Historiography of Korean Esports: Perspectives on Spectatorship

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As a historiography of esports in Korea, this article documents the very early esports era, which played a major role in developing Korea's esports scene, between the late 1990s and the early 2000s. By using spectatorship as a theoretical framework, it articulates the historical backgrounds for the emergence of esports in tandem with Korea's unique sociocultural milieu, including the formation of mass spectatorship. In so doing, it attempts to identify the major players and events that contributed to the formation of esports culture. It periodizes the early Korean esports scene into three major periods—namely, the introduction of PC communications like Hitel until 1998, the introduction of StarCraft and PC bang, and the emergence of esports broadcasting and the institutionalization of spectatorship in the Korean context until 2002.

Keywords: esports, historiography, spectatorship, youth culture, digital games

In the late 2010s, millions of global youth participated in esports as gamers and viewers every day. With the rapid growth of various game platforms, in particular, online and mobile, people around the world enjoy these new cultural activities. From elementary school students to college students, to people in their early careers, global youth are deeply involved in esports, referring to an electronic sport and the leagues in which players compete through networked games and related activities, including the broadcasting of game leagues (Jin, 2010; T. L. Taylor, 2015). As esports attract crowds of millions more through online video streaming services like Twitch, the activity's popularity as one of the most enjoyable sports and business products continues to soar.

With that said, there were several game competitions before this boom period, as far back as several decades ago. Already in the 1950s the foundation stone of digital games "was laid and with it the competition on PC or console" (Larch, 2019b, para. 1). When Tennis for Two—known as the first video game, created by William Higinbotham, in 1958, in the U.S., came out, it had esports potential. The game design allowed for spectating, as it was possible to follow the match between two players, leading to a public spectacle. At that time, people were already watching other people play video games (Kalning, 2008; Scholz, 2019). In the 1970s and the 1980s, arcade games were popular, and several major competitions attracted many game players and fans (Borowy & Jin, 2013). Of course, although some people watched game competitions, this did not mean that mass spectatorship (the increasing involvement of mass media in mass competition events like esports, with people not only playing but also watching other players' games and sharing their opinions for

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fun) occurred immediately, nor was it televised on screens. Back then, computers were also expensive, and most people could not enjoy this particular entertainment medium (Scholz, 2019; T. L. Taylor, 2018).

It was during the 1990s that people started to compete with each other off-line, which means that esports in our contemporary terms has had such a short history and exploded like a cornucopia. In other words,

> in the 1990s, it became clear that the future of competitive gaming would be found in PCs and networks. As hardware became more and more affordable and more powerful, PCs became interesting for private households and thus also for the gaming industry. In the mid-1990s, the first big LAN parties were held at which gamers could compete with each other. However, not only on a large scale, but above all on a small scale, gaming over the network exerted an ever-increasing fascination. More and more gamers met at small network sessions and gambled their favorite games. (Larch, 2019b, para. 16)

Several countries, including the U.S., Germany, and Australia, developed the early form of esports. Two gaming leagues that formed in the U.S. in 1997 are attributed to jump-starting the contemporary history of esports: the Professional Gamers League (PGL) and the Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL). The PGL—a LAN-based tournament organization—was one of the first professional computer gaming leagues. It was run by Total Entertainment Network, partnered with Advanced Micro Devices (AMD), and was one of the first online professional organizations for computer game players ("Short Take," 1997). The CPL was formed in the U.S. with the goal of regulating gaming competitions (T. L. Taylor, 2015). However, in no other country did esports become more popular than in South Korea (henceforth, Korea) in the late 1990s, which established Seoul as the home of esports (Larch, 2019a).

Although Korea is not the first country to have developed esports, Korea has been known as the capital of esports (Yu, 2015), a mecca of esports ("Seoul Is a Mecca," 2019), a juggernaut of esports (Barrett, 2016), and a suzerain of esports (Han, 2008) by both national and international media and game players. When Blizzard Entertainment (2018) offered Seoul the opportunity to host the Hearthstone Championship Tour in May 2018, it called Seoul the unofficial capital of esports as well. As Rea (2016) aptly observes, "not only have esports had a significant impact on Korean popular culture, Korea has also influenced the development of global esports" (p. 22). *The New York Times* (Mozur, 2014) also indicates that for Korea, esports is a national pastime, although this was a bit of an exaggeration because digital gaming was mainly for those in their late teens and their 20s during the early stage of development. Nevertheless, there is no serious academic discourse on the early history of Korean esports and spectatorship, whether targeting the entire public or narrowing the scope to those in their teens and 20s.

As a historiography of esports in Korea, this article documents the very early esports era, which played a major role in developing Korea's esports scene, between the late 1990s and the early 2000s. It articulates the historical backgrounds for the emergence of esports in tandem with Korea's unique sociocultural milieu. In so doing, it attempts to identify the major players and events that contributed to the formation of esports culture, in particular mass spectatorship. It periodizes the early Korean esports scene into three major periods—namely, the introduction of PC communications like Hitel until 1998, the introduction of StarCraft and PC bang, and the emergence of esports broadcasting and the

institutionalization of spectatorship in the Korean context until 2002. To discuss the early esports scene, this article interprets several underused trade magazines and popular media articles, including game magazines like *Kyunghyang Games* and *Game Donga*, mainly between the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Online blogs and discussion boards of the late 1990s on PC communications like Chollian were also identified and examined. These data were sporadically found in several online sources, and I carefully checked them in comparison with newspapers and weekly magazines of the same period to guarantee credibility.

Spectatorship in Esports

Esports has grown and evolved over the past 20 years. Unlike previous game competitions in the 1970s and the 1980s, one distinctive dimension for the recent growth of esports is mass spectatorship, which means that the involvement of mass competition events and broadcasting channels became a turning point for esports. Again, there were several early game competitions in several countries; however, esports was first popularized in Korea. Korea created the early boom of esports, both nationally and globally, as Internet cafés, known as PC bangs, fostered an environment of competition and spectatorship as early as 1998. As time progressed, friendly competitions grew into tournaments, and professional leagues, professional game teams, and superstars were rapidly formed. In particular, spectators became fans, and new Web communities were established (Cheung & Huang, 2011). Consequently, it has become a 21st-century spectator sport (Hutchins, 2008), which is even more popular than other sports such as baseball and basketball, as hundreds of thousands of fans turn up at esports arenas to support their favorite players while enjoying games together. The esports industry heavily relies on mass audiences to grow; however, little critical attention has been paid to the activities and perspectives of spectators—to those who attend esports events in person and watch esports online or through traditional media (N. Taylor, 2016). As N. Taylor (2016) points out, "there has been little attempt thus far in studies of esports to attend to the embodied work of watching" (p. 294).

As briefly discussed, esports mainly refers to an electronic sport and the leagues in which players compete through networked games and related activities, including broadcasting of game leagues, which means that it is crucial to analyze esports comprehensively—not only the professional gamers but also broadcasting, including online streaming services and audiences in terms of their spectatorship. In particular, Paradise (2018) points out, "for any particular game to become a sport, it needs three core components: competition, tournaments, and spectators" (para. 3). Three core elements contribute to the esports industry's rise as a new major spectator sport: "streamed competitions with organized leagues, professional players that can be viewed anywhere, and live events in major offline sports venues" (Paradise, 2018, para. 8). As Gibbs, Carter, Cumming, Fordyce, and Witkowski (2018) point out with the case of esports spectatorship in Australia, a significant body of academic research into esports practice, such as the performance, play, professionalization, and appeal of competitive digital gaming, has been established over the past decade (e.g., Jin, 2010; N. Taylor, 2016, cited in Gibbs et al., 2018; T. L. Taylor, 2015). These scholars focused on the major role of players, professionalization, game tournaments, and the industry (Gibbs et al., 2018). However, the study of spectatorship should also be conducted as a significant component of research in the esports area.

Spectatorship is one of the most significant and valuable assets of esports as it is the foundation for the growth of esports. Without fans and audiences, esports cannot grow. Here, the spectator refers to

the person who follows the in-game experience, but who is not a direct participant in the game. People watch esports for the entertainment value it provides, and therefore entertainment is at the heart of every spectator sport (Cheung & Huang, 2011). In this regard,

> Jonathan Beales, an esports organizer and commentator, says the crowd is part of the experience. They [the crowd] get behind their teams in the same way people do at football games. The crowd will roar when a map or level is completed, there is a sigh of disappointment for a mistake. Make no mistake, this is a spectator sport. The demographic is aged between 12 to 45, some with ambitions of making it as a pro player. Then when a team comes offstage there is a clamber for selfies and signatures as fans look to get their shirts and posters signed by the pro players. The players love the adoration, and the fans get to see and talk to their heroes close up. (Arthur & Stuart, 2014, para. 8)

The spectatorship of esports has rapidly grown over the past 10 years. For example, the total Dota 2 championship audience of 2018 was similar in size to the total number tuning into the Kentucky Derby, and larger than Tour de France audiences, underscoring the global dimension of competitive gaming:

> Given esports' popularity among younger [Americans], growth appears to be a given in the U.S. as well. A 2018 *Washington Post*–University of Massachusetts Lowell poll found, for instance, that 58% of 14-to-21-year-olds said they watched live or recorded video of people playing competitive video games, with a similar percentage reporting that they played such games themselves. Among adults overall, just 16% said they watched competitive video gaming. (Ingraham, 2018, para. 12)

Though it remains to be seen whether competitive gaming will ever be bigger than the NFL in revenue, the two are running neck and neck on a potentially even more important metric: popularity among younger fans. *The Washington Post* poll found that 38% of young Americans identified as fans of esports or competitive gaming, similar to the 40% who said they were fans of the NFL (Ingraham, 2018).

As such, esports has a close relationship with spectatorship, which means that both broadcasting and online streaming services are significant in esports as audiences now become an even more integral part of esports. Because of the significance of the role of media, it is critical to understand the history of esports in conjunction with media, both old and new, and spectatorship.

Role of PC Communication in the Pre-Esports Era

The first kind of esports, consisting of professional gamers, leagues, and spectatorship, started in Korea in the late 1990s. In the 1990s, the public also witnessed the rise of the indispensable Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW). The Internet connected video gamers through the Web so that online competitive gaming was made possible. Internet connectivity also gave rise to the growth in popularity of online games, instead of just console games.

In Korea, more than anywhere else, esports already oozed into mainstream culture. Korea provided glimpses of technology-related transformations before they expanded globally, including widespread, high-speed Internet availability and smartphone adoption. Korea also led in esports, creating organized leagues, training well-financed pro teams and filling giant game stadiums with frenzied fans as spectators to cheer on their favorite teams and players (Mozur, 2014). In the early stage of Korean esports, several factors created the environment for the activity to thrive, almost at the same time:

> When Koreans embraced the concept of esports in the late 90s, they went all in. Rallying behind StarCraft: Brood War, Korea would build the esports culture it is today around the Blizzard game, naturally making it the most popular esport game of all time in Korea. In 2000, a governing esports body, called the Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA) was formed. Tournaments were hosted with money on the line. Teams were created, filled with players, managers, and coaches. Esports started being shown on TV which led to the biggest bump to esports development—the inclusion of big sponsors such as Samsung, Korean Air, and Asiana who played huge roles in the booming esports scene. From here onwards, Korea emerge as the esports haven of the world. Only in the mid-2000s did the West start to slowly catch on to the esports wave and Korea was miles ahead. (Yu, 2015, paras. 12–13)

As expected, when esports became a popular event in Korea, it was at first not a televised event, but a small game community event in tandem with fan activities on personal computers.

In the late 1990s, two major technological breakthroughs played key roles for the formation of esports. One was the growth of PC communications, and the other was the growth of PC bang (Internet cafés). Early digital game culture as part of people's activities and their online communities was not on the Internet itself, but on personal computer (PC) communications developed in the 1980s and the 1990s (Jo, 2017). A new type of network service—PC communications—was developed in 1984 when DACOM's Hangul Mail was invented, and then was consolidated in 1986 as Chollian—the largest PC communications system at that time. Meanwhile, the KETEL (Korea Electronic Economic Daily TELepress) service that began in 1988 was reorganized as Hitel and soon became the most prominent PC communications service. This type of online communication using PC communications operated as a separate service, independent from the Internet, until 1995, when regular PC network users were able to connect to the Internet using commercial networks.

The most notable significance of PC communications is that they contributed to the development of the concept of online communities, including game communities (Chun, Park, Kang, & Lee, 2005). Before the invention of the WWW, people used only text to communicate with each other. In the late 1990s, there were 100 game-related communities at Hitel, and around 400–500 game communities with 35,000 people who were members at the game communities at Chollian (Chae, 2000). PC communications certainly helped people, in particular, Korean youth, to organize online forums to discuss and exchange information, as well as to establish clubs among people with similar hobbies. Many Korean youth began to communicate with one another through boards, and game communities were among the most popular online communities.

PC communications, followed by the rapid growth of PC bangs, greatly contributed to the growth of the early stage of esports. As discussed above, there were many online community members who played

and enjoyed digital games. Based on the growth of game communities and PC bangs, the first professional game league (Korea Pro Gamers League; KPGL) was started by Hitel in December 1997. The development of this early esports league had been made possible by the information technology revolution and rapid expansion in the availability, capabilities, and popularity of interactive digital communications technologies, which Korea developed enormously (Hutchins, 2008). Hitel held the KPGL competition four times in 1998. During the same year, IPac Net and PC bang chains together established another game league titled StarCraft-KPGL. The Korean game world considers 1998 as the first year of esports due to the competition between these two game leagues, which attracted many gamers to become part of esports (Yoo, 1999).

Of course, these game leagues were different from esports leagues in the early 21st century, as they mainly focused on off-line competition at PC bangs while excluding online game competitions. Although StarCraft was one of the major games for these early esports leagues, there were several more games, like Rainbow Six, Quake, and FIFA series games. As discussed in the next section, the shift of the major venue to online gaming, from PC communications to PC bang, became a turning point in developing spectatorship culture.

StarCraft, PC Bangs, and the Emergence of the Esports Era in the Late 1990s

When StarCraft, a game released by Blizzard Entertainment in 1998, made its way to Korea, it quickly became a mainstay of Korean esports. With investment and organizational help from Blizzard itself, professional tournaments in Korea outgrew the cramped PC bangs, first moving to hotel ballrooms and later stadiums (Mozur, 2014). It is not inaccurate to claim that a full-swing esports phenomenon started with StarCraft. As Stephen Rea (2019) points out, the release of StarCraft, a sci-fi-themed online strategy game, was "a boon for Korean digital gaming culture, arriving as it did at the height of PC bang expansion. StarCraft became a pop culture sensation in Korean seemingly overnight" (p. 120).

During the IMF (International Monetary Fund) financial crisis era right after 1997, which was the worst economic recession in Korean history, many people were unable to buy their own copies of StarCraft, but they were able to enjoy games at PC bang. Luckily for them, the first Internet connections were already introduced in 1994 with the name of BNC (Bit Communication Café) in Seoul. People connected to the Internet via dial-up modems. At that time, uses for networks mainly consisted of text-based bulletin board systems or services (BBS), not the Internet we know it today, with graphical Web browsers. The Internet was limited to the concerns of enthusiasts. In 1995, the first commercial examples of Internet cafés, providing faster connections, began to emerge (Huhh, 2007; S. H. Lee, 2016). These Internet cafés were called names such as Model Café, Network Café, and Cyber Café, and people could play simple games like Go. Koreans who did not have Internet connections at home came to check e-mails or printed out documents at these PC bangs. However, as people mainly used these cafés to meet with friends, like at coffee shops, the contemporary form of PC bang, with PCs installed on a large scale, therefore made revenues from hourly rental fees from the users starting in 1996, and this kind of PC bang exploded in popularity with the introduction of high-speed Internet service and StarCraft in 1998 (S. H. Lee, 2016). The hourly fees at PC bang were less than US$1, which was cheaper than that of a billiards room. People especially poured into PC bangs to play StarCraft. The convergence of PC bang as a new physical place and StarCraft as a game that people could play against each other through the Internet brought a culture shock, becoming a social sensation in Korean society (Im, 2009).

Here, a common misunderstanding is the relationship between the rapid growth of PC bang and the Korean government's information and communication technology (ICT) policy. Some popular magazines and newspapers, including *The New York Times* (Mozur, 2014), and academic works (e.g., Li, 2016) claimed that the Korean government focused on telecommunications and Internet infrastructure in response to the 1997 financial crisis; however, this is a far cry from the truth, as the sudden growth of PC bang was made possible because people who left big corporations in the middle of the crisis started to open PC bangs. The Korean government developed its ICT policy in the late 1990s to build national infrastructure like broadband (Li, 2016), which eventually helped the boom of PC bang. However, the swift growth of PC bang itself was not the result of the government's ICT policy. Once StarCraft was released, many gamers became interested in this new game, and on a large scale participated in various competitions.

PC bang rapidly became a venue for esports. Early Korean (pro) gamers participated in game competitions on Blizzard's Battle.net, which was launched on December 31, 1996. Battle.net was the first online gaming service of its kind, and game players could connect to the service remotely to play Diablo. As popularity of this service increased, features such as ladder rankings and game filters were added. The release of StarCraft in 1998 increased usage of the Battle.net service significantly (Chaves, 2011). Several Korean game players achieved huge success through competitive play on Battle.net, and they consequently became the first generation of Korean professional gamers in the late 1990s and the early 2000s.

More specifically, in 1998 the number of PCs and Internet-equipped houses was very low, so most gamers had to go to play at PC bang. Through word-of-mouth advertising, teens and people in their early 20s started to learn about StarCraft and created so-called PC bang culture. In fact, StarCraft in conjunction with PC bang changed Korean youth's life patterns. Until the mid-1990s, young people used to get together at billiards room and electronic game room (bang in Korea); however, in the late 1990s, they started to go to PC bang to play StarCraft.

For them, it was a culture shock to know that they could compete with people through networks anytime and anyplace, which triggered the growth of PC bang. Recognizing StarCraft's appeal among their customers, "PC bang owners began organizing informal tournaments that laid the groundwork for a televised, professional StarCraft league with sponsorship from companies like Korea Telecom and Samsung, as well as the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism" (Rea, 2019, p. 120). Korean esports traces its origins to informal tournaments that PC bang managers organized among their patrons. Customers, mainly Korean youth, flocked to PC bang not only to play games but also to watch PC bang regulars go head to head, which evidenced video gaming's value position as a spectator sport (Rea, 2019):

> PC bang owners began to observe a strange phenomenon among their customers. Not only were people flocking to PC bang to play StarCraft, they were also coming to watch others play. Soon, PC bang began organizing informal competitions in which the best players built their reputations in the community, developed rivalries, and even cultivated fan followings. Before long, PC bang franchises realized that they could use these competitions as marketing tools, and began sponsoring individual players and teams, marking the beginning of professional Korean esports. (Rea, 2016, p. 23)

A typical case would have been small-scale local StarCraft contests that were popular. Before the official establishment of the esports industry, PC bangs often sponsored StarCraft contests of their own:

> While Battle.net—a service provided by the developer [of StarCraft] to make online matches among players—was a reliable large-scale scoring board for the competition, players often wanted to contend and compete directly in the same offline space. These early local contests founded what would become the burgeoning esports industry in Korea. Aside from competitions in Battle.net, Korean players derived much pleasure in playing StarCraft with players whilst sharing the same physical environment. Even today, professional league players ("pro-leagues") of the game still conduct preliminary elimination contests in PC bangs. A PC bang is still the ground for aspiring esports superstars. (Huhh, 2007, p. 6)

Under this circumstance, the introduction of the notion of professional gamers (or pro-gamers) started in 1998. Although Korean youth played on PC communications, there was no concept of professional gamers in the realm of digital games. Some game players seemed to compete against each other, and their major goal was to play for fun and recognition by peers, but not for money. The awards for winning in some PC bang-hosted competitions included discount coupons or free admission to PC bangs, for example. The early game leagues provided small money rewards or eliminated their fees at PC bang.

In December 1998, Shin Ju-young won the Blizzard Ladder Tournament, became the first registered Korean in the PGL, and was introduced as a professional gamer in Korea for the first time in game history. Shin often played games at PC bang. In 1999, he regularly went to PC bang around 2 p.m. daily and connected to Battle.net for StarCraft—Blizzard's online matchmaking service. Shin Ju-young would regularly play until 8 a.m. the next day, which means that he used to play games for more than 15 hours per day. Through these game tournaments, he started to earn money, as he received around $2,000–$10,000 when he won the championship game. He also made some extra money by participating in exhibition games at newly opening PC bangs. New PC bangs around the country wanted to attract young gamers, so they invited a few famous gamers and offered exhibition games. People's interests, in particular young people's interests in esports, started around that time, as they believed that they could also become world champions with games while making money. However, because there were no regular game leagues, nor pro game teams that paid salaries, the income of these early pro gamers was still marginal ("World Champion," 1999).

Several off-line competition events also started, and the first esports league in the field of online gaming started in Korea in 1997. In December 1997, PC bang chains offered the first national online gaming league, the KPGL. The KPGL organized as an off-line game league. Players competed against each other in many PC bangs, and the best few were selected for its final off-line games. Two of the first off-line game leagues, NetClub and KPGL, were born. Shin won the first NetClub league to earn $10,000, and Lee Gi-suk won the first two KPGL leagues. Lee Gi Suk—known by his ID SSamjang—won the first and second KPGL championship games and became a national star. This was the time when the first game team, SG—supported by PC bang chain company Chung Oh Information and Telecommunication—started ("Esports 10 Years," 2010). As such, the use of PC communications and Battle.net played major roles in the formation of professional gamers and esports in the late 1990s.

Lee Gi-suk seized one of the only championships that mattered—Blizzard's official Ladder Tournament. StarCraft was at the apex of its popularity in Korea, and the victory made him an instant celebrity. He also earned a starring role in a national television advertisement for Internet provider KORNET (Korea Internet), giving him a level of mainstream recognition that may not have been matched even to this date. His yearly salary at its peak was approximately US$44,000, dropping to only $2,600 several years later as he did not win any championship games (J. H. Cho & Woo, 2017). In October 2000, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism and Samsung partnered to host the first World Cyber Games, "a global esports competition modeled after the Olympics" (Rea, 2019, p. 120). In other words, thanks to developments in Korea, the first global esports league was held in Seoul in 2000. "StarCraft's intricate depth became an escape from the real world for players like Lim Yo-Hwan" (Li, 2016, p. 39). In 2002, pro-gaming was recognized as an official job category in Korea, further legitimizing the world of esports (Jin, 2010; Rea, 2016, p. 23).

As a reflection of the sudden popularity of esports, professional gamer became the most popular job category for elementary school students. For example, according to a survey conducted by the Korea Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training in 2001, pro gamer was the most popular future job for the first time in history, followed by sport athletics, computer technicians, scientists, and developers. The influences of pro gamers were compared with famous sport stars and talents ("Changing History," 2016; Han, 2008).

With the expansion of PC bangs in tandem with the soaring popularity of StarCraft, the number of esports games also rapidly increased. In 1999, there were 25 esports games in Korea, but it increased to 51 in 2,000 even before the esports broadcasting era. As a reflection of esports' growing role as youth culture and a potential tool for boosting corporate and institutional images, several agencies, including telecom companies like Hanaro Telecom and KORNET; big corporations like Samsung and Hyundai Securities Co.; media like Sport Seoul, Tooniverse, Sport Today, Digital Chosun, and SBS; and universities like Hoseo University hosted esports games. The success of StarCraft and esports in Korea drove local game developers to create new online games as well. For example, NCSoft's Lineage I, an MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-play game) made in 1998, immediately became a big hit, which helped to start Korea's golden age of online game development and early spectatorship.

From Participation to Observation: Growing Esports Spectatorship

Digital game competition finally met with media to form esports when Tooniverse broadcasted a FIFA series World Cup 98 game, which also became a turning point toward mass spectatorship. When StarCraft syndrome swept Korea, Hwang Hyun Joon, a television producer at Tooniverse, who also broadcasted the FIFA World Cup 98 video game, proposed to create video game programming. What he planned was to create a broadcasting program based on the boom of StarCraft by making a game league. In the late 1990s, however, he was not able to easily find a studio for the game league, as digital games were looked on disparagingly by many Koreans, and nobody wanted to lend space for gaming. Alternatively, he established a ministudio on top of a table tennis table on the ground level of Tooniverse. Producer Hwang recruited Jung Il Hoon, a sportscaster, and later Lim Chae Kyung, who worked as an animation producer. They started to broadcast Hitel KPGL in March 1999—the first esports league televised in Korea—and they became key members in establishing OnGameNet, the first ever game-dedicated television channel (J. Y.

Kim, 2013). OnGameNet became the first online game specialty channel in the world and opened the world's first esports-dedicated stadium (Jin, 2010).

Esports and mass spectatorship grew with the live broadcasting of competitions on cable channels, followed by networks, which expedited the growth of esports and spectatorship among young Korean people. As T. L. Taylor (2015) correctly observes,

> the power of computer games is seen first and foremost as located in the way they ask us to interact with them, to be engaged. The classic formulation of engagement within game studies says it is direct action upon the game that signifies the heart of the play experience. (p. 181)

However, with the involvement of television, the concept of watching computer game matches by spectators was popularized, which fundamentally changed the nature of computer games.

Hitel and Tooniverse, again, established a game-only channel named OnGameNet in 2000. OGN (formerly OnGameNet) is a cable television channel that specializes in broadcasting video game-related content and esports matches. OnGameNet was previously a subsidiary of On Media, the parent company of several other cable channels. After a corporate merger in 2010, it is now owned by CJ E&M—the largest media company in Korea. OnGameNet (Chung, 2000) planned to develop a two-way broadcasting system to reflect the increasing demand by gamers and players, while developing the cable channel's competitiveness. It broadcasted game-related content for 12 hours per day starting in July 2000.

Originally starting out as a television program to follow the rising popularity of StarCraft, the successful growth of broadcast gaming allowed the Starleague in 2000 to become its own dedicated channel on OnGameNet. Starting out with a small prize sum and very few followers, Starleague grew tremendously. It helped to catapult electronic gaming into a major competitive and watchable sport. Interestingly enough, during the first Starleague, Guillaume Patry, known as "Grrrr . . ." from Canada became the first and only non-Korean to win an individual Starleague. After dominating the first few online leagues arranged by Blizzard Entertainment and AMD Professional Gamers League in the U.S., he turned his eyes to Korea and moved to Seoul in 2000.

During the same period, the term "esports" was established in Korea. In the 1990s, several countries, including the U.S., already used the term "electronic sports"; however, Koreans used cyber athletics, digital athletics, or pro-gaming to explain esports. With the rapid growth of online gaming and game competitions, Korea needed a proper term. Timely enough, the term "esports" was presented by Ji-Won Park, Minister of the Department of Culture and Tourism, in February 2000, when he first used the term at the inaugural meeting of the KeSPA. It immediately became an official term indicating online game competitions and related activities, including pro-game teams, broadcasting, and fan community activities ever since (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, 2008; Samsung Economic Research Institute, 2005).

Back to the early game television channel, OGN technically opened the watchable esports market by developing its camera techniques. Korea's esports world especially claimed that OGN's "observing

technique" was the most significant point for the growth of esports on screen. Observing means that television cameras go into the games so that they could zoom in and zoom out to select some major game scenes that the audiences must see. For example, in the case of League of Legends, a team consists of five players, and therefore 10 players play at the same time. The broadcaster must select the best scenes of any particular players to be watched (W. C. Jang, 2018).

Mass spectatorship continued to grow as a few game channels also jumped on the bandwagon. MBC Game—a subsidiary cable channel of MBC Plus—began its 24-hour game broadcasting in 2001, although it was replaced by MBC Music in 2012. MBC Game was the Korean non-free-to-air television station, which was well-known for being the esports broadcaster. Alongside OnGameNet, it specialized in broadcasting video game-related information and matches. It covered StarCraft, Warcraft III, FIFA Series, Counter-Strike, Winning Eleven, Age of Empires III, and Dead or Alive. MBC started its game cable channel by acquiring Look TV, a fashion specialty channel owned by CJ Cable, and opened in the name of Gembc to become MBC Game in 2003 ("Esports, 10-Year Vestige," 2009). Gembc was the combination of game and MBC and attempted to develop a more beautiful community through games (S. Y. Kim, 2002). There were a few more channels, like GGTV; however, only OnGameNet and MBC Game became major players (Yoon et al., 2012). The creation of game television channels expedited the growth of esports and fundamentally shifted the trend of esports. Because of the financial crisis of 1997, Korean esports leagues were struggling in the late 1990s; however, with the introduction of two game specialty channels and esports leagues organized by these two channels, Korean people and corporations started to pay attention to esports. Several big corporations like Samsung, SKT, and KT also began to support esports game teams ("Esports, 10-Year Vestige," 2009). In other words, several chaebol (big conglomerates) started to have their own professional game teams to boost their corporate images as esports spectatorship soared, which greatly helped the boom of esports in the 2000s.

Meanwhile, the Pro League, which was formerly hosted on OGN and MBC Game, then became solely hosted on OGN after MBC closed down its gaming venture. The Pro League allows for fans to follow their favorite team or player. It also allowed up and coming amateurs to participate in a televised setting. A total of 31 Pro League events for StarCraft: Brood War, existed from March 2003 to September 2012. The increasing rise of mass spectatorship can be exemplified with a particular event at the Pro League final—which attracted as many as 120,000 spectators to an outdoor stadium at the Gwangalli beach in Busan—a southern city in Korea, in 2004 and 2005 (J. H. Jang, 2006).

Another major development in the Korean esports world was the establishment of the 21st Century Pro-Game Association in 2000 (later changed to Korea e-Sports Association in October 2003; see Korea e-Sports Association, 2019) permitted by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. This was the first national-level esports association around the world, and it helped the growth of esports as it developed several necessary regulations and principles, as well as hosting esports leagues.

As such, compared with other parts of Asia and Europe, Korea had several key advantages in developing esports, including widespread high-speed Internet, PC bang, and the institutionalization of spectatorship, which meant huge numbers of people could watch the action without video dropouts in the initial stage of esports. With the rapid growth of digital technologies and their convergence with several

primary sociocultural elements, emphasizing dynamism and mass play culture, Korea has developed its unique spectatorship model in the realm of digital games.

Sociocultural Elements for the Early Growth of Esports Spectatorship

While the rapid growth of infrastructure like PC bang and high-speed Internet in the IMF era of the late 1990s played key roles for the Korean esports scene, several sociocultural dimensions also greatly influenced the formation of early esports and mass spectatorship. Cultural specificities embedded in Korean history should be emphasized as significant factors that prompted the rapid deployment of esports. There are a few distinctive cultural characteristics, based on the mentality of the people, rooted in Korean society and its historical context that are unique contributing elements to the swift deployment of esports, including enthusiasm for "edutainment," and developing dual personalities of two competing forces, social solidarity and individualism (Jin, 2010).

To begin with, most Koreans would certainly agree that Korea is nothing if not dynamic. This relentless drive, which has led Korea to chalk up a number of significant achievements, including its economic growth, has driven the rapid spread of broadband Internet connections. Korea's dynamism has played a role for the growth of esports, as many Koreans are good at immersion and competition. In modern Korea, until the late 1990s, *han* (the Korean sentiment of grievance or grudge) was one of the most significant national characteristics that portrayed Koreans' passive desire for redemption after enduring pain, including the Japanese occupation for several decades until 1945 and the Korean War (1950–53). Over the past two decades or so, Korea's *han* has rapidly been changing into *heung* (excitement), which is one of the most significant parts of dynamism, as economic development and democratization has resulted in growing self-confidence among its people. Since then, dynamism has mostly become synonymous with Koreans (Chang, 2011; Jin, 2016). Dynamism indeed represents the vibrant spirit, which embodies the unshakable moral strength that has overcome so much hardship, as well as a vision that proactively explores the future. Dynamism is especially based on Koreans' unique attitudes in that they prefer working together and playing together as opposed to working and playing independently, as seen in many Western countries (K. I. Y. Lee, 2015).

As dynamism is one of the major characteristics in playing and enjoying online games like StarCraft, it is natural for Koreans to adore it most (W. J. Cho, 2017). Young people enjoy both playing and spectating popular online games sometimes with friends and other times with nobody, but through high-speed Internet. This also shows social solidarity (Chee, 2006), which means that Koreans not only play together but also watch and enjoy games together more than people in other countries.

In fact, Korea has been proud of its tradition of social solidarity (Crotty & Lee, 2002). As *The New York Times* stated, while reporting on booming online games, "Korea is a group-oriented society, where socializing in bunches is the preferred form of interaction, and Western-style individualism is frowned upon" (French, 2002, p. 8). After conducting a case study of online games in Korea, Chee (2006) also emphasizes the importance of social solidarity of teens and people in their 20s in the process of growing online game communities.

Korea has certainly developed several collective play cultures, like farm music, Yut no ri—a folk game, and Gut—an elaborate type of shaman ritual. These traditional collective play cultures appeared as forms of Cyworld, Karaoke bang, PC bang, and *jjimjilbang* (Korean sauna), and eventually expedited esports as these collective cultures are embedded in game culture as well. Unlike North Americans and Europeans who like to play with computer and/or console, Koreans like online games to play games collectively between human players through networks, and this cultural characteristic is a reflection of Korea's traditional collective culture (W. J. Cho, 2017).

In tandem with social solidarity, a relevant aspect of the Korean culture is "mass play culture," which has become a critical element for the growth of esports. People do not want to be left out by not working and/or playing together. In the realm of digital games, unlike young people in the U.S., who mainly want to play alone, in a single player with/without computers, Korean young people do not like to play with a computer alone; instead they prefer to be part of teams to defeat other teams. The mass play culture characterizing Korean society has been a major factor for the popularity of Lineage I, for example. Sociocultural aspects are significant factors for the growth of both esports and mass spectatorship as amateur gamers sometimes go to game arenas to cheer up their favorite players together, while at other times watch digital games online or on broadcasting (Jin, 2010).

Meanwhile, Korea is also a society driven by competition. While Olympians would become national heroes in most countries when they receive any medals, a Korea's athlete who wins a silver medal at the Olympics would often hang their head in shame and apologize to the public for not achieving gold. Koreans just love "to make rankings and compare, and if you are not first, you are nothing," (Li, 2016, p. 43) as John Park, who worked at the StarCraft broadcaster GOMTV, stated.

Several mobile games developed in Korea, such as Anipang and Candipang in the early 2010s, certainly showed that these mobile games became popular based on Koreans' strong competitive nature. Anipang as a mobile game strategically fits into KaTalk's social networking platform, and Anipang added in a ranking system where players compete with their friends on KaTalk—an instant mobile messenger. Through encouraging competition with other users that they seem to know, Anipang has become entrenched in the lives of smartphone users. It is the rankings between friends that drive people to keep playing Anipang. When someone ranks lower than a friend or learns that a friend just scored higher, they are compelled to play until they achieve a better score, at which point an automated message is sent that states, "I beat your score by scoring 000" through KaTalk ("Four Reasons," 2012). Anipang can be played alone, but its allure is that it is community-based, which has been a very important feature for mobile gamers in Korea. Anipang players pointed to the push notifications and pressure they felt to attend to this particular mobile game from others (Jin, Chee, & Kim, 2015).

In sum, the growth of esports and spectatorship in Korea has been possible due in large part to various cultural factors, rooted deeply in Korean society and its historical context. Korean esports has achieved its tremendous growth mainly because of the convergence of infrastructural growth and cultural elements. On the one hand, high-speed Internet and PC bang, and later game specialty channels were significant as infrastructure, and on the other hand, people's mentalities, wanting to play together with dynamic spirit while enjoying competition and immersion played a role. As Aizu (2002) pointed out, several

social and cultural elements, including so-called 'me-too culture,' the aggressive mentality of the Korean people, high awareness of the challenges of globalization, and political and historical contexts embedded in contemporary Korean society played the decisive roles in its dynamic acceptance of Internet and the acceleration of esports (See Jin, 2010). These sociocultural elements, including dynamism, enthusiastic competition, and mass play culture are major elements of spectatorship, uniquely embedded in Korean society. As Borowy and Jin (2013) point out, "there is no better example of the combination of media as sport than esport, and by examining its origins we see how this competitive play activity grew" (p. 2270) alongside the developments of both event marketing and spectatorship.

Conclusion

This article has explored a historical understanding of esports and the initial formation of esports spectatorship in the Korean context. Korean esports became a model for global esports since its inception. Korea has not only institutionalized its esports in that it developed esports leagues, professional gamers and teams, and a national esports association but also established the direction of esports spectatorship as the country developed esports ICT infrastructure and specialty channels for the public to watch and enjoy games together. Korea has had these dimensions in place since the beginning. In other words, the rapid growth of IT infrastructure, the IMF crisis and the consequent growth of PC bang, and the development of esports channels all played key roles in the early esports scene.

Among these, several local cultures and characteristics embedded in digital games and esports, such as Korea's dynamism, competitive mentalities, social sodality, and mass play culture, worked as the foundations of early esports spectatorship. Increasing spectatorship by both esports fans and general audiences in tandem with sociocultural milieu surrounding the growth of digital games has expedited the popularity of esports.

In the early 2020s, there is no doubt that esports is one of the major sporting events and youth cultures; however, 20 years ago, Korea already developed the early stage of esports, which played a significant role for the growth of global esports. As T. L. Taylor (2015) points out,

> the story of South Korea holds an interesting place in North American and European pro gaming because it is regularly held up as a model for the future of esports worldwide. . . . 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. (p. 18)

What is missing in this interpretation is the significant role of spectators. As game players and fans, the general public, in particular youth in their teens and 20s, fundamentally shifted their interests toward digital games in the early 2000s: They played games together, and they watched games together. Consequently, Korea not only developed the esports leagues but also advanced the first game broadcasting channels, and therefore substantially contributed to the growth of esports spectatorship.

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