Overwatch Championship Series Korea Grand Final

Capital has always been quite concerned with the question of the gendered nature of labor power. It has never been able to obliterate the importance to itself of the gendered nature of labor power. It has always been able to work in and through the sexual division of labor in order to accomplish the commodification of labor.

Stuart Hall(1997, 25)

Korean fandom of esports unfolds in a radically different manner than the ways that it typically is seen in the West. I attended the 2022 Overwatch League Grand Final, held at the Anaheim Convention Center. At the premier event of the OWL calendar, the crowd was filled with young men in their teens and 20s (See Figure 2). A particularly enthusiastic fan of the Dallas Fuel, one of the two final teams competing, was clad in the signature blue of the team's jersey and attempting to rouse the crowd in an attempt to cheerlead. As he stomped across the stands, he waved energetically and screamed to engage those in the crowd. Fans of the game were similarly dressed in team apparel. The scene would not be out of the ordinary at any traditional sporting match in the United States, where fandom often necessitates cosplaying as players of their favorite teams. Western esports mimics such behavior but also includes cosplaying of popular characters from the games as well as supporting garb from the teams(Brown et al. 2018). This has been much explored, but what makes Korean esports fandom at its visual makeup and its participation is how Korean esports puts production value and aesthetics as a cornerstone of its product as means of promoting idolization, intrigue, and (romantic) fantasy(Elfving-Hwang 2018). Put another way, Korean esports is dominated by female fans.

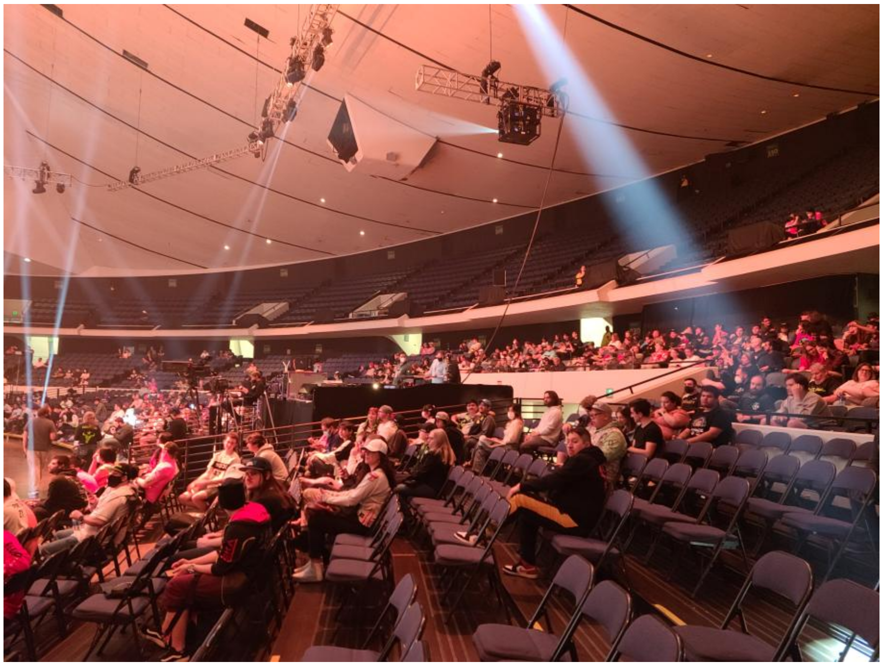

Figure 2 American esports fans waiting during pre-match broadcast of 2022 OWL Grand Finals

Game cultures and the identities they offer are not created in isolation. Rather, they develop and change in response to pre-existing social and cultural structures. These structures may include established gaming communities, popular media franchises, or social networks. Even when a game culture appears unified on the surface, it is actually made up of diverse, and sometimes conflicting, subcultures and communities. Each of these subgroups has its own unique set of norms, beliefs, and behaviors.(Shaw 2014; Ruberg 2019; Trammell 2023a) The scene of esports has often been described as one that is "tribal" in its makeup. In their study of Western esports fans, Coto-Anderson et al. identified that esports fandom was a complex navigation of gatekeeping, and self-affirmation, where "real" players were pit against newer, lower-level players (Anderson-Coto et al. 2019). The identities of esports fans are multifaceted and shaped by various situational and social factors. These fans often leverage their expertise, primarily derived from personal experiences and skill development, as a means of gatekeeping within their community(T. L. Taylor 2012). This practice of "gatekeeping" manifests in various ways, from engaging in intricate, terminology-laden discussions to deliberately distinguishing themselves from casual players. The underlying assumption around esports fandom in the 2010s was that it was predominantly an arena for those where able-bodied, cis-het, white, and masculine(Legierseand and Ruotsalainen 2024). Growing interest in esports by women has begun to challenge this belief(N. T. Taylor 2024), with research that has examined female participation in esports play and spectatorship on the rise, yet these new communities struggle to find purchase when introduced from top-down initiatives (Blanco 2024). As esports continues to evolve and diversify, it becomes increasingly important to recognize and study the complex interplay of identities, power dynamics, and cultural influences that shape its communities, challenging traditional assumptions and paving the way for more inclusive understandings of esports fandom and participation.

Similar to how professional European football leagues are dominated by the presence of Argentinian or Portuguese footballers, Korean esports leagues rely upon high-performing players in their most successful teams. As these players operate at the highest levels of achievement and skill, they, in turn, are products of their local communities and environments and have obligations to these communities. While it is the players on the stage that are earning the accolades and attention, it is the esports fan communities that create pathways for their success. This chapter continues that examination by looking at how Korean esports has become dominated by female fans, why they are so important to the development of the local industry. Much in the same way that queer indie game developers are praised for making the gaming industry more diverse and inclusive but fail to be appropriately compensated for their contributions(Ruberg 2019), females fans in esports have been similarly devalued by Western constructions of esports.

This underscores recent scholarship that has focused on the make-up of labor and fandom within video gaming, attempting to dismantle, complicate, queer, and disrupt traditional understandings of video games that prioritized their analysis through white male lenses. As we explore the concepts of labor and fandom, not only in the domain of gaming, but we must also examine the concepts of intersectionality as a method for grappling with the complexities that professional gaming and fandom engages in. Kimberele Crenshaw writes in support of intersectionality via critiquing the lens of contemporary feminism as eschewing focus on Black women, specifically writing:

> This focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply burdened, and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination. I suggest further that this focus on otherwise-privileged group members creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon. (Crenshaw 1989, 140)

Their excellent critique of contemporary feminism resonates now in our examination of games, their players and fans. Much of the work in game studies that we see today predominantly examines the conditions of Western players and experiences. Notably, there has been an increase in scholarships that examines traditionally marginalized players. Kishonna Gray’s work on Black gamers in streaming, esports, and media highlights issues facing Black gamers as well as coping and resistance methods(2020). As games scholar Adrienne Shaw describes so clearly: “What womanhood means, what blackness means, and what queer means are contextual and malleable”(Shaw 2014, 20). Making a strong argument for the importance of context in gaming, namely the medium of the video game, the games themselves, and how audiences engage with games, are products of deeper contextualized intersectionality.

Christopher Patterson positioned many games as “Global Games”, to “understand the discourses that envision games as a global art form, as global commodities produced by transnational companies that seem, initially, to hold no nationalist sentiments or orientations and thus evade the particularities and “seriousness” of national racial attitudes”(2020, 38). This analytical framing is a welcome addition to our deeper understanding of the roles of games within larger globalized society, however one of its limitations is how it continues to focus on Western conceptualizations of fandom, gaming, and participation. Patterson creates the term “Asiatic” as means “to characterize forms, spaces, and personages that many players will find similar to Asia but that are never exclusively Asian, or are obscured from any other recognizable racial genre, or are not foreclosed to other given identity tropes”(2020, 58). This organization of Asia as a subjectivity under a hierarchy of Western hegemony, continues a trend in Western academia of flattening the regional specificities of Asia, positioning agency out of the reach of Koreans, Chinese, or other groups commonly understood to be “Asian”. As a result of this flattening, we are a left with lossy data where once there had been a rich and complex narrative of political, historical, and cultural information.

Esports in Korea is often characterized by monolithic assumptions about Confucianism as a key process of understanding how public interactions occur, Fickle, drawing upon Joseph Jeon’s writing of the use of “Confucian discourses” in Korean film, decries “in esports, we see the same Confucian capitalism logic played out from both directions, such that being a good younger brother means being a good worker and vice versa” (Fickle 2021). While Fickle is correct in highlighting the quasi-familial/Confucian relationships that unfold in Korean esports as a result of the living conditions frequently seen in team houses, the conditions of youth who participate in esports is made more precarious by the economic and class realities of most esports players. Which is to say, the alienation caused by neoliberal organization of game spaces is a larger driver of this precarity(Scully-Blaker 2024). Further, attributing the modern Korean state as Confucian, despite lacking any of the historically traditional markers of a Confucian system or state. Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism[39] have routinely been used in scholarship to analyze contemporary Korean culture (K. H. Kim 2021), often leaving Koreanist scholarship at a crossroads for how to examine popular Korean culture as different from similar culture in the West. The invocation of such rigid and "problematic" language risks essentializing or trivializing conditions within the South Korean state, this is especially challenging considering how much of the discourse surrounding esports and professional gaming currently downplays it's Asiatic origins.

As we think about the conditions of the Korean state and how these conditions impact access to the played spaces of esports, it is useful to think about the dual concepts of place and space. Harrison and Dourish talk about "place" and "space", introducing them essentially as two accounts of spaces, a geometric account and an experiential account(1996), this social concept has been further developed to describe how both "place" and "space" are both social products that utilize different social practices (Brewer and Dourish 2008). This becomes relevant to our understanding of the places and spaces that Korean esports occupy, as they are fundamentally organized by the social conditions of Korean society. This of course includes the historical, cultural, and political realities of life in Korea.

This chapter develops an analysis of the gendered nature of Korean fandom of *Overwatch* esports, (hereafter, simply "Overwatch"), that explores the ways in which female fandom organizes and supports the local esports industry. *Overwatch* is a competitive team-based first-person shooter online game developed by Blizzard Entertainment[40]. I venture into the space of esports fandom to examine fans who attended the offline tournaments at the WDG Esports studio[41] Chungmuro

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[39] Alongside terms such as *han, Jeong, sinmyeong that* are frequently used in discourses on contemporary Korean culture.

[40] Overwatch (2016) and Overwatch 2 (2022) are the underlying games that all Overwatch esports are played on. This includes: the Overwatch League (OWL) which operated from 2018-2024, Overwatch Apex (Apex) operating from 2016-2017, Overwatch Contenders (OWC) running from 2017-2024 and the Overwatch Championship Series (OWCS) which has been in operation since 2024 to the present.

[41] WDG Studio is the official name of the company but unofficially refers to "We Design Game culture".

(2023-2024) and Hongdae locations (2025) in Seoul to understand how Korean esports fandom is gendered, arguing that women maintain an important position within the Korean esports scene. Contrary to Western norms that sideline or marginalize female participation, Korean women are active participants within these esports communities and places, where they are often the driving force behind local organizational efforts. Through participant observation of esports offline competition and fan interviews, I explore how Korean esports fandom is gendered and supportive of alternative participation to this traditionally hegemonic masculine space, but also how women's participation within these spaces does not remove them from contemporary issues in Korea.

3.1 Understanding Western Hegemonic Masculinity in Video Game Industries

Video games have been considered the site of male dominion for nearly as long as they have been a mainstream commodity. In the 1980s video games were marketed towards boys (Kirkpatrick 2013), the 1990s despite concentrated efforts by software developers and game designers struggled to break up the masculine provenance of games (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 1998). Subsequent analyses of games, their play and development have highlighted how gender remains a key component in the culture of their consumption[42].

Taylor and Voorhees, point to the lack of attention to masculinities in the study of regional game studies, correctly identifying that hegemonic masculinity does not play out in all arenas in the same manner, further that Western perceptions of gender construction are the main focus of English scholarship(N. Taylor and Voorhees 2018). I agree with their emphasis that studies into masculinity should not be reduced to simply studying men's issues without considering broader power structures and the contributions of feminist and queer theory, that it also needs to take into account the local non-Western constructions of feminism and gender. Communications scholar Aaron Trammell is useful in helping further the connection between race and class within masculine relations to games. While he adroitly points out that conditions of globalization further stretch our understanding of how race is compacted within areas play, as different cultures interact with race in different ways, it is useful to recall how class allows access to these game and play spaces(Trammell 2023b). This is seen in the context of Korean play spaces as well, where paid participation falls along gendered lines, where female fans are frequently utilized for their logistical and economic value they provide to the local industry.

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[42] There exists a wealth of meaningful scholarship that engages in how gender exists within the cultural sphere of gaming, far too many to list here, but a handful of texts can serve to introduce those of you who are interested in their design (Shaw 2014), history (Cassell and Jenkins 2000), professional play (Ge and Chen 2023), and online play experiences (Fox and Tang 2017) to list a scant few.

In her analysis of female gamers in Taiwan, Lin noticed how physical spaces of play are contested "Not only are relationships between computer games and gender roles defined by larger cultural constraints, but game choice and play are themselves acts of gender identity construction(H. Lin 2008, 77)". While this examination of esports seems to hold up in the West, the behavior of fandom and participation within the industry does not always neatly align. The intersection of esports and female engagement has been explored in its relationships to consumer interaction (Tang, Cooper, and Kucek 2021), promotion of transmedia materials (Coll 2024b).

3.1.1 Women in esports globally

Much of our understanding of esports play and fandom comes from research on hegemonic masculinity. That is, when we look to competitive esports, we frequently understand them to be the electronic corollary to their traditional forebear, specifically the site of masculine activity supporting other masculine actors. In their exploration of Portuguese esports Assunção, Scott, and Summerley highlighted how in Portugal, "a country with persistent patriarchal influence in society", esports communities resisted measures that were aimed to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion(2024). The resistance to these diversity measures demonstrated the entrenched nature of attitudes that view gaming as male spaces, specifically as the belief that professional and casual gaming occupy the same sphere, complicates non-male access to participation within local esports communities.

Anthropologist Akil Fletcher highlighted a similar if analogous situation in professional esports, focusing on issues of race rather than those of gender, namely that much of professional esports has a dearth of black players. Fletcher expresses how it is far from a simple flat issue of racism in online and digital spaces, but rather is a much greater and complex tapestry of class, gender, race, labor and technology issues (Fletcher 2020). He posits “it [race] cannot be separated from the fact that esports and gaming spaces are inherently white/Asian, male, and mid to upper class dominated” (2020, 2671).

Esports is noted as a site for creating (and recreating) “neoliberal masculinity,” where players embrace a hegemonic masculinity “that borrows facets of hegemonic, subordinate, and even counterhegemonic formations of masculinity for the purpose of competitive effectiveness and marketability” (Voorhees and Orlando 2018, 211). Through their examination of the professional organization Cloud9’s[43] CS: GO team, they illustrated how the entirely male team would enact multiple modes of masculinities throughout their interactions with fans, branding media, and each other. While at face value, the masculinities being performed challenged hegemonic heteronormative behavior through the implementation of homoerotic and affective behavior, these discourses still remained in service to larger economic neoliberal formations. As such, in spite of players demonstrating playful, caring, and other “soft” masculine behaviors were largely understood to be in service to promoting a competitive spirit.

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[43] Cloud9, is major North American esports organization that operates esports teams in 15 professional leagues at the time of writing.

The framing of esports as solely the site of masculine or Western sensibilities proves problematic when looking at how non-masculine, non-Western actors engage with esports. In their study of Chinese female League of Legends fandom, Yin and Xu express how female fans challenge the male-dominated culture of eSports by engaging with it emotionally and creating new spaces for discourse. They counter the competitive, often exclusionary, mentality of traditional male fans by introducing themes of romance, homosociality, and cuteness (2023). The reframing of fandom from female Chinese perspectives highlights how Western hegemonic understandings of gendered fandom can be limiting in non-Western contexts.

Throughout this chapter I have been describing masculinity under the banner of Western hegemony, which to some might appear to be a semantic choice to avoid addressing the racial component that is embodied by the social imaginary of “the West.” Put more simply, any examination of western masculinity can easily be understood to be that of a white masculinity, where all other racial and cultural identifiers have been scrubbed or reorganized to prop up whiteness as the default in the hegemonic order. Voorhees and Howard describe this as a process of embodying a techno-orientalist gaze, where “the Orient is imagined not as the past that will yield to white power but as the future that must be avoided to maintain white supremacy”(2024, 192). This framing of a techno-orientalist future as a prophecy of dread, exploitation, and doom leaves no space for an alternative the positions Asia as an arbiter of its own future, or anything other than a commodity to be consumed and dismantled in the service of white patriarchy. Problematically, this overtly pessimistic analysis is reliant upon the belief that Korean cultural values and labor principals can be effectively commodified, and scrubbed of their “otherness“ to invoke Iwabuchi (2004), Voorhees and Howard's description of how the North American esports industry capitalizes and plays with Korean bodies as a means of reaffirming Korean positionality as Other within the construction of an increasingly globalized, mediatized, and technologized world. Curiously, their framing the threat of a rising and competent Korea in areas of technology management, and more directly esports, fails to address the hard political reality of life on the Korean peninsula. A life that has been ruptured by the forces of American empire since its division in 1945. Absent an understanding of how Korean political, economic, cultural and technological development unfolded under the auspices of American occupation, promotes a discourse that simultaneously victimizes Koreans as recipients of white supremacy and racism, while also effectively Othering them into the very object of their techno-orientalist fantasy. They continue to describe how conditions of neoliberalism have positioned Korea as more capable than their North American brethren in adjusting to the necessary conditions to effectively master competition within esports. This framing of a techno-orientalist racialization is described as inevitable "Thus, despite its Asiatic trappings and fetishization of Asian capability, esports is not an amicable site where North America and Asia meet; rather, it exacerbates white anxieties about being replaced by Asians" (Voorhees and Howard 2024, 202). This is to say that positioning Korea as a racial other tautologizes the argument that cultural co-prosperity, cohabitation, or collaboration is impossible thus reaffirming its position at the margins of empire.

Esports is typically organized along gender lines, despite this often not being codified into the guidelines of professional leagues. In spite of the potential for cross-gendered play most play occurs siloed by gender, oftentimes to help support female players and fans to create role-models and build self-confidence (Madden et al. 2021). Structural barriers to female participation in esports also complicate the industry, situations like Molly "AVALLA" Kim's are common for women interested in being an esports player. Even with having the requisite skills to be a part of a professional esport team, the logistical difficulties of co-habitation made being a player practically impossible (B. "Gatamchun" 2018), as such she was forced to defer her play ambitions to the realm of coaching.

Online gaming has created a new space for Korean gamers to exist and play in. Being a very densely populated country, private space can be difficult to find in urban Korea. While Korea is a country that is steeped in Confucian values and tradition, "the Internet has provided the young with online and offline opportunities for casual encounters between the sexes." (I. Kang 2014, 58) Online games further the connection and interaction between men and women in Korea. Yet while females make up a significant portion of gamers in Korea, computer gaming is still largely perceived as a "masculine and technological activity" (Bryce and Rutter 2005, 307) Hjorth, Na, and Huhh discussed the importance of challenging the standardized gender norms and preconceptions that exist when it comes to game playing in Korea(2009, 268). There is a large number of women gamers, but they do not want to be viewed as "gamers" rather that they are PC users who also game. (2009, 268) The importance of cultural identity plays a large role in the creation and identity formation of the individual.

3.2 Organizations of Korean esports Labor, Fandom and Etiquette

The prevailing narrative about the younger generation in Korea often portrays young men as struggling to meet traditional masculine expectations, particularly in terms of financial stability and being the primary provider for a family(E. Bae 2015). This inability to fulfill conventional roles is seen as a major source of their frustration and distress. However, since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Korea has experienced a shift away from traditional family structures and gender-based division of labor. This change calls for new perspectives on how young people should live and what roles they should fulfill. Despite these societal changes, the persistence of outdated gender stereotypes and consumerist culture prevents the emergence of alternative forms of masculinity that could replace the traditional hegemonic model.

Looking towards the landscape of Korean esports organizations and fandom it is important to look at how gender roles are created, reinterpreted and managed within the ecosystem. To do this it is relevant to examine how gender and space is contested and constructed within Korea, both within the culture industries but also across the youth spectrum. Fandom in Korea is a complex negotiation of values and work, despite Korea being one of the originators of esports communities, we can see that it has not led to a particular development of fan/player relations outside of the Korean peninsula. Quite to the contrary, fan conditions in Korea appear to be an outlier when compared to how the rest of world interacts and consumes esports.

In Korean society, feminist scholars have criticized mainstream youth research for ignoring the gender dimensions of precarity. Bae has criticized youth discourse in South Korea for assuming the youth population to be predominantly male and understanding their disillusionment through the standardized life cycles of modern men(E. Bae 2015). Bae attributes this phenomenon to the gender blindness that perceives women as supporters in men's lives, resulting in the absorption of gender disparities within class or generational disparities, making gender disparities invisible. This is challenged in Korean esports fandom, as Korean women engage in a dual-role of support and consumption, similarly seen in modes of K-pop fandom and sports fandom ((J. O. Kim 2025; Gong 2017)).

The ways in which fans interact with players is demonstrative of particular gender relations within Korean contemporary culture. However, they are also ones that are novel in the sense that games are so frequently viewed as masculine and only under the purview of men (Paaßen, Morgenroth, and Stratemeyer 2017; Madden et al. 2021; Hayday, Collison, and Kohe 2021). Korea breaks that narrative and challenges our understanding of what it means to be a fan or player in esports due to the overwhelming support given by women to keep the leagues from failing.

3.2.1 Narrative Construction in Korean esports

During a conversation with a manager of a local Korean esport league broadcasting studios, the importance of developing narratives as a means to engage with the fans was discussed. The studio noticed that Men are "result-oriented", critical of how play occurred in a match, that their fandom was inextricably tied to the gameplay and the success and failure that the players showcased. This supports current research into the gendered fandom of esports(B. Yu, Brison, and Bennett 2022; Barney and Pennington 2023). Additionally, online interactions of male fans promoted a similar sense of general fandom, what is interesting is how the online offline spaces are organized to support the particular interests of the gender divided fandom.

The studio continued to point out how it was the importance of personal narratives that drove much of the fandom for female fans, noting “female fans tend to just take everything from the atmosphere, cheering, and also their interest in individual players and teams as well”(M. Kim and Lee 2025). The focus of women creating personalized narratives for themselves and the players drove a narrative-based relationship (See Fig 3). During interviews with female fans there was a similarly expressed sentiment, where for many of the female players they wanted to develop an interpersonal relationship with the teams, coaches, and players. The result of this type of fandom would promote specific supportive roles. One superfan[44], the cheerleader of a particular team, was given the honor of conducting the battle cry that preceded every single map of a match. She mentioned that despite her "favored" status she had no ambition to become more involved than she already was. However, in addition to her role as a cheerleader, the broadcast would frequently show her during game breaks, and the pre and postgame broadcasts.

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[44] This fan demonstrated considerable loyalty to the league and her favorite team attending every offline match, preparing goods and presents for the players to thank them for their hard work. In one instance she had procured a cake to give to a player who was celebrating his birthday.

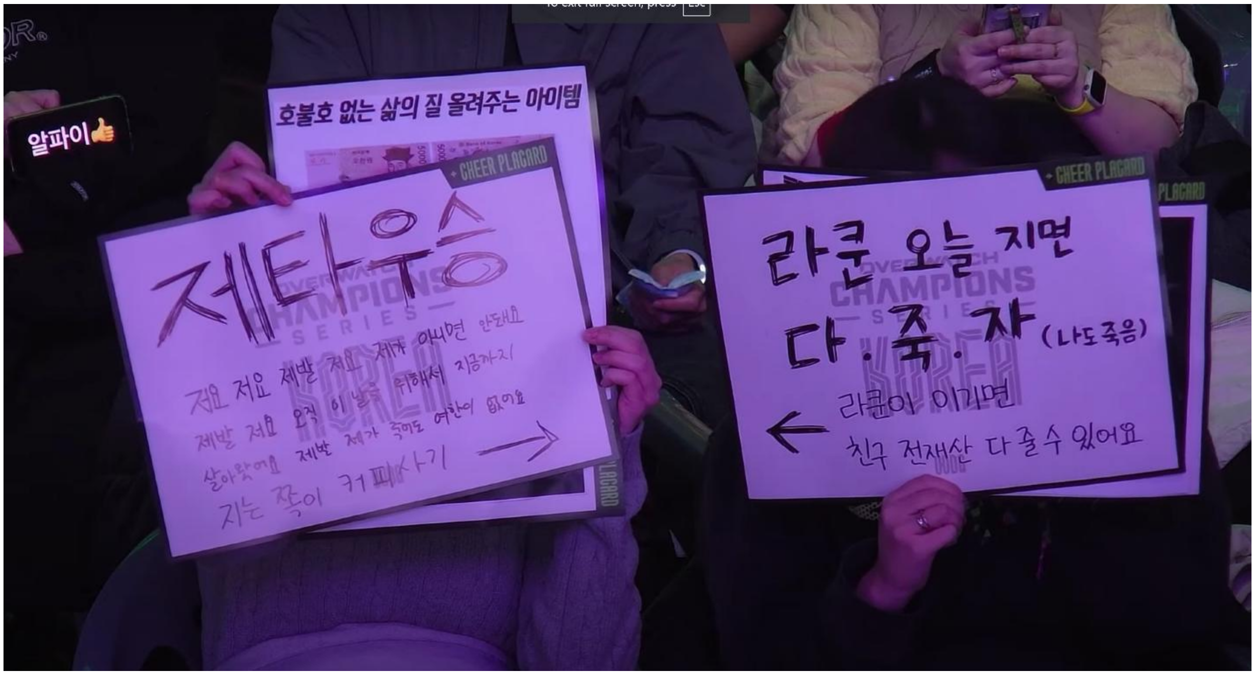
알파이👍
호불호 없는 삶의 질 올려주는 아이템
CHEER PLACARD
제타우승
OVERWATCH CHAMPIONS SERIES KOREA
저요 저요 제발 저요 제가 아니면 안돼요
제발 저요 오직 이 날을 위해서 지금까지
살아왔어요 제발 제가 죽어도 여한이 없어요
지는 쪽이 커피사기 →
CHEER PLACARD
라쿤 오늘 지면
다.죽.자 (나도죽음)
← 라쿤이 이기면
친구 전재산 다 줄수 있어요

Figure 3 Fan signs interacting with live broadcast.

The interaction between the fans and the "labor" of esports became a large component of the offline experience that was developed by WDG. During broadcasts fans would frequently write up fan signs where they would indicate all manner of messages to the players, teams, broadcasters, or even others in the audience. This development in the offline space to promote these interactions was a deliberate move by the broadcast studio. This behavior, while common to esports fandom worldwide, is truly embraced by Korean audiences, and is further supported by broadcasting decisions. Messages written on these fan signs would often include fanart or some personal connection to the fan holding the sign. For example, two fans would hold up signs that illustrate a private bet between the fans based on the outcome of a particular match, these fans and their signs would be showcased on the "jumbotron" screen that was used to show gameplay where they would then be included in a one-sided interview by the broadcasters who would ask questions while the fans responded with affirming or denying gestures. These interactions were such an integral part of the broadcast that particular fans would become recognizable, and larger historical narratives could be made in reference to them. The role of storytelling and community building via this narrative process was further supported by the players and teams who would regularly make themselves available to the fans after the matches at fan events. Acknowledgement of the fans and their dedication is a common component of Korean fandom where the development of parasocial relationships is a hallmark of building a loyal consumer base (Elfving-Hwang 2018). The narrative parasocial relationship building was so important to Korean female fans that it was often only the first match of a gameday where all the seats were occupied. In the later matches many of the seats had been vacated while the fans stood outside of the play venue in player meeting zones where they would collect autographs, selfies, and exchange prepared gifts with the players.

The local esports industry further highlighted how they developed a space that was very enticing to female fans. The owner of the WDG stadium, expressed how the lack of a liquor license and the ability to serve beer negatively impacted the rate in which male fans chose to attend. Coincidently, a common theme among the female fans I interviewed was how they would socialize with one another post-match, often seeking out nearby restaurants and bars to participate in the popular youth drinking culture of the Hongdae area.

While offline participation was dominated by females, online viewership was the inverse. One member of management expressed that typically 70-80% of viewership was male. I argue that industry decisions to promote access to players, and the development of narrative and parasocial relationships vis a vis the community afforded by the offline space contributed to making it more attenable to Korean female sensibilities.

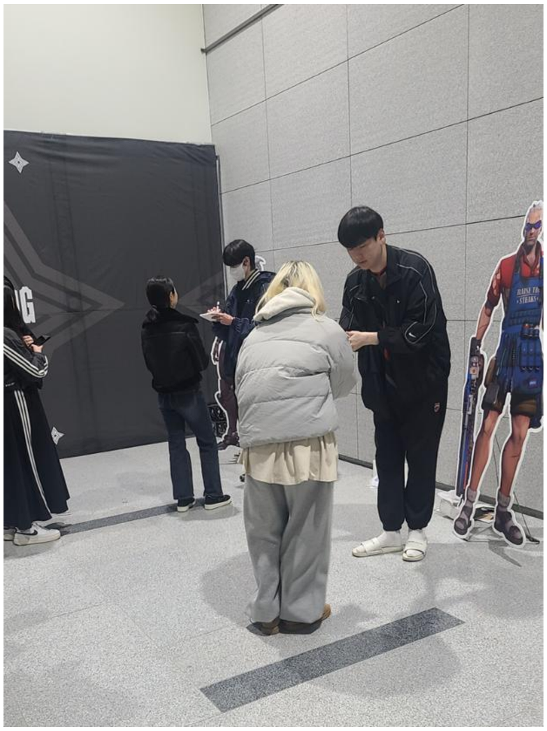

Figure 4 Female Fan interacting with esports player.

Current literature on Korean esports doesn't engage with Korea as a subject, and as such they transform Korea into what they need it to be to make their point, but in that process they lose much of the relevance of how esports in Korea relies upon historical, political, and gender division. Mandatory military service for men limits the possibility for participation and accessibility to offline esports, and larger esports youth culture as a whole. Returning to the cultural realities and environmental learning that is embedded into place and space(Brewer and Dourish 2008) that esports occupy, historical cold war division and the current organization of Korean youth participation privileges female engagement with esports in offline spaces.

3.2.2 The Korean gender divide and esports

Korea endures multiple issues that can be laid at the feet of gender problems domestically. Korea has the largest income pay gaps across gender with a rate of 31.2% (OECD 2024), coupled with the world's lowest fertility rate, with women expected to have .72 childbirths in their lifetime

(Jihoon Lee and Kim 2024). There are numerous examples of how gender relations are negatively impacting the development of the country. Access and participation within sports labor markets are similarly divided, as female workers are typically viewed as care workers due to the social identity of women in Korea(H. J. Kim and Lee 2023), esports as hybridized industry suffers from similar gendered expectations and experiences. In Korea', gender equality in its economy is stagnant, having some of the lowest female workforce participation among OECD nations (World Bank 2025) and one of the highest gender pay gaps among developed nations. Sociologists Cha and Kim argue that the social organization of time—how it's used and valued—is a key mechanism perpetuating this gender inequality (Cha and Kim 2023), More specifically expectations upon how men and women should allocate time between work and family, and how these activities are rewarded financially and socially, create a gendered "time divide" leading to unequal economic outcomes. These gendered expectations of society are deeply challenged by neoliberal norms that promote individualism and personal responsibility. It is this schism that undergirds many difficulties facing Korean youth as concerns over allocations of resources and general precarity of opportunity in a dwindling labor market.

The relationships between feminism, fandom, and professional esports play has been highlighted by tensions surrounding Kim “Geguri” Se-yeon, the first and only woman to play in the Overwatch League(Cullen 2018a). Geguri rejected calls from Famerz, a local Korean feminist organization, to become an icon for the progressive qualities of Korean feminism, preferring to focus on what work she could do as a player. The rejection of publicly facing feminist values is a common theme among Korean celebrity, stemming from several high-profile cases of harassment. Voice actress, Kim Jayeon, lost her job on the online game *Closers*, produced by Nexon, by sharing an image on social media of her wearing a t-shirt with the slogan “Girls do not need a prince” (K.

B. Wagner and Liang 2021). In October 2019 K-pop idol of the female group F(x) Sulli, committed suicide following months of online harassment(S. Park and Kim 2021). This stresses how feminism has become a major component for understanding the divide between genders in Korea. Specifically, as the current Yoon administration ran in part on a platform to return to traditional values while also declaring that the days of gender issues and need for offices to ensure equality had passed by. This is consistent with scholarship that has demonstrated that current social conditions within domestic Korea are fraught with issues and gender complications. At the same time that domestica gender issues are unfolding socially we can see that the local esports scene is not removed from this issue at all. As will be indicated below, the Korean esports scene is dominated by gender roles and positions.

Much as it is the same in other culture industries, we can see that Korean esports demarcates labor in particular ways. The idol system so common in K-pop often isolates genders and promotes activities that can make them more marketable towards fandoms, One of these notions is the development of fantasy and potential romance, albeit one that would never be fulfilled (Youna Kim 2013). The organization of esports space and fandom grapples with this divide in uneasy but promising ways. Many of the women that I interviewed expressed how they had seen esports as an opportunity for them to find meaningful interaction with young men. While there remain concerns over how life outside of the arena would unfold, with fears over finding work or romantic relationships, for the women I spoke with they expressed optimism over how their particular shared interests in esports made them understand young men more.

3.2.3 Gendered engagement with esports

What comes to be interesting about the Korean esports scene is particularly how much of it is dominated by women. Unlike how esports operates in the west where it is almost entirely within the confines of masculinity and masculine spaces, what transpires in Korea is a particular blending if not outright inversion of that same space. The omnipresence of females in esports mirrors the trend of female attendance at Korean sporting events (J. Yoon 2024), as well as offered women the capacity to engage with esports players via female gaze(Gong 2017)[45]. I list some examples from my attendance at the Overwatch World Championship Series held in Seoul. What becomes important to understand is how esports in Korea is reliant upon offline events to help support the larger initiatives of online play. That is to say that despite having online audiences that dwarf those possible of any offline venue, it is the interactivity that is enabled by the offline that creates a robust community of players and fans. As a result, what unfolds in Korean esports is a focus on promoting and highlighting the importance of the fans that show up to the box office and through the “turnstiles”. In Korean esports the players and fans have a strong interaction that exists between these parties, one that relies upon mutual respect and understanding of how these interactions fundamentally support the local industry. Furthermore, what we see about esports in a Korean context is that they utilize the organization of fans as a secondary process of economic and material support to not only the esports teams, but broadcast organizations and players.

The shared culture and expectations of decorum and etiquette undergird many of the fan-player interactions, which ultimately results in greater accessibility and comfortability between the two than esports communities in western contexts. This dramatic acceleration of access to players necessitates trust between all actors as towards their physical safety and privacy.

Korean pop-cultural fandom is often expressed via how romantic fantasies allow to be fostered and promoted as a natural course for fans. Idols have been known to apologize for dating, and are expected to be single "to appeal to teenage romantic fantasies" (Elfving-Hwang 2018, 194). The relationship between idols and fans further complicates understanding of public and private fandom. Korean fan cultures have also been noted for their problematic and obsessive nature with *sasaeng* ('private') fans. This particular phenomenon exhibits excessive interest, stalking, and potential abuse of an idol of interest (ibid). Korean esports similarly creates multiple modes of interaction for fans and players.

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[45] Gong described how female soccer fans from East Asian societies have developed a participatory culture, objectifying male athletes’ bodies: their active female gaze ‘validate[s] heterosexual masculinity and jeopardize[s] women’s status as legitimate sports fans’ (Gong 2017, 181).

During interviews with esports organizers, it was expressed that Korean esports allows women to play out their idol fantasies in ways that other Korean fandoms would prohibit. In someways it was a cost-effective decision to gain access to esports players over K-pop, K-drama, K-film stars. Several fans and staff talked about how the fandom in esports was heavily reliant upon female fan labor, as they were the ones that organized and supported many of the teams and organizations via their ardent fandom. Their importance to the local industry was well understood by the hosting organizations that saw the key difference between male and female fandom as the same difference between free-riding and paying customers respectively. With the value that Korean female fans provide to the local esports scene the local organizations did their best to provide these fans things that they would find attractive. This included space for fan meetings, access to broadcasters, teams, and players.

3.2.4 Gendered Fandom

> I was running late to the second day of the Overwatch World Championship Series (OWCS) and as I was waiting in line, I saw that other fans were similarly running behind getting into the venue. However, while I was only armed with a backpack and notepad, I saw that these two female fans had come with an assortment of shopping bags, presumably from a shopping excursion at nearby Myeongdong, a popular and busy shopping district near the WDG stadium. As we rode the elevator to the 7th floor and the main play hall, I saw that one of the female fans removed one of the shopping bags and offered it to one of the support

> staff who happened to be riding in the elevator alongside us. As the exchange occurred the fan expressed how concerned they were about the condition of the players of her favorite team, and she had prepared some small snacks and tonics to help keep them focused and healthy for the upcoming playoff season. The support staff graciously accepted the gift as if it was a matter of course, one that happens rather regularly. As the staff exited the elevator onto a restricted floor, I heard the common refrain "Fighting!" This reminded me that fandom begins immediately when you enter the facilities.
> -Taken from my observational notes.

What I would notice again and again attending the events at the WDG studio was the preponderance of feminine energy and spaces. The audience was almost always entirely College-aged Korean females. What also became particularly interesting was how these spaces promoted Korean femininity as opposed to the "neckbeards and sweats" so commonly found within western esports. What this, along with conversations with female Korean fans, began to tell me was that not only was Korean esports spaces accommodating to women, but they were actively seeking them out, for a multitude of reasons. The women at these events would have been similar to their peers at other live events or activities, which is to say that for the most part they adhered to the conventions of Korean youth feminine behavior, which is to say they were fashionably dressed, polite, and prepared.

Women in these events were able to show up as they would choose to and that frequently coincided with how Korean young women choose to show up elsewhere. They did not seem to feel pressured into changing their behaviors to suit western male expectations of interaction with esports. Within this space you could also see how camaraderie and interactivity would unfold as these women would informally compete to demonstrate their quality as fans to the teams that they supported. The exchanging of gifts between the fans and the players was incredibly common, and would occasionally follow a multiple stage process, where gifts would get more intimate and extravagant all as a way to demonstrate care and thoughtfulness. These gifts would range from gift cards to local eateries and cafes, to handwritten letters, flowers, and skincare products (fully trans-mediatizing the hallyu industries.)

When I set out to examine how young college aged women participated as fans in Korean esports fandom, I found myself with an unexpected challenge, namely that of “the approach”. I was something of an oddity in these spaces, while in my time participating in esports fandom and observational research back in the United States I readily saw myself among the other members of the fan community, specifically there was a plethora of white men who were comfortable in performing their fandom, in Korea I was reminded of how I was not the standard audience member. I recall vividly the first forays I made into these spaces and the failures that I accrued. While Korean society is no stranger to non-Koreans, and it’s foreign population is at an all-time high (D. Jung 2025), it still largely has the hallmarks of a semi-homogenous state. As such, aside from a handful of times during my participating and attending these esports events, I felt a little out of place as the only visibly non-Asian/Korean in the audience. Esports is also a game that skews towards younger players and fans.

In the same way that Korean female fans are participating in sports at ever greater levels, the New York Times, quoting the Korea Professional Sports Association’s data stating that 55% of professional sports fans are women (J. Yoon 2024). These female fans have developed a new sports fan culture, actively incorporating K-pop idol culture into the Korean football industry, where they travel abroad to attend football games, send coffee trucks to show their support, and secure first-row seats to take photos of the football players(ibid 2024). The rise in female participation in sports is echoed in the realm of Korean esports, as Korean female fans challenge the structural sexism that positions them as passive observers, whose interests are only those that can be found within the context of a household or family.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter goes further into examining the fan-player dynamic of Korean esports, focusing on how gender roles and expectations manifest within these fan spaces. Contemporary Korean society is grappling with major gender issues that are often highlighted in online discourse. Korean esports provides opportunities for many actors, male and female to operate and cultivate their interest of the sport alongside one another. In striking contrast to how esports fandom operates in western contexts, esports fandom in Korea relies greatly upon female participation. Combining interviews with esports staff, broadcasters, and fans I highlighted how gender roles are imagined and processed within Korean esports spaces. Through conversations, interviews, and observations I explored how feminine attitudes, values, and behavior challenge the hegemonic masculinity and expectations for participation within global esports fandom.

Esports fandom in Korea is a product of larger gender dynamics within Korean society, where esports venues and events serve as unique social spaces where young women can interact with men, both male fans *and* players on more equal footing. This phenomenon is particularly significant as it offers an alternative avenue for celebrity fandom, distinct from the more established K-pop industry. What is seen in Korean esports fandom is simultaneously occurring across multiple arenas of Korean sports fandom. Much in the same way that Korean soccer, and soccer media is being repositioned to accommodate the increase of female participants, where streaming personalities "express, and perform their gender potential in which they promote their gender identity to obtain celebrity power, authorize females' analytical sensibilities, and demasculinize the media spectacle of sports arenas."(J. O. Kim 2025, 11), Korean esports is transitioning to embody the same opportunities. However, while the prominence and access to esports by women has increased, these fandoms have yet to open up the possibilities for more professional engagements with the sport, outside of traditional positions of match reporter or support staff. Which in itself continues the trend of positioning females entirely within supportive roles in sports labor.(H. J. Kim and Lee 2023) On the other hand, witnessing Korean females challenge the norms of fandom locally, leads to the hope that global gendered inequality in esports can be overcome through shared experience and pursuit of fandom.

Chapter 4: When Whales Fight, A Shrimp's Back is Broken: The Transnational Politics of Activism in Esports

In 2019, as protests in Hong Kong responded to the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill, and South Koreans were boycotting Japanese goods during the Japan-South Korea Trade dispute, known locally in Korea as the "No Japan movement," esports emerged as a major site of political activism in East Asia. Two events; the "Blitzchung Controversy," in which professional Hong Kong esports player Ng "Blitzchung" Wai-Chung publicly declared his support for a free Hong Kong, and South Korean esports organization O2 Blast's "Boycott Japan" protest, demonstrated the political agency of esports players and teams yet resulted in wildly different responses. The former garnered international interest, US congressional condemnation, and widespread consumer backlash, while the latter merited no extensive international media attention, support, or criticism. The vastly different responses to these two forms of global esports activism demonstrate that Korean esports activism is still subject to the same conditions as its fellow *hallyu*[46] industries, whereas activism that runs abridge of economic and cultural hegemonic powers of China or the United States—such as those found that challenge the Chinese Communist Party's One China Policy—immediately draw activists and esports stakeholders to engage in a process of reifying Sinophobia or Sinodeference[47].

The title of this chapter, "When whales fight, a shrimp's back is broken,"[48] is a Korean proverb describing how Korea has historically found itself caught amidst larger powers, easily swept away in any potential conflicts. Contemporary Korea continues to be placed between the titanic powers of China and the United States. Korean esports shares this struggle, despite being a titan in its own right (K. Y. Bae 2021; H.-M. Kim and Kim 2022), and must position itself in service to supporting the same objectives at the level of the Korean state, where it must appease both. While tensions arise in Beijing over geopolitical issues, such as those of Taiwanese sovereignty, the Hong Kong Pro-democracy movement, or those of the territorial dispute surrounding the Diaoyu islands[49] and Washington, where cultural, political, and economic fears of a rising China are increasing, Korean esports has carved out a position of supplying world-class talent to buttress its own soft power objectives. By questioning how Korean esports navigates this precarious position demonstrates how its practitioners similarly engage in acts of either Sinophobia or Sinodeference, depending upon which hegemonic power they are attempting to placate at the moment.

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[46] *Hallyu* refers to the Korean wave of pop culture industries.

[47] Sinodeference it the term I coined to describe actions that are aimed to demonstrate respect and support of Chinese state policy or cultural values.

[48] 고래 싸움에 새우등 터진다

The activism surrounding these esports incidents was shaped by the American company Activision Blizzard, the proprietor of both esports competitions and developer of the underlying games, which levied heavy punishments on Blitzchung yet failed to censure O2 Blast. Blizzard censored pro-Hong Kong activism as a means to silence the professional gamers in the service of economic hegemony. Their discrepancy in action suggests larger social, economic, and political influences when it comes to policing grassroots activism in esports. In this chapter, I draw upon fan responses, media coverage, and American Congressional reports to argue that esports activism is subject to larger political hegemony. Chinese and American capitalist interests clash in these titanic economies. Esports, while dominated by South Korean influences (K. Y. Bae 2021), relies upon transnational labor, fandom, and platforms, finds itself situated between the “whales” of American and Chinese diplomacy, leaving little space for counter-hegemonic activist movements.

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[49] These islands located between Japan and China, known as the Senkaku islands in Japan, are currently in Japanese administration but whose territory is contested by China.

Similar to other Korean *hallyu* incidents of activism, Korean esports political action finds itself subject to larger global audience attention, but despite the prominence of the Korean esports industry, it remains subject to the demands and expectations of the state and global hegemonic powers. To understand how esports in Korea operates against the will of the esports industry and the Korean state, I draw upon Elfving-Hwang’s concept of a Hallyu “code of ethics,” a practice that demands (individual) adherence to capital and doesn’t allow for behavior that goes against the economic goals of the culture industries (Elfving-Hwang 2018). As esports players’ activism goes against the best practices of the industry, these acts of personal politicization operate alongside the larger transnational flows of the *hallyu* culture industry.

In this chapter, I argue that political activism in esports, both Korean and global, is constrained by broader hegemonic interpretations of acceptable political behavior. Specifically, the political agency of Korean esports players is subject to the same scrutiny and apathy in other *hallyu* industries, despite their relevant dominance within the esports industry. Ultimately, *hallyu* activism is also subject to the larger political domination by hegemonic powers.

This chapter argues that Korean esports celebrities’ social and political activism operates similarly to those in other *hallyu* culture industries. However, the reception of esports activism subjects it to larger geopolitical flows and power imbalances. While Korean esports labor is considered S-tier[50] in the esports world, they must still navigate the relationship between global capital and larger geopolitical hegemons, much in the same way that Korea navigates its relationships with China and the United States. As a result, Korean esports activism is frequently subsumed into American activism politics, where regional disputes are effectively ignored while those that challenge American global narratives are immediately elevated and addressed. Central to this piece is how Korean esports players balance positions of Sinophobia alongside those of Sinodeference as a means of maintaining access to the most powerful and lucrative global markets. If the esports players engage in activities anathema to either whale, they risk alienation, cancellation, and loss of earning potential. This censorship can come in the form of corporate stakeholders applying penalties, concerted efforts of angry fans organizing boycotts, or opposing competitors and organizations refusing to participate.

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[50] S-tier is the highest of ranking classification from S to F, with F being the worst. It is a commonly used ranking metric in video game communities popularized by Japanese video games.

The next section situates Korean esports activism within cultural studies and celebrity studies, briefly examining examples of non-gaming hallyu industries activism practices and their global reception. The demands of celebrity to act as a brand while simultaneously operating authentically according to one's political values create tension for hallyu practitioners as they engage in civic discourse. Subsequently, two sections unpack Korean esports activists' relationship to feminism and anti-Asian hate, domestically and within the United States, positioning political action under a guise of American hegemonic oversight. The final section of the chapter examines two major incidents in esports, 02 Blast's No Japan Boycott, and the Blitzchung controversy, to advance my argument that esports activism (Korean or otherwise) is marginalized when it does not address issues pertinent to those powers at the peak of global hegemony.

4.1 Celebrity Activism and *Hallyu* Industries

Celebrities increasingly hold the attention of contemporary society. They provide outlets for fans and observers to witness the public process of civic participation, branded engagement, and public discourse. They are actors whose interaction "occurs at the intersection of public biography and political discourse that is refracted through the consumer capitalism" (Boykoff and Carrington 2020, 830). What's more, celebrities are increasingly expected to be involved in the same issues and share the same values of their fans, despite how their individual views may potentially be at odds with those of their fans. Hallyu celebrity, of which I consider esports players to be members, further demands adherence to national norms and societal expectations, navigating perceived government-sanctioned commodification from the "girl industries" of female K-pop idols[51] (Yeran Kim 2011) to being expected to adhere to local fan expectations surrounding Korean-ness despite the quasi-globalist presentation of Korean celebrity(Jennifer Kang 2023). These expectations foisted upon Korean celebrities are demonstrative of the global position of Korea vis-à-vis Western celebrity. Stephen Epstein highlights how Korean hallyu celebrities and other East Asian celebrities frequently apologize for their actions over romantic "scandals," perceived violations of a celebrity-fan contract, or those that cause national disappointment in ways that are relatively unheard of among their Western celebrity counterparts(2020). The cycles of scandal (perceived or otherwise), fan/netizen outrage, public apology, and resumption of celebrity activity promote a concept of what Elfving-Hwang refers to as the hallyu "code of ethics." This "code of ethics" demands adherence to capital and doesn't allow for behavior that goes against the economic goals of the culture industries (Elfving-Hwang 2018).

In Korea, participation in nationalistic events and political activism is quite common, bordering upon a national pastime. As a democratic nation that achieved its democratization within living memory, participation in political and national civic events is common for many Koreans. For example, during the 2002 FIFA World Cup, held jointly between Korea and Japan, tens of thousands of Koreans boisterously supported the deep run of the men's national team, finding it an opportunity to promote their Koreanness, and celebrate their nationalistic sentiments; these same supporters came together to participate in "candle light vigils" protesting American military negligence following the deaths of two schoolgirls due to a poorly executed military exercise (S.-J. Lee 2006). The willingness of Koreans to routinely participate in nationwide political action has demonstrated an ingrained sense of civic duty. Widespread engagement in political protest covers all manner of issues, from domestic to global. In the past 25 years, protests have erupted around all manner of regional, international, and domestic issues. These issues include trade disputes with Japan and America, support for the installation of American military hardware, Presidential overreach, national tragedy in the mismanagement of the Sewol Ferry sinking, and mass organization to defend attacks on Korean democracy, as witnessed in the winter of December 2024 through the Spring. For many Koreans, regardless of their station, class, or political party, political participation is a vital component of civic life. The development of national broadband Information and Communication Technology and internet everywhere systems ensured that Korean civic life was transitioning from the analog and offline to the realms of digital as the internet and the 4th industrial age's cultural ignition process(Jiyeon Kang 2018).

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[51] Yeran Kim described female idols as a component of "girl industries", where idols are manufactured and consumed as neoliberal brand and commodities(Yeran Kim 2011).

In the rest of the chapter I foreground the relationship between *hallyu* celebrity activism, and transnational activism drawing upon K-pop transnational activism, Stephen Epstein describes how conditions of transnational consumption of popular culture between Japan and Korea are insufficient to mend the historical rupture, animosity, and historical reckoning that exists between the two nations, where "hopes for the ability of popular culture exchange to help promote understanding between South Korea and Japan [are] increasingly unrealistic" (Epstein 2020, 170).

The historical relationship between Korea and Japan has commonly unfolded in the context of cultural consumption.

Esports, like its traditional counterpart, is a hotbed of activism and politicking, with individuals, teams, and organizations utilizing platforms afforded them through sport to promote issues of social justice, environmentalism, feminism, and others. Similarly, esports often is organized more globally than traditional sports like American football or other domestic leagues of the United States[52]. This can be seen in the organization and development of global esports(D. Y. Jin 2021), with leagues such as the *Overwatch League* that emulate geographical proximity to its fanbases with teams such as the *London Spitfire*, *Shanghai Dragons*, and *Los Angeles Gladiators*. The emphasis on transnational organization opens up players and fans to new intersections of interaction, where as a result of the mediatization, personalization, and commodification of celebrity coincides with a greater expectation of personal political action. Paradoxically, in American sports/culture fandom there exists a tension as to the role of a celebrity to utilize their position and platform for the role of political activism, notably seen in conservative fans decrying that politics has no place in sports and that they should “shut up and play”(Towler, Crawford, and Bennet III 2020) , whereas progressive fans frequently desire that celebrities would utilize their platforms for activism and social justice to greater effect(Driessen 2022). The role of activism and celebrity is deeply influenced by American racial politics, systemic racism, and perceptions of who is allowed to participate within the public domain for discourse (Duvall 2020). Despite the murky positionality of celebrity activism in America, in Korea there long exists a history of popular activism especially with regard to Japan, and Japanese colonialism, Olga Fedorenko writes how *hallyu* celebrity are expected to be hybridized commodities, agents of international capital, while also model patriots domestically(2017). She goes on to express how this position is unnavigable as demands by industry to maximize their value by offending as few stakeholders as possible, yet "political neutrality on regionally controversial issues, however, is an untenable position when antagonistic geopolitical interests are concerned and nationalist passions flare" (2017, 499).

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[52] This is not to say that traditional team sports leagues like the NBA, NFL, or the English Premier League are not interested in growing fandom and its sports globally, rather that where typically it is a domestic or regional league that occasionally competes with other domestic leagues. Esports leagues like the Overwatch League operated on a global scale, with teams located on multiple continents, with matches being held in both transpacific and transatlantic regions. Prior to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, worldwide offline homestands were planned in every city that hosted an OWL team.

Korean esports, and their players, are subject to the same strategic and economic tensions of Korea in their political activism, as is discussed later in the chapter when examining the O2 Blast Boycott Japan movement. This is to say that the hallyu culture industries are not protected from fan expectations when they intersect with larger political interests. Celebrities are increasingly expected to participate in local, domestic, and regional politics as part of the process of fandom. For the hallyu culture industries, which I have argued that Korean esports is a component of, suddenly events such as the Black Lives Matter movement are relevant and deserving of comment. Esports, and other transnational media have become the site of political activation, interrogation, and reflexivity. To explore this, I first examine some examples of non-gaming *hallyu* activism domestically and internationally before I reference different contemporary game activism/political events. I will then transfer to examining how global/non-American activism operates with regards to larger geopolitical hegemonic realities.

4.1.1 BTS and Black Lives Matter

In order to highlight how esports operates under similar cultural logics as other *hallyu* industries, *when* it comes to looking at civic political activism, I first explore an example of K-pop activism involving the popular boy group BTS. Under domestic COVID-19 lockdown, the policeperpetrated murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, sparked widespread protests and reignited the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement across the United States and globally. Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, was arrested on suspicion of using a counterfeit $20 bill. During the arrest, white police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for minutes despite Floyd repeatedly saying he couldn't breathe. Floyd became unresponsive and was later pronounced dead. Bystander video of the incident went viral, leading to immediate public outrage.

The incident triggered massive protests against police brutality and systemic racism. Demonstrations began in Minneapolis and quickly spread to other cities across the US and internationally. The protests, largely organized under the banner of Black Lives Matter, became one of the largest civil rights movements in decades. Protesters demanded justice for Floyd and other victims of police violence, as well as broader reforms to address systemic racism in law enforcement and society at large. Common demands included defunding or reforming police departments, implementing stricter accountability measures for officers, and addressing racial disparities in various aspects of American life.

In support and allyship of Black Americans, BTS, among other K-pop groups publicly supported the BLM via a million-dollar donation to BLM organizations in a display of anti-racist activism(Benjamin 2020). Understanding the complex relationship between *hallyu*-nee-K-pop activism and American activism in many ways demands that the fan demonstrate and understanding of the “contextualization in multiple, overlapping social, political, and media worlds (M. Cho 2022, 276). K-pop supergroup BTS in their public support of the American BLM movement were subjected to criticism, from within their fandom and without, as to the validity of their allyship and the meaningfulness of such a gesture. While critics framed the group as participating in acts of minstrelsy and cultural appropriation, and “performative wokeness” (Chatman 2020), their sincerity and efforts to center Black American culture within the larger conceit of American culture have been viewed as sincere advocacy, rather than brand management (M. Cho 2022, 275). That the group’s intention were viewed as performative, fails to address the similar modes of racism that Asians, and Asian-Americans were subject during the coronavirus pandemic. Specifically, as rates of Anti-Asian hate acts were on the rise following the implementation of pandemic quarantine protocols(Ruiz, Im, and Tian 2023). BTS, in their continued support of anti-racism, allyship, and anti-violence were simply staying true to their roots.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, while there has been a great increase in corporate awareness and “support” for social justice and political activation of the general public, we have seen that corporations in sport have found new ways to co-opt messages of activism into the process of consumption. This is not to say that good faith corporate actors do not exist, as Henry Jenkins puts it “Companies should not be co-opting these social movements, but they should recognize that they live in a world where these social movements are occurring and they are dealing with consumers who feel strongly, one way or another, about these issues…if they are signaling support for Black Lives Matter, they can expect scrutiny”(Kozinets and Jenkins 2022, 271). While Jenkins expresses optimism at how corporations can interact with fans to participate civically, Vredenburg et al. are more critical of the authenticity of corporate activism as being little more than “woke-washed” and targeted at securing public sentiment as a means to drive profits(Vredenburg et al. 2020). What we are seeing is that celebrities, which includes esports players, find themselves in an awkward position as they are simultaneously individuals but also brands that are in need of corporate, commercial, and in the case of esports players, team sponsorship.

4.1.2 Esports activism/anti-feminism/anti-racism

As discussed in the previous chapter, Korean esports is also perceived as a site of feminist activism by Korean feminists, which has run afoul of various domestic Korean "interests" as misogyny of Korean netizens has attempted to intimidate, coerce, and silence practitioners perceived of maintaining "feminist" agendas. The case of female esports player Kim "Geguri" Se-yeon highlights how the simple act of existing as a female in the Korea esports industry opens one up to scrutiny or harassment (Cullen 2018b; Y. Choi, Slaker, and Ahmad 2020). This aligns with other hallyu industry interactions and engagement with feminism, where K-pop idols are positioned by fans and industry to undermine progressive attitudes (Epstein and Turnbull 2014), and that further values that are embedded into production and idol behavior that reinforce sexist culture, traditional gender roles, potentially limiting equal opportunities for women(X. Lin and Rudolf 2017).

Geguri has never allied herself with Korean feminist causes, going so far as to publicly reject attempts by local Korean activist groups to position her as a figurehead (Cullen 2018b). While Cullen attributes this to conditions of harassment in the Korean video game industry, where women have been subject to persecution and misogyny, female youth participation in Korean feminism has largely transitioned to a practice of "quiet feminism" in response to public backlash and antifeminism that coincided with the expansion of Korean feminism in the late 2010s (G. Jung and Moon 2024). Within esports-adjacent broadcasting, gender division still remains a common theme of discussion.

Contemporary Korea is grappling with issues surrounding gender, debates on the role of women in the workplace, traditional values, conscription of young males into the military are all issues that unfold in everyday Korean life. As these societal issues are omnipresent and ubiquitous in Korean society, men and women find themselves embroiled in national debate, with tempers flaring, often devolving to larger conflict as supporters of traditional patriarchal systems clash with Korean feminists. Earlier in this dissertation, I examined particular incidents where gendered support of labor, or values rapidly became contentious in the Korean netizen blogosphere. I return to these incidents to highlight that the values and conflict unfolds as a form of political action, sometimes as formal protest, and organized, concerted collective action, other times it comes as conversations held in public, expressed on social media, or broadcast online. These behaviors that infringe upon common social expectations occasionally flare up to be seen as larger political action, as Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, “the concessions of *politeness* always contain *political* concessions”(1977, 95). As such, it is meaningful to examine events that begin not initially as political or social activism but rather contain the seed of those actions, as they become to be understood by local communities.

In January 2021 former Overwatch League pro player Ryu "ryujehong" Je-hong was suspended from Korean esports organization Gen.G[53]'s content creation team following a controversial Twitch stream. During the stream, ryujehong made inappropriate comments about a female streamer, “Haegi”, and engaged in an argument with viewers. He used sexist language, expressing that “women shouldn’t interrupt men” and made threats towards chat participants who criticized his behavior. As a result of this incident, Gen.G issued an English statement announcing ryujehong's suspension from their content creation team(Sim 2021). The organization emphasized their commitment to respect and inclusivity, stating that they do not tolerate discriminatory or abusive behavior(Cooney 2021). Puzzlingly, the female co-streamer who was the subject of the mistreatment expressed her surprise that he was being punished as she had not been offended and had similarly been making sexist jokes as well. Public opinion surrounding the incident became more pronounced as it was behavior that was unbecoming of a spokesperson.

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[53] Gen G. also known as Generation Gaming, is a transnational esports organization, originating in Seoul, but holding additional headquarters in Santa Monica and Shanghai. They were the parent organization of the Overwatch League’s Seoul Dynasty.

What we see here is that domestic issues regarding gender division and sexism become meaningful to the greater esports media scene when they become championed or offensive to Western sensibilities. Specifically, as illustrated, the domestic interplay and interpretation of events by the co-streamer are insignificant when compared to the understanding by a non-Korean speaking and presumable Western audience. This is to further my argument that issues that rise to prominence in one of the “whales” are those that become those that must be addressed by Korean organizations, players, and media. The issues that fail to capture or engage with this larger hegemonic social justice are effectively ignored; this can be seen in the cases of anti-Asian hate during the pandemic period.

In 2021, Lee “Fearless” Eui-seok, a player for the Dallas Fuel of the Overwatch League discussed in detail his personal history as the victim of racism living in America. During a live stream, when asked by a player about his experience living in Texas he responded candidly. “Being Asian here is terrifying, seriously, people keep trying to pick fights with us. Every time they see me; it’s like Americans will come up to us and try to cough on us.” Following, his commentary, Activision Blizzard, the company that operates the Overwatch League, came out in support of Fearless, condemning the actions of hate and ignorance. Lee “Fearless” Eui-seok’s comments about living in America further corroborate how political commentary of domestic American issues can be viewed as acceptable. Coincidently, these stories highlight racism and Sinophobia amongst the American public (Liao 2021). Fearless' candid discussion of his experiences with anti-

Asian racism in America, shared on his Twitch stream, was met with support from his team, the Dallas Fuel, and the Overwatch League.

Interestingly, as will be discussed later in the chapter, while Blitzchung's comments about Hong Kong were seen as too politically sensitive, Fearless' revelations about racism in America were met with official statements of support and promises of action. This disparity suggests that discussing certain domestic American issues, particularly those related to social justice, may be more acceptable in the esports world than commentary on international political matters. This incident, along with the industry's response, highlights how esports organizations navigate political speech. It appears that addressing racism within the U.S. is viewed as a more palatable form of commentary, because it aligns with broader corporate social responsibility initiatives. The story ultimately underscores the complex intersection of politics, social issues, and corporate interests in the global esports landscape.

While there still exists divisive practices within Korean esports fandom and industry, these examples are meant to highlight how it is that the conditions that Korean esports celebrity face, the hardships and exclusion, as well as their approach to activism is similar to those found in other Korean hallyu celebrity, however despite claims of multiplicity, and transcultural understanding of hallyu celebrity, esports fails to gain similar public understanding or support for issues impacting its labor pool. In other words, it is the gamer who is still ostracized in the larger analysis of celebrity culture, where they have been continually marginalized and minimized, in spite of how the participants have attempted to overcome and break up that projection.

To return briefly to a non-gaming context of hallyu activism, and the political fallout that occurs during particular incidents, Korea routinely is sidelined while more dominant narratives of activism and political struggle are examined. K-pop mega group Twice found itself at the center of these larger political issues. During a Korean television broadcast of the entertainment program *My Little Television*, Taiwanese member Chou Tzuyu was photographed with a Taiwanese flag displayed in her bedroom. This seemingly innocuous image led to a fellow Taiwanese singer/idol Huang An calling out the presentation of the flag as support for Taiwanese independence, directly in opposition to Chinese One China Policy. What followed was public uproar by Chinese netizens and calls for boycotts of Twice’s label JYP Entertainment. Ultimately, both JYP and Tzuyu offered public apologies to stem the anger demonstrating how larger geopolitical issues become increasingly relevant in transnational celebrity and fandom. What is more, in spite of the broadcast taking place entirely within Korea, directed at a Korean audience, with a Korean music group Korea was no more than a vehicle for larger more dominant geopolitical disputes (Epstein 2020). The reality for hallyu celebrity is one that is dominated by these larger cultural, economic, and political issues.

4.2 A Tale of Two Incidents: 02 Blast’s No Japan Boycott & the Blitzchung Controversy

This section relies upon archival data that I collected back in 2019, during a field visit to the Korean Contenders Season 2 Final held in Seoul. This event took place against the backdrop of significant geopolitical tensions, specifically, the Hong Kong protests and the Japan-South Korea trade dispute. By examining these real-world incidents, we can better understand how esports emerges as a site of political activism, and how the responses to such activism are shaped by broader hegemonic forces. Understanding how esports navigates its position between the competing interests of global powers, particularly China and the United States. This will demonstrate how Korean esports activism, despite the industry's prominence, remains subject to the same constraints as other *hallyu* industries when it comes to political expression and activism, ultimately arguing that political activism in esports is constrained by broader hegemonic interpretations of acceptable political behavior.

4.2.1 O2 Blast’s No Japan Boycott

In 2019, Japan's decision to remove Korea from its list of preferred trading partners or “whitelist” drew widespread attention and criticism in Korea as it was “sparked by a deepening dispute over the countries’ wartime legacy” (McCurry 2019). This move raised concerns in Korea about potential disruptions to its semiconductor industry, a crucial export sector reliant on certain chemical materials from Japan, as a result, Koreans initiated a boycott of Japanese products, leading to the withdrawal of several Japanese companies from the South Korean market.

The trade dispute intensified anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea, which subsequently affected the K-pop industry. Several K-pop groups faced criticism from their fans for planning concert tours that included stops in Japan. Fans argued that performing in Japan during this period of heightened tensions could negatively impact their idols' careers. This led to online protests, with fans using hashtags to express their disapproval of Korean entertainment agencies' decisions to proceed with concerts in Japan. The protest, which began with fans of the group EXO, gained momentum as supporters of other popular groups like Seventeen, TWICE, and Mamamoo joined the movement.

The 2019 trade dispute between Japan and South Korea is not an isolated incident, but rather the latest manifestation of a deeply rooted historical antagonism that has shaped East Asian geopolitics for over a century. Japan's decision to remove South Korea from its "whitelist" of preferred trading partners must be understood within the context of the region's colonial past and the unresolved tensions stemming from Japan's occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945[54].

In the summer of 2019, the general Korean public undertook a largescale and widespread boycott of Japanese products and travel to Japan. The movement, locally referred to as "No Japan," consisted of Korean consumers boycotting Japanese products, from beer to cars to fashion brands. The consumer boycott intensified in July following Japanese restrictions of exports of semiconductor materials and removal of Korea from a "whitelist" of most trusted trade partners, which itself was viewed as a retaliation of the Korean Supreme Court decision ordering Mitsubishi Heavy Industries of Japan to compensate South Koreans for conscripted labor during World War II(Ko and Kim 2022). The ensuing boycott of Japanese products by South Korean consumers exemplifies how political actions become embodied in everyday practices, as individuals consciously alter their consumption patterns in response to perceived threats to national interests. This boycott, facilitated and amplified by digital platforms, demonstrates how our interactions with technology are never neutral but are always imbued with cultural meanings and political implications

In support of the No Japan movement, Korean esports organization O2 Blast[55] adopted slogans and images found commonly among boycotters. I came across the team's support for the movement at the finals of Contenders Korea Season 2: Playoffs held on August 31st-September 1st at the Seongnam Sports Complex in Seongnam, a satellite city of Seoul. As is common at Korean esports events, prior to the gameplay of the tournament booths were erected to allow fans of the teams and the sport to gather and commune. Various paraphernalia and banners were made available to fans to aid them in their support for the teams. At the official booth for the OC Blast a large banner ([Figure 1]) depicting the team's logo invited fans to collect a badge with the message of the movement: "NO [.] Boycott Japan: Don't go, Don't buy." The team, while highly ranked heading into the end of season tournament failed to win either it's semi-final or 3rd place match, and did not mention it's political views during the broadcast of the tournament, in contrast to the events that unfolded a month later in Taiwan.[56]

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[54] The colonial legacy routinely pops up in Korean society as anti-Japan sentiment in Korea has been intensely connected to its patriarchal national identity and its sense of shame. These issues have historically been known to compromise governmental negotiations between Japan and South Korea over political and economic agendas. (Ching 2019)

[55] O2 Blast would later become an affiliate team of the now defunct Overwatch League's San Francisco Shock, prior to 2022 they were an independent esports organization operating in Korea, that acted as steppingstone for Korean players, into the highest international echelon of professional esports play.

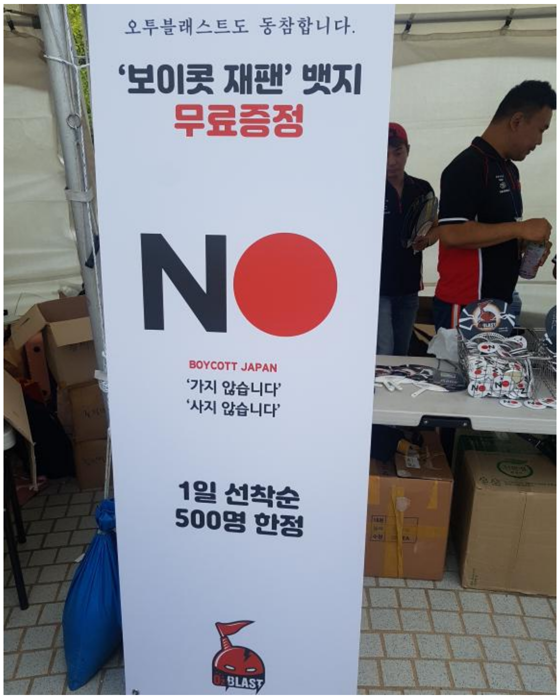

Figure 5 O2 Blast No Japan Banner

According to section 9.3.2 of the rules of participation in Overwatch Contenders Korea[i] participants, are not allowed to engage in any action that would bring negative attention to Blizzard, the tournament, or other teams participating. By publicly supporting the nationwide boycott visually, orally, and through the dissemination of merchandise urging others to participate in the boycott against the purchase of Japanese goods or travel to Japan O2 Blast would have contravened the rules as they were outlined by Blizzard and the local organizers. In spite of this violation of the terms of conditions and code of conduct, no public censorship or condemnation of this political activism took place. Many of the players of O2 Blast who participated in the boycott would go on to OWL, and become some of the most successful and decorated athletes in the sport, faced with no banning or limitations upon their careers[57], in ways that will become readily apparent to the events that would take place in Taiwan a month later. The lack of attention domestically or internationally suggests that the conditions of this type of activism are not flagged as meaningful, as it did not run afoul of greater American regional strategy vis-à-vis democracy building, and free speech principles. It also continues a trend of Korean regional activism not rising to global attention, despite the popularity of the movement domestically.

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[56] The focus on international play is the key point, domestic leagues in Korea are frequently lauded for their higher levels of competition, organization, and play skill than their western or Chinese counterparts. While this is not true in all esports, for most Korean play is still considered to be S tier, and as has been explored in Chapter 1, most successful teams utilize some form of Korean players, organization, or play styles.

4.2.3 The Blitzchung Controversy[58]

In June 2019, individuals in Hong Kong began to protest the proposed 2019 Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation Bill, commonly referred to as the Extradition Bill. As described by Trithara:

> the extradition bill was introduced to address legal loopholes that prevented the extradition of suspected offenders to places such as Taiwan, Macau, and mainland China. According the Hong Kong Bar Association, this was not a loophole but rather a “deliberate decision”

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[57] This is different from how activism in traditional sports in the United States has historically been received. In 2016, Colin Kaepernick, a quarterback on the San Francisco 49ers of the National Football League, knelt in protest during the national anthem, this was in support of raising awareness against racialized oppression and police brutality carried out against people of color in the USA(Boykoff and Carrington 2020). His protests are believed to have led to him being “blackballed” from the league.

[58] The Blitzchung Controversy, as it became known as, refers to the media imbroglio that resulted following the public support for a free Hong Kong by Hearthstone esports player Ng Wai Chung, a Hong Kong citizen. For a deeper understanding of the history of the controversy please see (Davies 2020; 2022; Klíma 2022; Trithara 2022)

> enshrined in the Foreign Offenders Ordinance negotiated in 1997 prior to the United Kingdom's handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China (PRC) because of the "fundamentally different criminal justice system operating in the mainland and concerns over the mainland's track record on the protection of fundamental rights" (Mayberry, 2019). (2022, 70–71)

Over the course of Summer of 2019 and into the Fall protests continued to surround the proposed implementation of the bill. The bill was removed from consideration on September 1st, but protesters continued to organize and demonstrate until their demands were met. Events escalated on October 1st, the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China, when a pro-democracy protester was shot by the Hong Kong Police.

Following this incident, on October 6th *Hearthstone* esports player Ng Wai Chung, known professionally by the moniker "Blitzchung" was interviewed following his victory during the Asia-Pacific Hearthstone Grand Masters 2019 Season 2 tournament, held in Taiwan. During the post-match interview Blitzchung was wearing a similar mask to those commonly associated with pro-democracy protesters. The stream interviewers "Mr. Yee" and "Virtual" ducked out of the camera while Blitzchung yelled in Mandarin, "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times!" before the feed of the broadcast was cut.

In response to the outburst, Blizzard Entertainment, the developer of the game as well as the organizer of the esports competition, reacted swiftly and sternly. The following day, Blizzard banned Blitzchung from the current tournament, prohibited him from professional competition for one year, and made forfeit the winnings from the tournament, roughly $4,000 US dollars. Additionally, Blizzard punished the two shoutcasters[59] by terminating their contracts. Blizzard cited its tournament policy as justification for its actions listed under section 6.1(o) of the official Hearthstone Grandmaster official rules[ii].

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[59] Esports broadcasts utilizes the term shoutcaster to refer to both "color" and play-by-play commentators. For more see Renner and Taylor (2021).

In the wake of these disciplinary actions Blizzard became the target of public outcry, extensive media coverage, and US political backlash. In the immediate aftermath of Blizzard's decision to ban Blitzchung and revoke his prize money, the gaming community erupted in outrage. Social media platforms were flooded with the hashtag #BoycottBlizzard, as players worldwide vowed to stop playing Blizzard games and cancel their subscriptions. This digital protest was accompanied by real-world actions, including walkouts by some Blizzard employees who covered up the company's stated values of "Think Globally" and "Every Voice Matters" on a statue at their headquarters.

The controversy quickly transcended the gaming world, attracting attention from mainstream media and even politicians. In an act of bipartisanship members of Congress and Senators[60] wrote a letter to Activision Blizzard, parent company of Blizzard Entertainment, critical of Blizzard's actions, viewing them as a capitulation to Chinese censorship and a suppression of free speech. This political dimension added further fuel to the fire, as the incident became emblematic of broader concerns about China's influence on global corporations. In contrast to Blizzard's actions, some competitors sought to capitalize on the controversy. Epic Games, creator of Fortnite, publicly stated that they would never ban players or content creators for political speech, positioning themselves as champions of free expression in the gaming industry(Kelly 2019).

Blizzard's initial silence in the face of mounting criticism only exacerbated the situation. It wasn't until October 11, 2019, nearly a week after the incident, that Blizzard president J. Allen

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[60] Democratic Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon joined Republican Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, alongside House members Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez(D), Mike Gallagher(R), and Tom Malinowski(D).

Brack released a statement. The company partially reversed its decision, reducing Blitzchung's suspension to six months and restoring his prize money. The punishment for the two casters involved in the incident was also reduced. However, this partial reversal did little to quell the controversy. Fans of Blizzard felt that their response was insufficient and failed to address the core issues of free speech and political neutrality(Thier 2019). The company's attempts to navigate the situation without alienating its Chinese market while also appeasing its Western audience were seen as clumsy and insincere.

The controversy came to a head at BlizzCon, Blizzard's annual gaming convention, in November 2019. Protesters gathered outside the venue, while some attendees expressed their dissent more subtly by wearing pro-Hong Kong t-shirts or Winnie the Pooh costumes (referencing a banned meme in China). During the opening ceremony, Brack offered an apology for the company's hasty decision-making but notably did not specifically mention Blitzchung or Hong Kong(Duggan and Kim 2019). The long-term impact of the Blitzchung incident has been significant. It sparked ongoing discussions about free speech in gaming, the influence of China on global corporations, and the role of politics in esports. Blizzard's actions in subsequent events and tournaments have been closely scrutinized for signs of political censorship, and the company's reputation among parts of its player base has been significantly damaged.

4.3 The dual curse of Sinophobia/Sinodeference

What is interesting about these issues is how they demonstrate a complex relationship with China and the United States, where activism and political displays that follow contemporary Sinophobic rhetoric become major issues for public discourse, both in America as well as Korea. American imperialism in East Asia dictates not only the support of economic, cultural interest but also those of strategic importance. This continues today, in myriad was via, cultural, technological, and platform imperialism, through which American interests are protected and promoted. It is this "consumption of this US-made material [that] is effective propaganda for the ideas and values of the USA"(Sparks 2012, 284). As the subject of American imperialism, Korean activists reinforce their own views on Sinophobia, which benefits American hegemony. This contrasts with the general operation of esports teams, game developers, and production companies in a behavior I call *Sinodeference*, where action is taken to placate and uphold values, attitudes, and positions that support Chinese state policy and platforms, in the objective of maintaining favorable relationships with the country, or perhaps more specifically access to its markets.

In the case of Korean esports this follows the trends seen in other *hallyu* industries where the Hallyu "code of ethics" demands adherence to capital and doesn't allow for behavior that goes against the economic goals of the culture industries. China is Korea's largest trading partner, while the United States is its most important strategic ally. As a result, Korean cultural industries find themselves in an untenable position having to navigate these tides between these opposing empires[61]. While typically this maneuvering takes place top-down with state policies and actions defining the scope of interaction, as was the case during the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense,[62] during the 2010s, the role that celebrities have in impacting the larger relationship between nation-states is coming increasingly apparent(Fedorenko 2017). As esports becomes a larger component of Chinese soft power[63](Wong & Meng-Lewis 2023) inevitable conflict with Korean esports supremacy is destined to occur.

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[61] Coincidently, American corporate capitalism also finds itself subject to a similar precarity as highlighted by Blizzard and the Blitzchung controversy, in order to maximize profits corporations need to appease whoever is holding the purse strings. The key difference being that major American conglomerates have the tacit support of the American military as the final stop back against the gravest of capitulation.

[62] An American anti-missile defense system, deployed in Korea ostensibly as a protection against North Korean aggression. For more see (Song 2023)

Leading up to the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics Cold War divisions momentarily thawed as North Korea participated in the Winter Olympic Games held in South Korea. Both North and South Korean athletes competed on a unified women's ice hockey team, Korean athletes marched under a unification flag, and high level talks led to a summit in Singapore involving South Korean President Moon Jae-in, North Korean Leader Kim Jong-un, and American President Donald Trump (Rowe 2019). As Korean sports diplomacy gains traction, esports becomes the site of friction and tension between player values and state objectives.

Korean Esports has found itself at odds with China on numerous occasions. In 2021, OWL player Jong-ryeol "Saebyeolbe" Park of the Seoul Dynasty was the subject of controversy due to his criticism of Chinese policy (Chalk 2021). During a Twitch livestream Saebyeolbe was reported to have said "I can't call Taiwan, Taiwan. Taiwan is not a separate country," he said about restrictions he faces while streaming in China. "Hong Kong is also not a country. I can't say that. I can't say Taiwan and HK. At all. They don't recognize them as countries. I got into so much trouble for saying their names." This incident led to other OWL teams based in China to boycott Saebyeolbe, which was a de facto boycott of the Seoul based team. In response, Saebyeolbe issued an apology that was eventually accepted by the Chinese teams as normal team activities resumed.

In 2024 League of Legends Champions Korea, (LCK) broadcasts in China were suspended during the spring season. Huya, the Chinese video game streaming platform that had broadcast the LCK since 2018 stopped official Chinese-language broadcasts of the season. Huya, financially supported by Tencent Holdings, also the owner of Riot Games, the developer of League of Legends was the exclusive streaming partner of Riot Games in China. Upon inquiry, Riot Games Korea told local media that broadcast suspension was an issue of broadcasting rights within the country, however insiders felt that it was potentially a retaliatory move over Korean esports organization Generation Gaming publicly supporting Taiwanese sovereignty(Cao 2024).

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[63] That esports has risen to such prominence in China is in itself noteworthy, where it had until recently been viewed as vulgar, violent, non-productive, and lacking in cultural sophistication (Lu 2016).

Generation Gaming, in a Facebook post referred to Taiwan as a country in a post promoting an upcoming sponsored event on the island. Following outrage by China, Gen.G. CEO Arthur Hur expressed a formal apology statement in which he said "Gen.G unswervingly respects China's sovereignty and territorial integrity"(Everington 2023; J.-Y. Kim 2024). The kowtowing to Chinese netizen pressure and Chinese foreign policy led to criticism from Korean netizens who accused the organization of furthering Chinese communism and falsely claiming neutrality while adhering to Chinese state objectives.

Retired NBA superstar Michael Jordan has often been attributed to having said "Republicans buy sneakers too"[64], in response to his refusal to support Democrat Harvey Gantt in a 1990 Senate race in Jordan's home state of North Carolina. Gantt, an African American running against incumbent Republican Jesse Helms, a notorious racist(Lutz 2020). Jordan, who at the time was one of the world's most respected, and recognized sports celebrities demonstrates the conflict exists for celebrities in their capacity to publicly act politically. The interrelationship between self-commodification and profit driven motives with the values of activism and political speech is one that celebrities must find ways to navigate to domestic, regional, and transnational political issues as tacit part of their employment, and status. Esports players in Korea have traditionally embodied the same stance of as Jordan when it comes to political activism and agency, where “ it has long been the norm for both players and teams to deliberately steer clear of anything that might embroil the parent company in controversy” (Y.-J. Jeon 2021). Yet, in spite of these norms that echo celebrity behavior in other hallyu industries, political activation amongst the players has a pattern of “finding a way”.

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[64] It should be noted that Jordan denies ever making such statements.

4.4 Conclusion

Stuart Hall reminds us in his poignant critique of capitalism in an age of globalization, (perhaps its final days), where he expressed how “Capital is constantly exploiting different forms of labor force, constantly moving between the sexual division of labor in order to accomplish its commodification of social life” (1997, 27). He is naturally discussing the divisions of race and ethnicity as much as he examines the frictions of gender as it is absorbed to further the goals of capital. As such it is of little surprise that the tensions of racial division, historical revisionism, and global trade, and the activism that sprouts up to resist such actions are neatly ignored or dismantled by larger hegemonic forces, it is only when those forms of resistance begin to interfere with the larger “serious” business of the day that they are addressed at all. Until that moment in time, the powers that be are more than willing to downplay, ignore, or disregard largescale political action as just another game that children play, and worthy of just as much attention. As Korean esports models itself more closely to that of other hallyu global celebrity it finds its values and beliefs similarly ignored.

Evoking concepts or Nietzschean *ressentiment,* Ahlem Faraoun in examining the 2019 No Japan movement states “while state leaders have conventionally aimed to increase Korea’s national status and power *vis-à-vis* Japan, the Korean people have aimed to obtain justice and equality” (Faraoun 2021, 280). As is seen with O2 Blast its activism resonates more strongly with that of the

Korean people, who express strong desires for historical reckoning and justice regarding colonial memory and exploitation on behalf of the Japanese empire. That these acts, countermand the intent and goals of the Korean state apparatus to promote and develop Korean superiority towards Japan demonstrate how individual, or in this case organizational, activism is a process that esports is deeply entwined with. However, these acts of activism can similarly be understood as a practice of socially conscious marketing, which works against the hallyu code of ethics, which aims to organize celebrity labor entirely within the confines of economic growth and prominence. Socially conscious marketing reconfigures politics so that corporations can become activists that commodify their own activism by using it for branding and public relations (Aronczyk 2013), put more simply activism in esports is acceptable when it has been found to benefit corporations, aligning with larger "accepted" social justice campaigns.

Chapter 5: (Conclusion): That's not *hallyu*! Korean gaming as (non)culture

Korea's video games industry has resisted neoliberal temptations to commodify workers and exploit their labor; compared to other Korean industries, video games have been on the vanguard of climate of sustainability. However, Korea's industrialization of play in the esports sector of the Korean video games industry more closely resembles the commodification of human ability seen in other culture industries, like K-pop and K-drama/K-beauty/K-cetera.

The Korean video games industry—as a cultural export that includes everything from design, development, manufacturing, and professional play—exists in a weird place in Korea. It's bringing in tons of money and generating global influence, but there are a combination of factors that continue to marginalize it: it's too novel, it's too radical of a departure from traditional career paths, it's leisurely/not-serious, it's not as sexy as the other culture industries, video games represent a danger of addiction, the usual strategies of focusing on aesthetic properties don't translate to games/esports, video games' lack international prestige which makes Korean international prestige easily overlooked domestically.

Korea's formal approach to the industrialization of play has produced an outsized Korean influence in the global economy and culture of video games. However, though it has been *officially* recognized as a Korean Culture Industry, Korea's domestic video games industry fails to receive adequate acknowledgement for its substantial economic and political contributions to *hallyu*. Like Korean auteur filmmakers and K-pop idols, esports pushes the human as the central unit of public fascination, representing the most promising strategy for integrating video games into the larger project of Korean soft power. Efforts to solidify esports' place in the larger complex of *hallyu* still struggle because of larger global resistance to the cultural capital of games and their player bases, misunderstanding of its domestic human resource in stark difference with the other more recognizable avenues of Korean culture industries.

Though the Korean process for the professionalization of play has been widely taken up in American, Chinese, and European contexts, Korea's failure to recognize the power of its own celebrity manufacturing pipelines represents not only a profoundly overlooked source of national revenue and global influence but a state-sanctioned devaluation of games and play.

Esports players find themselves supported through fans but also heavily scrutinized and criticized by the Korean public at large as being part of a larger health issue. While other culture industries are attempting to capture and capitalize on representation and the diverse human qualities that make pop culture industries possible, Korea reverts to traditional and outdated moral panics surrounding games. This different reception to games, the valuation of their play and their development, as part of a complex and uniquely Korean "convergence of culture and work"(D. Y. Jin 2010, 81) gestures towards a larger network of cultural issues, where the economic utility provided by games far surpasses the global understanding the value that games provide. However, it is this convergence that demonstrates that even composite industries such as those in games and esports are viewed more closely to the outputs of the factory floor than those found at the cinema or concert hall.

This project detailed here aims to help better understand the position of games and their play via their industrialization as esports in a Korean context. Global esports' reliance on Korean human capital makes it an important site of interrogation as local, domestic, and international values are embedded into the practice of play. This dissertation examining the into Korean esports reveals the intricate entanglement of technological systems, cultural practices, and socio-economic structures that shape the lived experience of competitive gaming. By examining the material and social arrangements that constitute Korea's esports ecosystem, we uncover how the seemingly mundane - from the architecture of PC bangs to the rhythms of online play - become sites of cultural production and economic value. This research contributes to our understanding of esports not as a predetermined outcome of technological advancement, but as a sociotechnical achievement, deeply rooted in Korea's historical trajectory and contemporary geopolitical positioning. The emergence of Korean esports exemplifies how local practices, and global forces co-constitute new forms of digital culture, challenging us to reconsider the relationship between technology, place, and identity in an interconnected world. This work bridges the analytical gaps between game studies, informatics, and area studies, offering a framework for understanding esports as both a cultural artifact and a complex system of human-computer interaction situated within broader societal contexts.

The tension between neoliberal self-commodification and communal support that characterizes Korean esports is not merely an industry-specific phenomenon but a microcosm of broader societal negotiations in contemporary Korea. Just as the nation has had to balance its economic imperatives with its cultural heritage, Korean esports players navigate a precarious path between global celebrity and local community membership. The persistence of supportive fan-player relationships in this high-pressure environment speaks to the resilience of Korean social structures in the face of globalizing forces.

In examining Korean esports fandom through its gendered composition challenges preconceptions about gaming spaces and digital cultures. Here, the dominant presence of female fans in offline competitions disrupts the Western-centric narrative of esports as solely a masculine domain, revealing instead a complex interplay of gender performance, fan labor, and cultural negotiation. This phenomenon isn't merely a reversal of gender norms but a nuanced reimagining of what esports fandom can be. Female fans in Korea aren't passive consumers but active creators of community, narrative, and meaning within esports spaces. Their engagement reflects broader societal tensions around gender roles in Korea while simultaneously carving out new possibilities for feminine expression and agency. Moving forward, we must continue to interrogate how these spaces both challenge and reinforce traditional gender dynamics, and how they might serve as sites for reimagining gender roles in society at large. By centering these often-overlooked perspectives, we open up exciting new avenues for exploring the transformative potential of digital cultures in shaping gender identities and relations.

5.1 “Talon max E takes Ghost”: Esports as political engagement

What does it mean that games and esports are such a core component of daily Korean life, that it is used as tool for understanding and navigating daily life? I am drawn to the idea that during the most recent turbulent time in Korean politics, the 12/03 martial law crisis, or more succinctly the failed political coup of President Yoon Suk Yeol, games were once again a meaningful way to understand the images being broadcast on television and streaming platforms, like YouTube Live, TwitchTV, SOOP (formerly AfreecaTV), and Instagram. As opponents to the coup rushed to the capital, opposition leader Lee Jae Myung urged his fellow members of parliament to descend upon the Capitol building to take action against the order. He filmed himself scaling the fence of the grounds in order to circumvent (Rashid 2024) security and vote to overturn the marital law (See Fig 7), during which netizens called his move “Talon max E takes ghost”[65] a direct reference to League of Legends champion Talon, who specializes in subterfuge, and clandestine movements in gameplay. To understand what this means demands some awareness of *League of Legends* gameplay, but simply put Talon, the champion, uses fully leveled ability that is bound to the "E" key—Assassin's Path—to "vault over any structure, up to am max distance."[66] It is little coincidence that the most popular esport in Korea in turn becomes a manner in which its citizenship understand life, as games are more readily available and digested than any just about any other media. While we have seen how games and gamification has been utilized on the world stage before, from financial populist movements like the 2021 GameStop Short Squeeze, to more targeted and potentially insidious behaviors in the collective internet outrage of Gamergate (Bortnick 2025) what has yet to be explored is how these actions are emblematic of *hallyu* culture, one far removed from the profit motives and market drive of the industry. Instead, these grassroots *hallyu* demonstrates how Korean culture becomes a meaningful, nay dominant way of understanding politics and life.

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[65] Esports journalist Ashley Kang first disclosed this on X. Ashley Kang, X post, December 4, 2024, 1:04 p.m., https://x.com/AshleyKang/status/1864158804713328714

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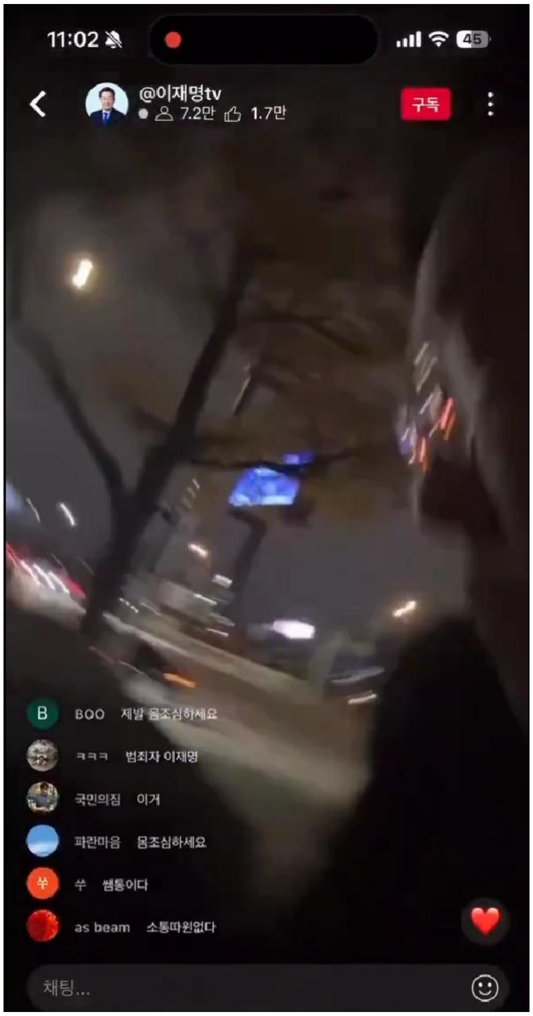
[66] The ability description from League of Legends champion menu.



BOO 제발 몸조심하세요
ㅋㅋㅋ 범죄자 이재명
국민의짐 이거
파란마음 몸조심하세요
쑤 쌤통이다
as beam 소통따윈없다

Figure 6 Screenshot of Korean lawmaker's YouTube Live broadcast scaling parliamentary wall during the 2024 Korean Martial Law Crisis

5.2 What to do about a problem like Korea?

The importance of the game cultures of Asia, with Korea in particular, is providing insight into how Asia is being reconceptualized as a geo-imaginary that has further importance and on the state of "global techno cultures", Asian game cultures are defining many of the ways that communities interact and think about themselves as it transitions from a place of "technological prowess to ideological power", it is important to recognize the role of gaming cultures as they shift into the modern "participatory media stage" (Hjorth and Chan 2009, 8). While it is the West that is seen to be leading the way in terms of cultural organization, that is not the case with game culture where Asia, and Korea in particular is the site of advancement in both technology and player culture.

At the same time as esports drawing upon the larger cultural logics of *hallyu* and how Korean culture is commodified and exported, there exists a rift in what esports is as one Esports executive adamantly expressed:

> It has nothing to do with *hallyu*. It's more that we got the best players, infrastructure. So pretty much, we are the Premier League[67], like, as a nation, like, when it comes to esports, like, because there are different sports in esports, you know. There's *League of Legends*, *PUBG*, *Valorant*, *Overwatch*, has nothing to do with hallyu. It's just this entire country is way better when it comes to performance. So we can't really relate to like, our esports culture to [hallyu culture]. (M. Kim 2025)

As the concept of identifying esports as *hallyu* proves to be deeply contested by particular stakeholders, failure to include them within the boundaries of *hallyu* culture seems that it will only fuel the precarity that is so commonly found within the local industry.

Esports and games in Korean contexts have often been blamed for the failure for esports to reach its global potential as cultural medium. As it operates simultaneously within the realm of sports and competition, but also within similar cultural understandings of *hallyu* industries. Matthew Jungsuk Howard addresses these anxieties by examining how the StarCraft II Visual Novel, examines “fish-out-of-water story following a white, nominally North American or European, *StarCraft* II (2010; SC2) player who goes to South Korea to try and make it as a professional gamer in the world’s most competitive country for SC2 play” offered a counter-narrative to Korean roboticism in esports, but it also reflected a techno-Orientalist Western essentialism toward a Korean esports elsewhere (Howard 2022). This essentialism furthers the narrative that Koreans have no personality and cannot be the subject/object of desire in globalized media, which aligns with failures of OWL to market and narrativize its "product" of Korean personalities. Instead of engaging with its talent pool it focused on "local" (read/ non-Korean) talents, which were more palatable for Western audiences. This is contrasted with how local Korean esports organizations, broadcasting, and fans interact with esports on the peninsula. The misuses of labor "commodities" in the form of players demonstrate one of the reasons why OWL failed to reach its lofty investment goals[68]. However, rampant speculation and influx of capital investment into the still-growing esports ecosystem were more destructive than any simple broadcasting decision, these highlight how a lack of awareness and understanding of the industry compounded into a global collapse and subsequent restructuring.

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[67] The Premier Leage refers to The English Premier League, the highest level of professional football (Soccer) in England, often considered the preeminent professional league for its sport globally.

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[68] The Toronto Defiant, included among the first OWL expansion franchises to enter the league, paid a massive franchise fee that was estimated at 35 million USD according to reports(Cooke and Kitt 2023).

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Endnotes

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[i] The rule is described in full here: A Participant may not engage in any activity or practice which (i) brings him or her into public disrepute, scandal or ridicule, or shocks or offends a portion or group of the public, or derogates from his or her public image, or (ii) is, or could reasonably be expected to be, detrimental to the image or reputation of, or result in public criticism of or reflect badly on, the Blizzard, Tournament Administration, or any of their respective Representatives, Contenders, the other Teams or their respective sponsors or members, the Game or any other product or service of Blizzard. For the avoidance of doubt, Participant affiliation with individuals, entities or brands that are detrimental to the image or reputation of Blizzard, Tournament Administration, or any of their respective Representatives, Contenders, the other Teams or their respective sponsors or members, the Game or any other product or service of Blizzard, as determined by Tournament Administration, will be deemed as a violation of this provision and these Official Rules.(Blizzard Entertainment 2019, 19)

[ii] The relevant rule pertaining to the Hearthstone tournament is detailed here: Engaging in any act that, in Blizzard's sole discretion, brings you into public disrepute, offends a portion or group of the public, or otherwise damage's Blizzard image will result in removal from Grandmasters and reduction of the player's prize total to $0 USD, in addition to other remedies which may be provided for under the Handbook and Blizzard's Website Terms. (Blizzard Entertainment 2019a, 12)