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### Why are Koreans so good at Gaming?

This seems like a phenomenon unanswerable. Especially when people, even the gaming enthusiasts, were interviewed, it seemed like no one really had a reason, except for, a base mechanical advantage. However, the more time we spent in class talking about Korea and its society through Kpop, and delving into what was known about East-Asian society, some answers started to reveal themselves; ones that some people may not have understood before. First, recent history allowed for Korea to become the most “plugged in” country in the world. Its internet is 4 times faster than the US, and the Korean government provides subsidies for companies and tax credits for consumers of electronics. Second, a country influenced by Neo-Confucian ideals hurts its people. Koreans feel like they aren’t accepted in society, much like Otaku in Japan, and shut themselves in with their internet and video games, a form of escapism. Lastly, Korea is incredibly Nationalistic, with everyone wanting to promote and represent their country. Hallyu doesn’t just apply to wanting to be a Kpop star anymore, they also want to be pro-gamers, cosplayers and shoutcasters. These 3 points, and many smaller others, contribute to Korea creating some of the most talented, hardworking and successful gamers out there. Korea created Esports and Korean teams continue to dominate with every new game release.

### **Korea as an electronic nation**

Korea is often referred to as the “littler brother” of Asia, this is probably due to its back

and forth throughout history being stuck in all their older brother's conflicts. However bad history was, they have found a way to come out on top. Coming out of the Cold War, Asia had a surge of technological development. With the United States being a major influence, pushing them to better manufacturing, East Asia became a hub for electronics, and became the best in the electronics game. This all happened though, in roughly, the last 30 years after the split of the Koreas was softened with developed trade and commerce (Yee Shin). In the 1990s the government set out to get their whole country online, from a very undeveloped country, to the most advanced system in the world. It happened virtually overnight, the strength of a nation to further the economy was shown with conglomerates, known as Chaebol, to get the nation on their feet again (NowThis). During this time if the country was going to be online, *everyone* went online, all at once, basically, the magic of nationalism and a supportive government.

Korea has an astounding 90% of home broadband access, when only 60% of America does. Korea's connection speed is also roughly 4 times faster than it is in the West. The Chaebol and government have made an economy where competition is natural, that it pushes the prices down and quality of access up. Americans pay an average of \$45 a month versus \$28 in Korea (Sutter). Internet sources suggest that the best indicators of a country's flourishing, is how well the people are informed. For a country like Korea success is defined by internet culture, and by all standards, they are successful; Korea went from being one of the poorest, underdeveloped countries, to one of the highest standard of living, wealth and education (ABC News). Besides just making it easy for companies to push competition and provide good service, the government began promoting subsidies for companies to get their companies online, and to use internet based services, and tax credits to individuals who get their families on broadband (Sutter). Key word being *broadband*, since wi-fi will do you no good if you need speed.

The economic implications of this are many; first, that Korea now has the 4<sup>th</sup> GDP (an estimation) in the world (ABC News). Korea now has the money to influence the global economy, and dominates in areas such as electronics, Kpop and could be considered the “monopoly” of those things. Making money is great, but what about the reach of these influences? It’s said that **League of Legends** retains about 67 Million Players monthly (Larger than the size of France) (Vice) and Kpop boy band **BTS** has over 123 Million views on their video *Blood Sweat Tears* (at the time of writing this). Korea took their economic success to create entertainment machines, and use the internet as a global platform for promoting themselves. The global online game market was estimated around \$11.88 Billion in 2011, compared to a measly, \$4.98 Billion in 2006 (Dal Yong), which has only continued to grow. *Online games* are another key difference, where the United States, Europe and even Japan diverge is that those countries often prefer *console games* of an adventure nature and a finite plot.

Lastly, South Korea was the place where Esports became a real sport; you can go to conventions, watch TV, and stream competitive games. Where before, the “traditional” sports, were the only industries that had that much reach in the West. The power of nationalizing games through Esports now is strong enough to bring in the global market. Everyone who plays games also watches the pro competitions (and buys their merch) (Dal Yong). The number of eyes on these matches has opened up new opportunities, for companies to own teams and develop players (Vice) (not unlike Kpop companies) and for eyes to be on the latest and greatest; tech and otherwise (Fandom Wikia). South Korea has created a sensation, that may be based on Western ideals, but the nationalistic ability to create something so inherently popular, is something seen as critically Korean (Jeongsuk) .

## Youth and society

It's no question that South Korea is a successful country, with a lot of global internet power and a lot of wealth. But what about the pressure on the people to hold up to this level of success and power? Do the South Koreans ever wane, and why is it that people look to Kpop and games, of all the things? This is where escapism for young people comes in; for a lot of South Korean youth, they live in and observe an unkind, often times ridiculous, pressure cooker of a society. Coming from a traditionally Confucian society, these kinds of strict lifestyles are very normal and take a toll on Asian youth (PBS News).

Not only did Korea quickly rise to power with the integration of technology, they're also one of the best educated countries in the world (PBS News). Many students study from the time they wake up in the morning, until very late at night when they go to sleep, often time without many breaks. Kids will start school at 7 am, end at 6 pm, then go to cram school and then also study at home, and of course extracurriculars and chores at home. Confucianism has an emphasis on hard work and education, one must study hard to succeed. There is also immense pressure to succeed financially as many Asian societies will live with whole family's generations together in one house; not only do you have to support your children but also your parents (Myonggu and Douglas). There's also a rigid hierarchy, so children often feel they can't even express problems with their parents. These children have almost no time for themselves and no room for failure, pressure on children in South Korea is immense, since everyone is actually in competition for their grade (PBS News). In 2005 South Korea had the highest suicide rate in the world, at an astonishing 24.7 per every 100,000 people (OECD). It's estimated it hasn't changed much since then, and possibly gone up in each of the Asian countries (Wiki). With the stress of school, and the familial burden to do well, we get a similar effect as what happened with *Otaku* in Japan.

Essentially, to deal with the stresses of life, Japanese youth adapted their interests and knowledge to ease the burden on themselves (Hack). This originally manifested itself in *hikikomori* in Japan, the very definition of otaku; a person who refused to interact with the outside world beyond necessary (Youngkyun). This is almost definitely the same circumstance that came to be in Korea more recently.

Coming away from that, though problems originally rose with the hikikomori, basically not even fulfilling their basic duties, both Korea and Japan had a majority of those who were like this come out as a new sub culture. Now gaming is just as mainstream as anime is. Though people may start playing games because of societal pressure, it is not necessarily a bad thing to be gaming all the time. Though some people do suffer from gaming addiction (Vice) (Youngkyun) for the most part young gamers contribute a significant amount into society, being the social norm, and the economy, thriving online game empire (Vice). There are also even benefits to gaming a lot and well, some people can see increased brain capability, improvement of sight, and it has many social benefits as well (McGonigal). Though it was suggested with McGonigal, it's been noted that the possibility for change and a flourishing in gaming culture came out of a talent for team building games with a passion for saving the world.

### **Hallyu and Nationalism**

Now that games are mainstream for South Korean society it's becoming increasingly popular as a career choice, fairly similar to the rise of Kpop. Coined the "Global Dreams Factory" (Ho) young people aspiring to be Kpop stars can train (in exchange for a huge debt) and audition nearly once a week within Korea. The Esports scene has a similar structure in that kids who get picked up early by teams will train many hours, even before becoming a pro (Vice).

With the rise of the internet more and more kids not only will try out doing these things, but totally and full heartedly aspire to work in entertainment. From 1991 to 2012 there was a 29% increase in the number of elementary school kids who wanted to be “entertainers.” (Oh, Lee) Though the idea of producers, writers, developers and crew goes over elementary school student’s heads, working in entertainment may be the real end goal for them. For some this will mean being an *online personality, shoutcaster or professional gamer* (Vice). Because entertainment is such a broad and interesting area, it is possible that games and Kpop may be Korea’s official exports in the coming years.

On top of games going mainstream, a lot of Koreans find they have something to look up to when they see Korean teams winning at their favorite game. Much like how Kpop has brought the nation a sense of pride (Hallyu and the Korean Wave) gaming enthusiasts find just as much support for their craft as any professional athlete (Vice). Jeong Suk Joo call this “*pop nationalism,*” the support of an entire nation (and it’s government) in ventures in pop culture. With so much money, time and resources put into these industries, surely they are bound to do well. The nationalistic ideals of the South Korean people make it very easy for one and all to come together to learn, play and support each other, but they don’t see it as supporting one another but an entire institution. Coming across this idea was interesting to me, because games were originally a way for young people to get away from a society that places too much on them, now these players are the rock stars with all eyes on them (Vice).

Lastly, to address the governments support of games (and Kpop); the Korean government has contributed by creating the *Korea Esports Association*, a branch of the government dedicated solely to making sure games run smoothly, that the country is getting income from games, and that human rights violations are not being swept under the rug (Wiki). There’s even a

Congressman, Jun Byung-hun, who says he stands with the young folk and wants to support their passion for games in voting against certain bills that would prevent children from playing past a certain time at night, and making sure game rigging scandals never happen again (Wiki). The support for the games industry probably comes from the fact that a huge portion of the country's GDP is related to games and online activity, of course they would want to keep that within the country. In 2015 alone the *League of Legends* opening final Championship had viewer ship of 334 Million (Kotaku), that's more than the size of **Indonesia**, the world 5<sup>th</sup> most populated country. With this much business and support behind the professional Korean teams, it's no wonder Korea produces some of the most talented athletes the world will ever see.

### **Final Thoughts**

Though none of this is set in stone, it definitely portrays a clear image at least of how Esports in Korea came to be. Some other ideas I've heard tossed around, in interviews and less reputable sources are less important, but deserve a platform; one was that the work ethic of East-Asian countries is part of what makes all of them so good, being that not just Korea, but Japan and China also hold out above their Western counterparts. Another was that since all the Asian countries tend to lean towards pop culture as mainstream, they really want to be the best at something, and their dislike of the other countries due to historical problems, and being "*the Little Brother of Asia*." One last one, and this has to do with professional gamers everywhere, more people become obsessed with games in Korea than anywhere. Korea certainly has more of this occurring, that does not necessarily contribute to a success at games, though it does mean more people on average play games, and that is how they are able to find so much more talent. I suppose all ideas hold some ground, and there is not only 3 reasons for anything. South Korea is a very idealistic country with lots of history that's made it exactly what is happening today. From

*Confucianism* to wars, and bad history within itself and *supportive government*, Korea has become an empire of professional gaming. It is likely that as long as these continue to be true South Korea will be **the** dominate force to be reckoned on the Esports scene.