# FCJ-049 Negotiating Intra-Asian Games Networks: On Cultural Proximity, East Asian Games Design, and Chinese Farmers

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2 The East Asian online games boom started in South Korea in the late 1990s. Following unqualified domestic success, South Korean games were subsequently exported to other regional markets throughout East and South East Asia. During this time, game development companies specialising in online games for the Asian market also emerged in China and Japan. This essay proposes that one of the key features in this networked gaming context is the relationship between the adaptation of regional East Asian aesthetic and narrative forms in game content, and the parallel growth in more regionally-focused marketing and distribution initiatives. East Asian online games design and marketing play to notions of perceived cultural proximity within the region. By encompassing these considerations, this essay aims to offer a contextual analysis of intra-Asian games networks in terms of production processes and related emergent concerns. How have these online games networks evolved? What are the cultural politics inherent in present-day games networks within East Asia? How may ongoing developments in these games networks contribute to an understanding of contemporary transnational Asianness and its signification within regional cultural flows? To what extent are intra-Asian game networks reflective of imbalanced power relations within the region?

3 A basic chronology of key moments in the cultural history of intra-Asian games networks is presented in this study. The essay begins by mapping the development of this mode of cultural production and concludes by chronicling specific issues that have recently transpired within these networks. At the same time, however, this is not a simplistic narrative of exponential progress – or incremental decay, for that matter. Production processes and their attendant problematic aspects overlap in the middle section of the essay where I address the cultural politics of East Asian online games and the constituencies of intra-Asian cultural flows. Chinese farming (a term that refers to the activities of certain types of Chinese gamers believed to be proliferating in online game worlds) serves as a detailed case study for analysing how these issues coalesce. My hermeneutical agenda is explicit: what general lessons might be drawn from this relatively short – but rapidly evolving – cultural history in order to advance current understandings, and inform future research on games networks in East Asia?

4 My analysis of intra-Asian games networks centres on the production and circulation of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). MMORPGs enable thousands of players to simultaneously engage in group-based interactive gameplay in evolving virtual worlds. They are also known as persistent world games in the sense that such virtual worlds continue to evolve even when an individual player logs off. *Lineage* attracted significant international press attention from 2001 onwards for being the world's most heavily populated MMORPG at the time, with over 4 million subscribers worldwide (e.g., Levander, 2001). This South Korean designed MMORPG is still regarded as one of the most popular persistent world games, even warranting the launch of its follow-up *Lineage II* in 2003. Most of the subscribers are located in East Asia, particularly in South Korea, Taiwan and China. Even though *World of Warcraft*, a persistent world game launched in November 2004 and developed by the North American studio Blizzard Entertainment, had reached over 6.5 million subscribers worldwide by July 2006 (Mmogchart.com, 2006), it must be noted that a significant number of these subscribers are based in China and South Korea. *World of Warcraft* had reached 1.5 million subscribers in China by July 2005 (Blizzard Entertainment, 2005), increasing to an estimated 3 million in July 2006 (Schiesel, 2006). The game continues to perform strongly in China where it attained peak and average concurrent users of approximately 630,000 and 330,000 respectively for the second quarter of 2006 ('The9 Soars', 2006).[1] Indeed, if anything, this example clearly shows that networked games have become ensconced as a key mass popular cultural form in this region. How, and why, did this popularity develop in such a short period?

## The Development of Online Game Networks in East Asia

5 Japan's role in developing console-based videogames culture is unquestionable. The Nintendo Corporation was responsible for the global distribution and mass popularisation of NES, SNES and

Nintendo 64 videogames as well as portable GameBoy games in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Sony entered into the videogames market with PlayStation in 1994; and currently enjoys nearly unrivalled international market dominance with the PlayStation 2 console and its associated games. This continued emphasis on developing videogame consoles and videogames for both domestic and international markets has arguably come at the expense of both stand-alone PC games and online computer games in the Japanese context. By contrast, online games currently tend to dominate in South Korea, Taiwan and Mainland China. There are a number of factors contributing to the rise of online games in these territories. Console games were never officially marketed in these locations on a mass scale. South Korea, for instance, had placed restrictions on the import of Japanese popular culture following the Second World War when Japan occupied Korea. These restrictions were only officially lifted in 1998. Moreover, international game companies have been reluctant to focus on the videogames market in these East Asian territories because of widespread games software piracy. Local PC game developers in South Korea, Taiwan and Mainland China similarly experienced limited success in the 1990s (e.g., Liu, 2001).

6 In the meantime, online games culture was already steadily evolving especially in South Korea. Imported games such as Blizzard Entertainment's *StarCraft* (1998), a real-time strategy computer game with networked multiplayer capabilities, proved to be an early success and was a contributing factor in the mass popularisation of computer games, particularly in relation to networked games. Over the years, *StarCraft* has achieved a wide following in South Korea (e.g., Herz, 2002); and its iconic status is ratified by the fact that it continues to feature regularly in televised player competitions as well as government and corporate sponsored tournaments (K. Cho, 2006; Kanellos, 2004). While the appeal of such eminently playable imported game titles – together with the explicit domestic acculturation of computer games as a form of mass culture – undoubtedly helped cultivate local audience interest on a mass scale, there are other factors to consider as well.

7 The rapid uptake of persistent world games in South Korea in the late 1990s may be further attributed to two inter-linked infrastructural conditions, namely the expansion of national broadband networks and the proliferation of Internet cafés (known in Korea as PC *baangs*). Both of these may, in turn, be linked to the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98. The intensive governmental focus on developing the domestic information technology infrastructure as a means to rebuild the national economy, together with an attendant interest in supporting local cultural industry initiatives like the fledgling games industry, soon produced tangible results (Yoshimatsu, 2005: 17). By 2003, South Korea had the highest usage of broadband connections in the world. As persistent world games generally rely on high-speed Internet connections, the comprehensive national broadband infrastructure was undoubtedly a contributing factor in enabling the widespread uptake of these games. Indeed, by 2003, South Korea also had the highest proportion of online gamers per capita in the world (Chou, 2003).

8 In addition, the Asian financial crisis had created a situation where many retrenched middle managers turned to making a living by setting up their own Internet café businesses, often with the aid of government subsidies to connect to broadband networks (Yoshimatsu, 2005: 17). The Internet cafés, in turn, provided a cheap form of entertainment for students and the unemployed alike, thereby cultivating gamer usage at these locations. Despite increasing rates of personal or home computer ownership, Internet cafés continue to be significant social locations for playing online games. According to the Korea Game Development and Promotion Institute, 84 per cent of Internet café users play online games (KGDI, 2004: 22). Game companies such as NCSoft derive up to 72 per cent of total sales from Internet cafés (Yoshimatsu, 2005: 18). By 2003, there were over 20,000 Internet cafés in South Korea, where online games are played using a variety of micro-payment schemes including pay per play, hourly charges and pre-paid billing cards (KGDI, 2004: 30). Such payment schemes act as a means of getting around the problem of software piracy and offer a measure of revenue protection for the game companies. Needless to say, this commercial model has acted as a determining factor in fuelling the exponential growth of the online games development industry, and in the subsequent proliferation of similar online games industries and networks in East Asia.

9 There are strong parallels among East Asian games network economies in terms of the development of key infrastructures that support the continued growth in online games usage. In

China and Taiwan, for example, broadband usage continues to grow, while Internet cafés are also increasingly being used for playing online persistent world games (Chou, 2003; Tambunan, 2004: 4-6). The South Korean games industry exemplar remains dominant in East Asian creative industry contexts. The online games development industry in South Korea has been consistently supported by extensive government intervention and preferential cultural industry policies. As Hidetaka Yoshimatsu notes, 'the government offered comprehensive and integrated support for creating favourable environments for the development of the industry in broad policy areas ranging from technological upgrading, managerial and human resource development, global connections, and education' (2005: 23). Such extensive and programmatic governmental endorsement of the online games industry has seen it rapidly grow to become an extremely lucrative export sector. Indeed, the Korea Culture and Content Agency reports that in 2005 online games accounted for 43.3 per cent of total entertainment and culture-related exports including music, movies, TV dramas, books and animation (J. Cho, 2005).

10 Comparable levels of governmental backing are now being replicated in China, where comprehensive efforts are being made to seed the growth of the local online games development sector. The Chinese government is reportedly investing US$242 million in the local Chinese games development industry with a view to developing over 100 original online game titles (Feldman, 2004). The Japanese government started to actively support its domestic games industry from 2001 onwards by assisting in key areas such as media content development and export-oriented initiatives. According to Yoshimatsu (2005: 9-15), the market-led growth in the 1980s and 1990s had to give way to more programmatic government-coordinated development in the Japanese game industry because of specific contextual considerations. Owing to a combination of factors including local videogames market saturation, declining domestic sales and Japan's persistent economic recession, Japanese companies are now increasingly concentrating on international markets and starting to expand into online games development (Japanese Economy Division, 2004: 13-15). Perhaps the most significant example to date of ongoing troubles in the Japanese games industry is the domestic and international distribution of Square Enix's *Final Fantasy XI* (2002), a persistent world game that is notably part of an already well-established and lucrative console game franchise. *Final Fantasy XI* is also the first cross-platform MMORPG in which both PC and PlayStation 2 console versions connect to the same servers. The official mass distribution of Japanese consoles and videogames in the South Korean and Chinese markets in 2002 and 2003 respectively was initially successful but market stagnation soon followed (KGDI, 2004: 13; 'Spoiling the Game', 2004). Current schemes to improve the console games market in these territories centre on the introduction of videogame network services and the introduction of networked videogame rooms as an equivalent to Internet cafés (KGDI, 2004: 13-14). These scenarios are collectively indexical of the virtual hegemony of networked games and networked gaming culture in the East Asian context.

## The Cultural Politics of East Asian MMORPGs

11 South Korean-made online games feature prominently in East Asian games networks. In 2002, South Korean products had a 65 per cent share of Taiwan's online games market (Lin, 2002). In 2003, South Korean companies controlled more than 70 per cent of the Chinese online games market (Embassy, 2004). While East Asian online games development will continue to evolve and diversify over time, South Korean games currently act as paradigmatic models for the development of East Asian MMORPGs. What are the main characteristics and distinguishing features of South Korean MMORPGs? How are South Korean games influencing the design, production and marketing of other East Asian MMORPGs? These questions may be briefly explored with reference to the three iconic South Korean designed online games within intra-Asian games networks, namely *Lineage* (1998), *Ragnarok Online* (2002), and *Legend of Mir II* (2001). The design elements in these games underscore the common practice of indigenising imported Western idioms by infusing and hybridising them with East Asian aesthetics, narratives, and histories.

12 As part of the early wave of South Korean-designed online games in the late 1990s, it is perhaps unsurprising that *Lineage* relied on the then established gameplay and thematic conventions for online games. The game was closely modelled after European and North American paradigms for medieval fantasy role-playing games. Even then, compared to North American online gaming

contemporaries like *Ultima Online* (1997), *Lineage* presented some cultural variations in terms of gameplay design. First, there is an emphasis on in-game quests that can only be completed by highly organised groups of players (teams referred to as blood pledges). Second, the player avatars are characterised by their allotted places within strict social hierarchies, where only members of the Prince/Princess character class can recruit groups of followers and form blood pledges. These features appear to be especially conducive to the Internet café gameplay context, so much so that it is not uncommon for leaders of blood pledges to arrange with members to congregate in real life and play together as groups in Korean PC *baangs* (Levander, 2001). In the words of J.C. Herz (2002):

13 > What makes *Lineage* a distinctly Korean experience is that when players assemble to take down a castle, they do so in person, commandeering a local PC baang for as long as it takes. In the middle of a battle, these people aren't just text-chatting. They're yelling across the room. Platoons sit at adjacent computers, coordinating among themselves and taking orders from the Blood Pledge leader. *Lineage* has a fixed hierarchy, unlike American role-playing games, in which leadership structures emerge organically. At the outset, you choose to be either royalty or a commoner. If you are a prince or princess, your job is to put together an army and lead it. If you're a commoner, your job is to find a leader. You pledge loyalty and fight to take over castles, and no matter how great you are at it, you can never be in charge. This kind of tightly defined clan structure, which mirrors the Confucian hierarchy of Korean society, would be anathema to American players, who generally want to be the hero-king Lone Ranger. (Herz, 2002)

14 A closer analysis of *Lineage* reveals an additional element of local acculturation. The back-story and game-world settings are derived from Il-Sook Shin's popular *manhwa* (Korean comic) with the same title. *Ragnarok Online* shares a common point of origin. While the *Ragnarok* story has its origins in Norse mythology, the in-game narrative and settings are loosely based on Myung-Jin Lee's *Ragnarok: Into the Abyss*, a successful *manhwa* adaptation of the Norse legend (e.g., GameDaily, 2004). In Lee's work, the original Norse stories and characters are altered in order to reflect local South Korean social mores, particularly in the depiction of male-female relationships and peer group dynamics. Lee has also taken considerable creative liberties with the descriptions and roles of Norse gods. Loki, the mythological trickster figure, for instance, becomes recodified as a heroic young assassin. The *manhwa*-MMORPG interface occurs at various levels. For example, the original *manhwa* storyline revolves around competing guilds, thus linking it to generic MMORPG dynamics. It is also unsurprising to note that Lee retained considerable creative control in building the game. He professes to being 'heavily involved' in the back-story and original art design of the game, as well as its development process, to the point of even creating the in-game job class system (GameDaily, 2004). Hence, *Ragnarok Online* is a persistent world adaptation of a *manhwa* adaptation of Norse mythology; and, like *Lineage*, it is indexical of the creative inter-cultural and cross-media transformations that are implicit in many South Korean MMORPGs (e.g., Cosplay Lab, 2004).

15 Intra-Asian games networks also partly depend on regional cross-media literacy in the sense that the online games often build on or cross-reference other popular cultural forms such as comics and animation. The settings and characters in *Ragnarok Online* are very cartoon-like especially when compared to North American game-worlds – partly to reflect its *manhwa* origins, but also partly to cater to the taste for cute graphics with bright pastel colours that have become synonymous with much East Asian popular culture, particularly those which are distributed within regional markets. The successful expansion of Korean online games networks to North East and South East Asian markets from 2000 onwards may therefore be, in part, attributed to a perceived sense of cultural proximity among these territories. This term may also be used to refer to the use of regional cultural signifiers and themes as markers of cultural affinity in transnational Asian games networks. *Legend of Mir II* provides an example of how cultural proximity is manifest in MMORPG design, particularly in its use of visual and narrative elements considered marketable within Asia. *Legend of Mir II* was the most popular online game in China in 2002 and 2003, attracting over 700,000 peak concurrent users in 2003 (Actoz Soft, 2003). *Legend of Mir II* features a fantasy Oriental game world complete with traditional Asiatic design elements in architectural and dress styles, as well as a Taoist character class. The overarching objective of the game is to unify and restore a once great civilisation, thereby simultaneously mining a core role-playing game narrative trope as well as referencing a familiar narrative trope in classical Chinese literature.

Given the unqualified commercial success of this game in China, it would seem that such generic visual and narrative design elements resonate with the present generation of Chinese gamers.

16 This design ethos is replicated even more explicitly in *Legend of Knights Online* (2003), touted as the first Chinese-made online game. The storyline of the game is based on Chinese martial arts narratives, in particular tales of knightly chivalry known as *wuxia*. According to John R. Eperjesi (2004: 30), *wuxia* stories, characterised by action featuring armed combat as opposed to hand-to-hand combat, were 'considered superfluous at best, regressive at worst' by the Chinese government for the most part of the twentieth century. Although *wuxia* stories circulated in the form of serialised novels and were incorporated into Peking Opera in the nineteenth century, censorship laws were passed in China in 1931 to prohibit films that promoted a belief in superstition, while mainland Chinese film-making was directed towards the project of nation-building. Thus, from the 1930s onwards, popular culture forms based on *wuxia* were produced primarily in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Accordingly, PC games developed in these territories in the 1990s set the precedent for Martial Arts RPGs based on *wuxia* narratives (Liu, 2001). Many of these were based on the popular martial arts novels of Louis Cha (a.k.a. *Jin Yong*), and with the present turn to online games in the region, Taiwan in particular has continued to develop games such as *Jin Yong Online* for domestic and regional audiences. According to one report, *wuxia*-themed games constitute one third of the online games market in China today ('China busy', 2004). As Jung Ryul Kim (2004b) notes, 'The emerging strength of Chinese *Wuxia*-style (martial adventure or chivalry) online games demonstrates that Chinese gamers are hoping to see their own traditional values and specific historical artifacts in the new cyber-realities.' At any rate, what kind of tradition is being engaged here? Eperjesi (2004: 37) contends that '[a]s economic reforms in China continue to repress the revolutionary dreams of Mao and nurture the growth of middle-class Chinese public spheres, we can expect to see an increased circulation of politically vacant signifiers of traditional culture that aim to foster smooth cultural and economic relations'. This scenario is arguably evident in the reclamation and recirculation of *wuxia* in China today. As Liu Shifa, a spokesperson for China's Ministry of Culture asserts, '[*Legend of Knights Online*] proves the charm of homemade online games, which have begun to serve as a catalyst for the rebirth of the whole information industry' (cited in Xinhua News Agency, 2003). In other words, these narratives are now proactively recuperated in China as a sign of indigeneity and fashioned into a marketable aesthetic.

17 The circulation of marketable versions of traditional culture is becoming commonplace in East Asian MMORPG design. *1000 Years* (2001), for instance, is described as an Asian Martial Arts MMORPG by its South Korean developer Actoz Soft (2003). The promotional blurb for this game, which is simultaneously distributed in South Korea, Taiwan and China, reads as follows:

18 > Set your clock back to 100 decades ago, when the most notable historic changes occurred in the Far East. Masters of Martial Arts spread out rapidly among the three newly born dynasties of Korea, Japan and China. In this era when Kingdoms fell and new dynasties were born, players start their own journey to become a Master and rewrite the history of eastern Martial Arts (Actoz Soft, 2003).

19 Such visions of a shared Asian martial arts history (however questionable) are suggestive of the manifest desire to commodify and market a depoliticised sense of shared East Asian cultural lineage and regional identification. This game has consistently ranked among the Top 5 most popular online games in China between 2001 and 2003 (Actoz Soft, 2003); and it is indexical of the current cultivation of Asian-specific transnational cultural networks in East Asian MMORPGs. Cultural proximity is now conscientiously invoked as an essential component in local and regional game development and marketing. Wang Jinbo, general manager of the Taiwan-based Soft-World International Corporation, maintains that Chinese online game makers have their own advantage against foreigners. As he succinctly puts it: 'Our products have cultural proximity with customers' (cited in 'China Busy', 2004). Nevertheless, while the term cultural proximity infers notions of commoditised cultural affinity, it may also simultaneously invoke problematic essentialist tropes of cultural convergence, equivalence and homogeneity. At stake here is the need for a closer examination of how Asianness or pan-Asian identification is modulated and marketed in Asian MMORPGs circulating within the East Asian region.

### The Constituencies of Intra-Asian Cultural Flows

20 Contemporary pan-Asian regional discourses stem from a much broader history. As Kuan-Hsing Chen points out, 'one has to be extremely careful with the celebratory aspects of regionalism; the

[Japanese] imperialist Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere project, for example, launched in the 1930s, was able to operate under the name of regionalism' (1998: 27). Furthermore, 'when questions are asked – Is Asia one place? What are the Asian values? – then a universal Asian identity collapses, and differences of tradition, history and past hatreds resurface' (31). Yet, regionalism continues to circulate in present discourses on East Asian economies, particularly in relation to consumerist-driven forms of Asian modernity. The regional identification of East Asia since the 1990s may be attributed to the global intensification of transnational capitalism. Consequently, as Leo Ching argues:

21 > Asianism no longer represents the kind of transcendental otherness required to produce a practical identity and tension between the East and West. Today, Asia itself is neither a misrepresentation of the Orientalist nor the collective representation of the anti-imperialists. Asia has become a market, and Asianness has become a commodity circulating globally through late capitalism. (Ching, 2000: 257)

22 Ching's statement has significant implications for an understanding of the commodity function of Asianness in newly emergent intra-regional networked cultures. Asian antiquity (imagined or otherwise) acts as a common reference point for in-game narratives, characters and imagery in Asian MMORPGs. Given the kinds of transnational border crossings enacted in, say, the production of Oriental style South Korean games for distribution in the Chinese market, what seems to be happening in intra-Asian games networks is the generation of 'a sense of temporal (antique) and spatial (exotic) longing for authenticity' (Iwabuchi, 2002: 567). At the same time, however, authenticity is used as a means to distinguish locally produced games without necessarily disavowing the significance of imported forms and borrowed styles. In this sense, Asian MMORPGs may be regarded as modern popular cultural forms that are simultaneously marked as local and international, as specifically Asian but always already hybridised in orientation. These machinations are underscored in Actoz Soft's (2003) promotional blurb for *Legend of Mir II*: 'While most RPGs are focused on North European Fantasies, *Legend of Mir II* strongly emphasises…an original story with oriental background, mixed with western type RPG elements'. Thus, following Kaori Yoshida (2004), '[r]ather than an essentialized sameness of Asian culture, what may enable … [the generation of] a 'regional imagined community' has more to do with the shared experience of 'Asian modernity' that results from indigenising Western modernity'. At any rate, the shared experience of Asian modernity has not resulted in the levelling of differences. Differing registers of Asianness are taken into account in the regional distribution of online games, so much so that the same game may be played and experienced somewhat differently in each territory.

23 Intra-Asian games networks are sustained by the standard East Asian online game development practice of providing customisable territory-specific content and extensive localisation services for products that are distributed regionally. Jung Ryul Kim (2004a), the Chairman of Gravity Corporation, the South Korean developer of games such as *Ragnarok Online*, describes the formula for successful regional distribution as follows: '(1) make it [the game] familiar to the target users, and (2) get someone who knows local users well to deliver it.' In other words, there is a twinned process involved in intra-Asian games distribution – namely, localising in-game content and gameplay mechanics to make the game familiar to target users, as well as using local hosting partners to assist in the ongoing provision of game services. Regional localisation processes are thereby also contingent on the establishment of collaborative transnational ventures within intra-Asian games networks. For instance, Japanese games publisher Square Enix entered into partnership with Webstar (an affiliate company of Softstar Entertainment, Taiwan) for its first foray into the online games market in China in 2002 with *Cross Gate*, a MMORPG developed specifically for the Asian market. At issue here is the significance of localised cultural knowledge.

24 As Toby Ragaini (2004), the Online Creative Director at Monolith Productions, notes: '[T]here's a tendency to oversimplify the significant regional differences between the various countries. Singapore, Indonesia, Japan, China and South Korea should all be considered separate marketplaces with distinct needs, expectations and system specifications.' At the most basic level, localisation requires both the straightforward linguistic translation of the game text and the provision of territory-specific content. For example, Kim (2004a) points out that Gravity utilises 'region-specific updates that allow players to enjoy replicas of historical buildings, wear traditional indigenous apparel, fight creatures inspired by local myths, and collect culturally themed items.'

Moreover, in *Ragnarok Online*, players may visit and congregate in different cities designed in ancient Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese, Chinese and Thai styles. It is no coincidence that this sample is reflective of the main markets for this particular game.

25 Preferred gameplay styles are also different in each territory. Terence Tan, CEO of Phoenix Games Studio, provides an account of the rationale for territory-specific variations in *Fung Wan Online*, a martial arts persistent world game based on a popular Hong Kong comic:

26 > We found important differences between Korean, Malaysian, Singaporean and Taiwanese players. Developers who lump all Eastern players together are in for a rude shock. For example, many Taiwanese hate losing belongings, while Southeast Asians don't mind if the risk/reward is high enough. So, we had to disable a pick-pocketing feature in Taiwan, while leaving it for Southeast Asia. Both regions enjoy PvP [player versus player combat], but the magnitudes of punishments and rewards were different. (Tan, 2004)

27 Such localised interventions ensure a degree of cultural familiarity and relevance in different territories. The processes of regional localisation therefore provide insights into the intricate modulation of Asianness within intra-Asian games networks. Asianness is crucially not mobilised as a singular and unchanging referent. Instead, the plurality of Asian audiences is tacitly underscored in intra-Asian games localisation.

28 At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged that intra-Asian game networks do not presently operate on a level playing field. The present hegemony of South Korean MMORPGs raises the question of whether it constitutes a new type of media imperialism within the region. The current situation in Mainland China provides a case in point. According to a report published by China Media Intelligence (2004), '[t]he problem for Chinese developers with the Korean stranglehold on the sector is overcoming the inertia of the Chinese industry on the one-hand and trying to temper the momentum of the Korean industry on the other.' The South Korean market dominance impacts on licensing issues, intellectual property, and profit margins for Chinese developers and games operators. 'The predominance of Korean games means that Chinese online games operators are constantly faced with high intellectual property payments which can take away as much as 50 per cent of online gaming revenue' (China Media Intelligence, 2004). Ian MacInnes and Lily Hu offer a sobering demystification of the economic success of the Chinese online games market by pointing out the weak bargaining position of Chinese online game operators who often have to bear considerable operating risks:

29 > [S]ince the Chinese game operators were so eager to obtain the licensing right of popular online games from abroad and operate them in the local market for quick profits, bargaining power rested almost entirely with Korean developers as they controlled the scarce resources – popular game titles – in the Chinese market. As a result, Chinese online game operators usually have to pay a large upfront licensing fee, which can be as high as $1-2 million US, plus a large portion, as high as 50%, of later operating profits…The weak bargaining position of Chinese online game operators also has meant that bugs have marred the licensed games. The Chinese game operators are not given access to the source code. Troubleshooting problems with licensors abroad has been time-consuming and ineffective. (MacInnes and Hu, 2005)

30 Comparable scenarios have arisen in Taiwan. Chieh-yu Lin observes that 'Taiwanese online game companies are still heavily dependent on the South Korean game development companies and this has become the main reason why the industry has not been growing well on its own.' For example, 'Gamania Digital Entertainment Co Ltd…survived purely on its agent rights and has made the most revenue (nearly NT$3 billion) among all the local companies out of *Lineage*, the most popular online game in Taiwan. However, the real profit Gamania makes is only around NT$10 million, due to high royalty fees' (Lin, 2003).

31 At issue here is the broader question of the degree to which 'increasing intra-Asian cultural flows newly highlight structural asymmetry and uneven power relations' (Iwabuchi, 2004: 19). One case study that deserves closer analysis in this light is the emergence of Chinese farmers in the regional and global digital game-item trade.

### The Case of Chinese Farming

32 The increasing convergence between persistent world economies and real world economies is not unique to Asian MMORPGs. A real-world market has arisen for virtual-world goods. Global

transactions in virtual properties were estimated to be worth about US$880 million in 2004 alone ('Interview with IGE', 2004).[2] Suffice to say, there is now an established global secondary market in virtual commodities, which has in turn created a situation where gameplay is becoming commodified and instituted as a form of work. This convergence between play and work has given rise to what may be termed the gamer-worker.[3] My discussion focuses on the discursive evolution and circulation of the gamer-worker phenomenon colloquially known as Chinese farmers. I analyse the term's present significations in networked persistent world economies, particularly as an index of asymmetric power relations both within and without intra-Asian games networks.

33 In generic MMORPG contexts, farming (or gold farming) refers to the acquisition of in-game items or currency (gold) usually by repeatedly defeating lower level enemies and collecting the resulting treasure or currency. This term does not always carry negative connotations. Generally speaking, it is not unusual for the average player in most persistent worlds games to spend at least a few hours on gold farming in order to gather sufficient items and currency to facilitate smooth progress in the game. Chinese farming, by contrast, is a specific term used within online gaming circles to refer to the perceived proliferation of Chinese gamer-workers in persistent world games. It is believed that they are employed for a nominal fee by game-item traders to play a particular game for several hours a day, amassing virtual wealth in the form of game-items or in-game currency, which are then subsequently sold by the traders for real cash. Once the virtual characters created and used by the gamer-workers reach a high enough level, they may be sold as well (Tambunan, 2004: 19). In this respect, the issue of grinding or the laborious task of levelling up a playable character comes partly into play as well; however, I will focus on aspects of farming in this discussion.

34 The term Chinese farmers evolved from an earlier term Adena farmers, which originally referred to the mainly Chinese gamers employed by South Korean and Chinese in-game item traders to specifically farm the in-game currency of *Lineage* known as Adena (e.g., Steinkuehler, 2004). As these farmers grew in both reputation and visibility among international gaming circles, and especially when they started farming in other game titles and offshore game-worlds, there was an accompanying shift in the naming of these gamer-workers as specifically Chinese. Common complaints levelled against Chinese farmers include the belief that they affect both the social dynamics and the economy within the game-world. They are generally considered to be spoiling the game experience for other players because they tend to strategically position themselves in areas where monsters are known to re-spawn or re-appear shortly after killing them. In this manner, gold farming becomes a relatively straightforward procedure of simply harvesting the gold dropped by the slain monsters. However, these places subsequently become no-go zones for other players. As Steinkuehler (2004) alleges, these farmers 'often declare – in both word and deed – whichever hunting area they currently occupy as their own property, ostensibly off limits to anyone else on the game. Should you challenge them on it, they will kill-steal you, drop-steal you, heal whatever monsters you are hitting, and if necessary PK [Player Kill]'. Recurrent gripes are encapsulated in this all too familiar refrain: 'The Chinese farmers have utterly ruined the economy and unbalanced any sense of fairness in the game. So I am certain these Chinese farmers are making a pretty decent living in China' (cited in He, 2005). These presuppositions warrant further exploration.

35 Commentators such as James Lee (2005) believe that Chinese farming is starting to become a highly organised large-scale commercial activity resulting in the emergence of farming centres run by local Mainland Chinese and off-shore multinational agencies. According to him, Chinese farmers are now the main global suppliers of game-items for online games such as *World of Warcraft*. Chinese farming practices are also evolving. Lee reports on the current use of Chinese farmers to monitor game macros or waigua software programmes that run automated bots within the game-world environment. The Chinese farmer therefore acts as a kind of virtual babysitter who is required to watch over these bots:

36 > The macros for *World of Warcraft*, for example, control a high-level hunter and cleric. The hunter kills while the cleric automatically heals. Once they are fully loaded with gold and items, the farmer who's monitoring their progress manually controls them out of the dungeon to go sell their goods. These automated agents are then returned to the dungeons to do their thing again (Lee, 2005).

37

The main role of the farmer is basically 'to fend off the occasional player itching for a fight or game master who's hunting for…automated farming programs' (Lee, 2005). In short, the farmer is a form of low-skilled cheap labour used to monitor the bots. At issue here is the question of whether the farming centres described in Lee's account are equivalent to sweatshops, especially when it is pointed out that a Chinese farmer in *Lineage II* earns the equivalent of US$0.56 per hour. One might argue that these farming centres are functioning more like so-called cottage industries that are paying their gamer-workers relatively well compared to average local wages. One might even make the case that the farmers 'aren't exactly working in sweatshop conditions … [and that] there's a world of difference between making sneakers and watching bots fight all day' (Lee, 2005). Similar concerns – and justifications – have been issued in relation to the emergence of these virtual [but not quite] sweatshops in places such as Romania (Thompson, 2005). At the same time, however, the core question of exploitative organised labour remains.

38 Following his pioneering empirical studies conducted in 2005 and 2006, Ge Jin (2006) confirms the widespread proliferation of gold farming centres in Mainland China. While he concedes that the work conditions he has observed at some of these farms might justify their label as 'gaming sweatshops', it is also 'an oversimplifying term that obscures the complexity of this phenomenon.' Jin proposes an alternate reading. He suggests that in the gold farms 'exploitation is entangled with empowerment and productivity is entangled with pleasure.' His interpretation foregrounds the relative agency of the gold farmers:

39 > Most of the gold farmers I talked to love the job. In the gold farms, you can see they are enthusiastic about their job and they got a sense of achievement from it, which is rare in any other sweatshops. Most of the gold farmers I met do not have better alternatives. All the gold farmers I met are male, usually in their early 20s. They were either unemployed or had worse job [sic] before they found this job. Many of them were already game fans before they became 'professional'. In some sense, they are making a living off their hobby, which is an unachievable dream for many people. What's more, the game world can be a space of empowerment and compensation for them. In contrast to their impoverished real lives, their virtual lives give them access to power, status and wealth which they can hardly imagine in real life.

40 Jin crucially stops short of romanticising this putative agency. After all, he is bearing witness to an arguably circumscribed form of self-actualisation and socio-economic empowerment. As Jin acknowledges, '[The gold farmers] are proud of their achievement in the game world but they are also sensitive to the fact that they are playing to provide a service to some wealthier gamers. In the game world they are simultaneously the master and the servant. Power relations do cut across the virtual and the real.' Jin's research findings are echoed in other recent reports. For instance, *New York Times* writer David Barboza cites a Chinese gold farmer who appears to confirm Jin's initial observations. The farmer states, 'For 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, me and my colleagues are killing monsters…I make about $250 a month, which is pretty good, compared to the other jobs I've had. And I can play games all day' (cited in Barboza, 2005). Nevertheless, contrasting viewpoints need to be factored into consideration. Writing in the *South China Morning Post*, He Huifeng quotes a Chinese farmer who acerbically points out, 'You try going back and forth clicking the same thing for 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week, then you will see whether it's a game or not' (cited in He, 2005). In short, the gamer-worker remains a worker.

41 Emergent understandings about the sociology of Chinese gold farmers need to be highlighted. Attendant questions about class and economic mobility need to be raised. For whom is gold farming profitable and at whose expense? What are the local socio-economic machinations involved in organised farming practices? Barboza offers an example that affirms the need for such deliberations. In his words:

42 > The operators are mostly young men, like Luo Gang, a 28-year-old college graduate who borrowed $25,000 from his father to start an Internet café that developed into a gold farm on the outskirts of Chongqing in central China. Luo has 23 workers, who make about $75 a month. If they didn't work here, Luo said, they'd probably be working as waiters in hot pot restaurants, or go back to help their parents farm the land; or more likely, hang out on the streets with no jobs at all. (Barboza, 2005)

43 The it's better than nothing rhetoric starts to sound rather hollow, especially when spouted by entrepreneurial middle classes presuming to speak and act on behalf of others. He Huifeng provides a corroborating example:

44 > Wei Xiaoliang, 26, owns the Shenzhen Red Leaf technology company and focuses his business on wholesaling *Warcraft* gold to overseas brokers. We prefer to hire young migrant workers rather than college students. The pay is not good for students, but it is quite attractive to the young migrants from the countryside, Mr Wei said. He is thinking of moving his company to Gansu or Shanxi provinces, where he could easily find scores of rural migrants to become farmers at lower costs. (He, 2005)

45 This intricate national sociology of rural-urban engagement, economic mobility, and rural migrant labour obviously warrants further detailed study. At any rate, the symbology of migrant labour has already been utilised by Ge Jin and Nick Yee to interpret the transnational social standing of Chinese farmers. For Jin, 'Chinese gold farmers are in some sense a new kind of immigrant workers, disembodied through the Internet, then reembodied on a foreign territory as the mythical warriors, magicians or priests – virtual bodies that are the bread earners for real bodies' (2006). It is important to emphasise that these virtual bodies are also specifically marked as *racialised* bodies. The Chinese gold farming phenomenon thereby offers a situated context for examining how racial tropes play out in an online environment.

46 Nick Yee's essay Yi-Shan-Guan (2006) provides an incisive account of how present-day discourses on Chinese farmers belie a range of historical assumptions, generalisations, and judgements about racial Otherness. Yee mobilises a trenchant critique of the racist subtexts in descriptions and discussions by online gamers that centre on, and vilify, the Chineseness of the gold farmers in question. For him, the overriding 'theme of immigrant worker being harassed by Westerners who feel they own the land and can arbitrate what constitutes as acceptable labor is one that is hard to escape.' For example, in analysing gamer statements about Chinese farmers and farming practices, Yee discerns that 'it's hard to not interpret them as the digital variation of go back to your own country. And beneath all that is the eerie undertone of this land belongs to us and we prefer to keep it that way – a digital country club where language fluency is the membership fee.' Humphrey Cheung (2006), likewise, reports on the use of English language tests among some players in *World of Warcraft* as a way of weeding out possible Asian gold farmers. Broken English arouses suspicion. In short, collective anxieties about Chinese farmers have seemingly occasioned acts of boundary policing premised on English language competency as a marker of racial and ethno-national lines.

47 In Cyber-Race, Jerry Kang (2000) makes a compelling case for harnessing the Internet's intrinsic qualities, such as its capacity for anonymity, pseudonymity and social interaction, in order to challenge and disrupt dominant racial meanings. His key propositions are as follows: 'Specifically, we can adopt a strategy of abolition, which disrupts racial mapping by promoting racial anonymity; integration, which reforms racial meanings by promoting social interaction; or transmutation, which disrupts racial categories by promoting racial pseudonymity' (2000: 1153). The case of Chinese farming complicates these potentialities if only because it demonstrates how racial meanings can be insidiously re-mapped in cyberspace. The affective dimensions of such contemporary power dynamics also cannot be underestimated. Yee sums up the predicaments generated by these imbrications of power, class and race in the poignant conclusion to his essay:

48 > As I recovered and pondered how to exact revenge against these 3 gold farmers [whom I had just encountered in the game], I realized that in my mind I had instinctively cast them as Chinese gold farmers. And in return, they had probably instinctively cast me as the white leisure player. And in this mesh of historical and contemporary racial narratives where we all suddenly seemed to be playing out our expected racial roles, I found myself pondering what it really meant to be Chinese-American… because somehow, in this land of Elves and Orcs, I suddenly felt more Chinese than I usually do in the real world. (Yee, 2006)

## Conclusions, Projections and Introjections

49 The varied constituencies of intra-Asian games networks draw attention to the complexities inherent in transnational East Asian cultural production, regional cultural flows, and pan-Asian identification. It is crucial to retain an understanding that the Asianness of Asian MMORPGs and the Chineseness of Chinese farming are discursively – and *economically* – produced. Intra-Asian networks simultaneously highlight structural asymmetry and uneven power relations within the region. Attendant concerns include Chinese farming and the current situation of Chinese and Taiwanese online games operators who have developed an over-reliance on servicing imported

South Korean games. The Chinese government started enforcing protectionist policies in 2004 in order to foster the domestic games development industry, and it is becoming harder for foreign companies to obtain a license for distributing foreign-made online games in China (Embassy, 2004). In this respect, intra-Asian games networks offer a rapidly evolving context for continued study and further critical examination. This is therefore a timely moment in the evolution of these networks to evaluate how Asian MMORPGs have contributed to the virtual hegemony of networked gaming culture in East Asia, and to anticipate the inevitable next generation of Asian-designed persistent world games in the very near future. By the same token, the assumptions implicit in any attempt at analysing online games as a popular cultural form must also continue to be interrogated. As Koichi Iwabuchi notes, 'emerging transnational connections through popular culture are predominantly ones among relatively affluent youth...and among media and cultural industries in urban areas of developed countries' (2004: 19). This is certainly a point worth taking on board but at the same time there are other absences and sites of critical quietism: namely, the poor rural youth who appear to populate gold farms in China have thus far largely gone unnoticed in many international reports and commentaries. Such awareness must temper euphoric accounts of the ascendancy of game networks in East Asia, and their ancillary industries such as the trade in digital game items and currency. To this end, contextual studies that are aimed at analysing topical developments in this dynamic field need to be simultaneously focused on how these networks might be complicit in 'reproducing cultural asymmetry and indifference' (20) in the region.

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**Notes**

[1] While MMORPG subscription figures are useful in providing a snapshot of the estimated number of players on a comparative worldwide basis, it should be acknowledged that East Asian MMORPGs usually rely on peak concurrent user (PCU) and average concurrent user (ACU) statistics because these players typically pay by the hour, rather than monthly.

[back]

[2] The CEO of IGE (a company that deals with the buying and selling of MMORPG currency and items on the Internet) provided this estimate at the State of Play conference in October 2004 and in various media interviews. Nevertheless, there is considerable ongoing debate – and uncertainty – about the actual worldwide volume of real-money trade (RMT). As Edward Castronova (2006), who specialises in the study of online game economies, states: Putting the pieces together, a fair guess as to the size of Asian, US and European [RMT] markets combined, including growth into 2006, would be at least $100 million, more likely closer to $200 million, and quite possibly over $1 billion if industry figures are to be followed.

[back]

[3] Other scholars have coined different terms. For example, Julian Kücklich (2005) uses the term playbour to describe this and other forms of conjunctions between play and work.

[back]

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