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Chronotopes and Social Types in South Korean Digital Gaming

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ABSTRACT

This article examines a South Korean cultural chronotope from the perspective of Korea's world-renowned digital gaming culture, including its professional electronic sports (e-sports) scene and the experiences of amateur gamers in online gaming cafés (*PC bang*). My analysis centers on two of Korean digital gaming culture's recognizable social types and the spatiotemporal qualities of their play: professional gamers and the quickness embodied in their e-sports performances; and a specific kind of amateur *PC bang* gamer who is more socially isolated and whose engagement with games is slow and repetitive. I argue that through their performances in digital games' virtual and actual-world participation frameworks, gamers orient to these social types in ways that differentially construe their relationships to semiotic depictions of places, times, and personhoods. Thinking through these orientations and their spatial, temporal, and social qualities is critical to understanding chronotopic representations of contemporary Korea.

A strong force pulls K's body back as the car accelerates. . . . He feels a little dizzy, but it isn't entirely unpleasant. The world has always moved around him quickly, and right now this [taxi] is his world. Soon he will adapt. The speed of his body will adjust to that of the taxi.

(Kim [1996] 2007, 21)

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He was too used to looking at the world through a lens. . . . The video camera was his shield, a small but safe refuge from the vast unknown. . . . For a split second, C wanted to stay in his world, the world he knew, one he'd reflected on, created, and captured.

(Kim 2007, 97)

This article deals with chronotopes, a concept most readily associated with Mikhail Bakhtin's work on literary genres. Even though my analysis does not focus on literature, the two text-artifacts above feel like appropriate places to begin. Kim Young-ha's *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself* (2007), the novel from which they are taken, presents a morbid portrait of deeply unhappy people living in late twentieth-century Seoul and an anonymous narrator who assists them in committing suicide. When it was first published in 1996, South Korea was less than ten years removed from nearly three decades of authoritarian military rule and at the tail end of the "Miracle on the Han River" (*Han'gang ūi kijök*), a period beginning in the early 1960s during which the Korean economy grew from one of the world's poorest to its eleventh largest (Moon and Rhyu 2000, 77). In this historical context, *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself* and its themes of social disconnection amidst rapid, bewildering societal changes may be read as expressions of more general anxieties and uncertainties in Korea at that time that persist to this day. The epigraphs above concern two of the novel's main characters, "K" and his older brother "C." K, a taxi driver, "revere[s] velocity as his god" (Kim 2007, 103) and is compelled to race his cab on the highways around Seoul. C is a video artist who watches "the world . . . going about its business as usual" (79) as he becomes progressively isolated. Both K's reverence for the "dizzying" yet "not entirely unpleasant" experience of acceleration and C's increasing sense of being withdrawn from the social world are part and parcel of representations of Korea at the turn of the century as a society that was moving quickly and in which social ties were becoming increasingly atomized.

In the following, I examine what Asif Agha has called a "cultural chronotope," a "[depiction] of place-time-and-personhood to which social interactants orient" (2007, 320), which appears in Korean popular culture products like *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself* and is organized around Korea's period of "informatization" (*chöngbohwa*) beginning in the mid-1990s. Building upon the so-called catch-up strategies of economic development during the Miracle on the Han River (Lee and Lim 2001), political and business leaders envisioned informatization as a means of turning Korea into a global leader in information and communications technologies by building the world's most advanced infor-

mation society. I approach this cultural chronotope from the perspective of a surprising yet integral aspect of informatization: Korea's world-renowned digital gaming culture, including the world's first national professional electronic sports (e-sports) scene and the rise of online computer gaming as a wildly popular leisure activity located in the country's tens of thousands of online gaming cafés (*PC bang*). By attending to Korean digital gaming culture's spatiotemporal qualities, I demonstrate how this cultural chronotope organized around informatization has "produce[d] specific kinds of person, actions, meaning, and value" (Blommaert 2015, 109) that inflect everyday social life. The social types exemplified by K and C in Kim Young-ha's novel—defined, respectively, by qualities of quickness and by qualities of social atomization—are both principal characters in Korea's digital gaming ecosystem and its various virtual- and actual-world participation frameworks, albeit at different times and in different places. I want to suggest that these ostensibly divergent social types are complementary figures in chronotopic representations of informatized Korea to which digital gamers, among others, orient via their individual practices and performances.

Bakhtin's description of chronotopes as "the intrinsic interconnectedness of temporal and spatial relationships" (1981, 84) that helps readers interpret novels raised an important point regarding their broader significance for cultural semiotics: as chronotopic representations circulate through media like novels—or digital games—they communicate shared social meanings across times and spaces. Picking up a thread that, as he puts it, "remains elusive" (2007, 322) in Bakhtin's work, Agha notes that "a chronotope is a semiotic representation of time and place peopled by certain social types. . . . It links representations of time to those of locale and personhood. And it is experienced within a participation framework: The act of producing or construing a chronotopic representation itself has a chronotopic organization (of time, place and personhood)" (2007, 321). With respect to how chronotopic representations are produced or construed in Korean digital gaming culture, salient participation frameworks include the virtual worlds of digital games and the actual-world spaces where gaming happens, such as e-sports stadiums and *PC bang*. The spatiotemporal qualities of digital gaming performances within these participation frameworks identify gamers from among "an imaginative sociology of possible lives that inhabit that space-time" (Dick 2010, 277) and in relation to "a scale of spatial and temporal horizons within which some events are understood as meaningfully occurring" (Stasch 2011, 3). Insofar as digital gaming practices are semiotic endeavors in their own right, their temporal qualities connected intrinsically to the spatial contexts where they are practiced, the qualities of gaming performances come to index recogniz-

able social types to which gamers “orient . . . through different frames of participatory engagement, and align their own selves to them to different degrees in semiotic behaviors” (Agha 2007, 326).

My analysis centers on two of Korean digital gaming culture’s recognizable social types and the spatiotemporal qualities of their play: professional gamers and the quickness embodied in their e-sports performances; and a specific kind of amateur *PC bang* gamer who is more socially isolated and whose engagement with games is slow and repetitive. I argue that through their performances in online computer games’ virtual-world environments and the actual-world spaces of *PC bang* and e-sports arenas, digital gamers—like K in his taxi or C behind his camera lens—orient in ways that differentially construe their relationships to depictions of place-time-and-personhood. Thinking through these orientations and their spatial, temporal, and social qualities is critical to understanding chronotopic representations of contemporary, informatized Korean society.

“Late to Industrialize, but Ahead in Informatization”

Korean digital gaming culture’s emergence is entwined with the broader history of Korean informatization. Though its roots stretch back to the “telecommunications revolution” of the 1980s (Oh and Larson 2011, xxiv), the informatization era began in earnest in 1995 when Korea’s National Assembly passed the Framework Act on Informatization Promotion. The Framework Act established the government’s strategy for building the Korea Information Infrastructure (KII) network, a “high-speed and high-capacity ‘information superhighway’” that would “make telecom services universally available to all” through a nationwide system of fiberoptic cables (NCA 1996, 13). The same year that the Framework Act was passed, the newspaper *Chosŏn Ilbo* coined a slogan that would become emblematic of the era: “Late to industrialize, but ahead in informatization” (*Sanŏphwa nŭn nŭjŏtchimhan chŏngbohwa nŭn ap’sŏcha*).¹ This slogan, which several of my interlocutors paraphrased in our conversations, situated Korea in global, historical context according to particular spatiotemporal qualities. To wit, “Dr. Park,” who worked on Korea’s Informatization Promotion Committee as a key policy advisor to the Kim Young-sam administration (1993–98), related this bit of potted history to me: “Korea, Japan, China: we’re competing all together, all the time. China is a really big country, and Japan—in terms of economy and technology—was higher than Korea. But Korean people under-

1. See http://news.chosun.com/svc/content_view/content_view.html?contid=1995030570106. The *Chosŏn Ilbo*’s characterization of Korea as “late to industrialize” is also consistent with political economy discourses on “late industrializing” economies in East Asia associated with Alice Amsden’s work (1989).

stand that in terms of history they had been ahead of Korea only for less than one hundred years. So, today Japan is richer than Korea, but Korean people think ‘We were always ahead of you; still, we can do that.’ We think that we were late in industrialization, but we can be ahead of Japan in information.”² Dr. Park’s narrative was consistent with chronotopic representations of Korea at the turn of the century: Though Korea was understood to have lagged behind its East Asian peers in terms of industrialization, informatization was the aspirational centerpiece of policies designed to accelerate Korea’s level of technological development in order to surpass them and become the most advanced information society in the world. Informatization was ultimately a success in many respects. Korea is now home to the world’s fastest average Internet connections and boasts a 98 percent adoption rate for four megabit per second broadband services, tied for the widest level of coverage in the world (Akamai 2017, 12–14). The speed of Korean Internet contributes to a felt aesthetic of qualitative acceleration that contrasts with other spatiotemporal contexts; for instance, a Korean man in his early twenties who had spent several months in 2010 living with family in Connecticut told me that he had been surprised and frustrated by how slow the Internet connections in the United States were, asking me, “How can you live like that?”

The technological capacities of the KII and the telecommunications networks that succeeded it were the conditions of possibility for digital gaming to flourish in Korea. At the same time, the popularization of digital gaming played a significant role in driving informatization’s development; a 2003 study conducted by the United Nations’ International Telecommunications Union found that “the impetus for growth [of Korean broadband Internet] was greater speed in handling online games,” leading some experts to conclude that “the success of the South Korean broadband market may largely be due to broadband-specific applications, such as online games” (Lau et al. 2005, 356; see also Jin 2005). Digital gaming culture also benefited from the Kim Dae-jung administration’s policies (1998–2003), which encouraged venture capital investment in Korea’s nascent software industry, including a number of game development startups, and provided game companies with access to government subsidies (Jin and Chee 2008, 46). Game developers grew alongside the appearance of *PC bang*, whose number exploded from roughly 100 in 1997 to more than 13,000 within just two years (Aizu 2002, 14). While *PC bang* initially provided 24/7 access to computers and high-speed, low-cost Internet access at a time when broadband subscription services were pro-

2. Personal interview, October 22, 2012.

hibitively expensive for many Korean households, they soon became known primarily as popular leisure spaces where customers came to play the latest online games. Digital gaming culture's development was not only an index of the new technological capacities that informatization afforded but also a conspicuous assemblage of practices and participation frameworks that complemented chronotopic representations of Korean society as fast moving and futuristic. In assessing the state of Korean Internet at the turn of the century, Korea's official information technology policy agency celebrated the role that *PC bang* and digital games had played in informatization's "rapid growth" since the mid-1990s (NCA 2000, 2).

The release of *StarCraft*, a sci-fi-themed online strategy game developed by California-based Blizzard Entertainment, in 1998 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 Korea seemingly overnight. Yöng-gi, a man in his early thirties who was in high school when the game was released, told me that, at the time, boys in his class who did not know how to play *StarCraft* were labeled "losers" by their peers; he and other male gamers with whom I spoke estimated that most Korean men who came of age in the late 1990s and early 2000s had played the game at least once in their lives. *StarCraft* became so synonymous with Korea's information society that one of Internet service provider Hanaro Telecom's early print advertisements invoked both it and *PC bang* in a pitch to parents: subscribe to Hanaro's household broadband service and you will not need to worry about your children playing *StarCraft* at a *PC bang* all day long (Oh and Larson 2011, 81).

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 (MCST). In October 2000, the MCST and Samsung partnered to host the first World Cyber Games, a global e-sports competition modeled after the Olympics. In a prerecorded segment at the opening ceremony in Seoul, Kim Dae-jung addressed the crowd: "I hope that the first [World Cyber Games] will help our nation to become recognized as one of the leaders in games, knowledge industry, and IT infrastructure, as well as help the world's game-loving young people exchange information and build friendships" (quoted in Stewart 2004, 9 n. 3). Kim's statement was a clear endorsement of digital gaming—and e-sports in particular—as being at the center of Korean aspirations to be "ahead in informatization."

Ppalli Ppalli Munhwa

Hanaro Telecom's 2008 television commercial³ for its "Hanafos" high-speed broadband Internet service is a prime example of the cultural chronotope organized around informatization. The scenes shift rapidly: a woman jumps into a taxi's backseat and tells the driver, "Ajössi, ppalli kachuseyo!" (Sir, please hurry!); teenage girls' fingers swiftly move across keypads as they text with their mobile phones; office workers furiously click mice and tap on keyboards; and a group of Korean diners at a restaurant slurp the last remaining soup from their bowls as their non-Korean companion has only begun taking spoonfuls from his. The accompanying vocal track, sung to the tune of Rossini's William Tell Overture, repeats, "Ppalli ppalli, tō ppalli" (Quickly, quickly, quicker), as the song's tempo hastens to keep pace with the images running fast-forward. Finally, text appears against a time-lapse video of traffic in downtown Seoul: "Ppalli ppalli hankukinüi ch'ogosok intōnetün?"—roughly, "What's the high-speed Internet for Koreans on the go?" Park Jun-kyu, a well-known Korean actor, appears with the answer: Hanafos's 100 megabits per second service. The thirty-second-long spot weaves indexes of informatization—mobile telecommunications, knowledge workers, and high-speed Internet—together with iconic qualities of quickness and acceleration, normalizing their relationship in chronotopic representations of a high-tech, fast-paced social world to which everyone must adapt or, like the non-Korean diner with his bowl still full of soup, risk being left behind.

Hanaro's commercial draws upon the familiar colloquial expression "ppalli ppalli munhwa." *Ppalli* is the Korean word for "quickly," while *munhwa* means "culture"; it is commonly translated as "chop chop culture," thereby retaining some of the Korean phrase's alliteration. The popular use of "ppalli ppalli munhwa" predates the informatization era, having emerged in the 1960s at the advent of the Miracle on the Han River as a way to convey a sense that "Koreans are restless for fast growth" (Lee 2003, 13) and to capture the affective experience of societal transformations in that period. As Nicholas Harkness argues, the "ppalli ppalli" of "ppalli ppalli munhwa" is not simply a descriptive term, but also "a directive to do things rapidly" (2014, 228), adding that while "[ppalli ppalli] was commonly heard during the decades of Korea's swift modernization, when everyone's sense was that there was no time to lose," by the 2000s, "like a voice fatigued by too much pushing, many Koreans [felt] a general sense of exhaustion from decades of striving" (228). June J. H. Lee notes that "this pathological obsession with speed was diagnosed as 'the Korean dis-

3. See <https://blog.naver.com/paranzui/50028829150>.

ease’” and that at the turn of the century, Korean popular culture was awash with “[signs] of the exhaustion of Korea’s modernization project” (2002, 56). In a lament that echoes K’s experience in his taxi in *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself*, one of Lee’s interlocutors recalled, “With all these dizzying changes, we were busy just keeping up with the world out there” (72).

During my fieldwork, I heard “ppalli ppalli munhwa” invoked jokingly whenever a restaurateur hurried us out the door to make way for customers during a lunch rush, or to explain why commuters pushed past one another to hustle down the escalators in the metro station only to wait on the platform for their trains to arrive. In these instances, “ppalli ppalli munhwa” signified a socio-temporal expectation to do more with less time, a source of personal anxiety and frustration that expressed a fear “of falling behind the people closest to them” (Rhie 2002, 128). Crucially, responsibility for catching up and keeping pace as well as blame for falling behind lies with individuals, who are left to fend for themselves, so to speak. One of my older interlocutors, a man who had lived through both the Miracle on the Han River and informatization, summarized this combination of quickness and social atomization in his definition of the phrase, telling me, “In the rapidly changing society, [people] cannot wait for the final pleasure. Ppalli ppalli munhwa: If you need help, I can help you, but if you don’t want it, I am very busy. You can just go your own way.”⁴ “Ppalli ppalli munhwa,” then, articulates a social world where moving quickly is imperative, yet also, like for C behind his camera lens, where individuals are disconnected from those around them and can either work to catch up or become increasingly withdrawn.

Insofar as it expresses a chronotopic representation of informatized Korean society, “ppalli ppalli munhwa” also inflects digital gaming culture, its spatio-temporal qualities, and the social types associated with it. As Brett Hutchins argues, “the culture of digital games and gaming is characterized by ‘speed and acceleration’” (2008, 854). This is true not only of the high-speed telecommunications technologies that make online gaming possible but also of the affective and embodied experiences of play itself. Many digital games—though certainly not all—are temporal contests waged among players and/or between player and machine. Such games reward quickness of play, as gamers find success outmaneuvering human and computer adversaries alike by simply being faster than their opponents. In the context of professional *StarCraft*, quickness is a skill that e-sports stars actively cultivate in order to participate at the high-

4. Personal interview, October 8, 2012.

est levels of competition, as well as a quality of e-sports performances that attracts and excites fans.

At the same time, other digital game genres, specifically massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), require players to perform sustained periods of repetitive activity in order to advance through the game, thereby extending the time of play at tempos that are comparatively slower than in professional e-sports. What is more, gamers typically perform these activities alone, withdrawn from their online and offline social networks. Discourses on digital gaming and online-mediated socialities more generally have often exaggerated the extent to which these participation frameworks disconnect individuals from others (cf. Turkle 2011), leading to caricatures of antisocial gamers that have circulated historically in news media and pop culture. There is ample evidence to support counternarratives about how online gaming especially can be a vehicle for rich social interaction (Chen 2009; Pearce 2009; Schiano et al. 2014; Shen 2014). However, digital gaming practices are rarely either wholly social or completely antisocial but, rather, oscillate between these two poles depending on context. For some Korean MMORPG gamers, playing alone is a salient quality of their digital gaming performances.

In Korean digital gaming culture, quickness and social atomization as qualities of gaming performance are projected onto different social types, one represented by the figures and bodies of professional *StarCraft* players and other e-sports stars, and the other by particular sorts of amateur online gamers and their relative social isolation. The next two sections describe these two social types in their respective ethnographic milieux. Their seemingly incommensurable depictions of place-time-and-personhood with respect to Korean digital gaming culture are, rather, complementary aspects of being and acting in the cultural chronotope organized around informatization.

Fast Hands, Fast Minds

Korean e-sports trace their origins to the informal tournaments that *PC bang* managers organized among their patrons following *StarCraft*'s arrival in 1998. Customers flocked to gaming cafés not only to play games but also to watch *PC bang* regulars go head-to-head, which demonstrated digital gaming's value proposition as a spectator sport. Korea's first professional e-sports league was founded in December 1998, and a cable television channel began broadcasting its matches three months later. The first pro-gamers were heralded as "important components of Korea's digital economy and culture-driven Korean society" (Jin 2010, 82), with superstars known as *bonjwa* appearing in advertisements for Internet service providers and media companies in the 2000s. As the popularity of

e-sports grew, pro-gamers achieved fame beyond the community of so-called game maniacs (*keim maeniak*) in *PC bang*. For example, in 1999 pro-gamer Lee Ki-sök was named Minister of Defense in a television station's poll to determine the "Super Millennium Cabinet," and in 2003 the Korean executive branch named *StarCraft* champions Lim Yo-hwan and Sö Chi-su official "cultural celebrities" in its annual report on the culture industry (KeSPA 2008). A survey of elementary school students in the mid-2000s found that "professional gamer," which was designated as an official job category in 2000, was the most sought-after career among boys in that age cohort (Jin 2010, 88). The professional e-sports scene, then, reflected Korea's aspirations to "lead in informatization," and "pro-gamer" became one example of a recognizable social type in chronotopic representations organized around informatization: individuals whose mastery of games indexed a technological proficiency that was in no small part due to the embodied quickness of their gaming practices.

While e-sports, Korean and otherwise, encompass dozens of game titles besides *StarCraft*, the incomparable popularity that this real-time strategy game found in turn-of-the-century Korea was the driving force behind e-sports becoming part of the pop cultural mainstream. Of the estimated 9.5 million copies of the game that were sold worldwide between 1998 and 2008, Korea alone accounted for 4.5 million, 70–80 percent of which were purchased by *PC bang*. At its apex in the mid-2000s, the professional Korean *StarCraft* league finals attracted an estimated crowd of 100,000, with thousands more watching the live broadcast at home (KeSPA 2008, 54). Although *StarCraft*'s⁵ popularity has ceded ground to newer e-sports like *League of Legends* in recent years, ordinary league matches still drew upward of 100 spectators while I was doing fieldwork, and the finals that I attended had an audience of over 1,000. Rapid-fire play-by-play from commentators in stadiums and on television broadcasts (known as "shoutcasters" in the e-sports community) and enthusiastic cheers from the crowd during tense engagements punctuated each match, while the flashing lights and fast-paced music in the video introductions before each set further added to an atmosphere of excitement; at one particular e-sports arena, I could even hear the steady stream of frantic keystroke and mouse click sounds coming from the players' competition booths if I sat close enough to the action.

5. Premier-level *StarCraft* competitions in Korea ended in 2012 as the leagues and players transitioned to *StarCraft II*, the sequel to the original game. Though the two games are thematically similar, their mechanics and strategy differ so greatly that fans and players consider them to be separate e-sports. *StarCraft II* has not achieved the same level of popularity as its predecessor for a variety of reasons that are beyond the scope of this article. I use the term *StarCraft* in reference to both of the game's iterations throughout this article for simplicity's sake.

Professional *StarCraft* events' aesthetic elements and their dromological qualities complement how the game itself aligns with chronotopic representations of Korea's information society. As Chin-su—a liaison between *StarCraft* teams and the Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA), the sport's governing body—told me, “Our *kukminsöng* [national character] is very similar to *StarCraft*. Koreans are very fast, very intelligent, and want to talk with others.”⁶ In this way, Chin-su and other e-sports fans with whom I spoke naturalized a connection between *StarCraft* and an essentialized “Koreanness” that was informed by qualities of quickness and acceleration.

One way of evaluating quickness in e-sports performances is by means of a statistical metric known as actions per minute, or APM (*pundanghaengdongsu*). During a break in the action at a professional *StarCraft* match in February 2013, Wolf Schröder, the English-language shoutcaster for the event's online livestream, reflected on the competitors' bodily skill sets and how they translated into e-sports performance. He noted that both players were renowned for having high APM rates, a calculation of the number of in-game commands that a player issues via mouse clicks and keystrokes in the span of one minute. Though APM is a measure of manual dexterity, Schröder was quick to point out that a *StarCraft* professional's chances of success did not depend solely on physical quickness but also demanded rigorous attention to strategy and situational play. “APM is not about fast hands, actually,” he remarked. “It's about a fast mind.”

APM is by no means a perfect index of e-sports performance, let alone skill; there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between keystrokes or mouse clicks and in-game commands, and further, players can artificially inflate their APM rates by issuing the same command over and over again, a practice known as “spamming.” Despite these shortcomings, APM is a relatively reliable indicator of excellence, and Schröder's commentary offers a clear example of how quickness is valorized in professional *StarCraft*'s participation frameworks. While fast APM alone does not make or break a *StarCraft* pro-gamer's chances of success in a given match, players with low APM rates find it virtually impossible to win against the highest levels of competition. Korean pro-gamers can typically sustain average APM rates of 300 and above over the course of a match, and several *StarCraft* fans told me that players who could not pass the 300-level threshold could not realistically hope to remain competitive in the top echelons of the sport.

As they work to raise their APM rates, pro-gamers must adjust the speed of their fingers, hands, and minds to *StarCraft*'s virtual-world temporalities, a

6. Personal interview, March 22, 2013.

process that entails aligning their performances with the game's hardware and software interfaces. Every *StarCraft* pro-gamer uses a mechanical keyboard with spring-activated key switches, which are more antiquated than the membrane keyboards found on most contemporary PC and laptop computers but also less likely to jam or stick. Given the speed at which professional *StarCraft* is played, this added layer of reliability is essential, as even a single errant keystroke can sometimes be the difference between winning and losing. Pro-gamers carry their own keyboards with them to and from their matches, much like a professional baseball player has a preferred glove or bat. Further, since their concentration must remain fixed on the match as it unfolds on their computer monitors, pro-gamers have devised ways of modifying their keyboards, for example, removing keys that they never use, swapping in different color caps for the keys that they frequently use, and affixing textured stickers or scoring the surfaces of certain keys, so as to improve the quickness and seamlessness of their performances.

However, as Schröder indicated in his comments, quickness in *StarCraft* performances is not simply a matter of striking keys and clicking mice; players must also be able to organize their strategies such that their in-game movements are efficient within the bounds of the game's preprogrammed temporalities. As several fans told me time and again, "*StarCraft* is all about timing." Not every command that a player issues is executed immediately in the game's virtual world, but rather is delayed for a predetermined length of time. These delays include "build times," the duration between ordering a unit to be built and the point at which it is ready for use, and "cooldowns," periods when certain actions like attacks and special abilities are unavailable. Specific build times and cooldowns vary according to individual units and abilities. Players do not formally measure these tempos but rather through practice develop an intuitive sense of *StarCraft* timing that aligns their performances across virtual- and actual-world participation frameworks. What is more, at the time when I was doing fieldwork,⁷ *StarCraft* was programmed such that it could be played at five different speeds, each of which had progressively accelerated build times, cooldowns, and unit movements while maintaining the same balance among their tempos. This provision in the game's design afforded an added challenge to more skilled players while allowing novices to improve their gameplay on the slower settings. Professional *StarCraft* was played at the fastest tempo—exactly 1.38 times "normal"

7. This distinction ceased to be significant for competitions beginning in 2015, after I had left the field. I mention it here as an additional example of *StarCraft*'s temporal iconicity vis-à-vis the cultural chronotope organized around informatization.

speed—meaning that pro-gamers had to adjust their APM rates to an accelerated pace of play.

Cultivating a high APM rate and learning how to adjust embodied performance to *StarCraft*'s internal tempos are accomplished through repetitive drilling over the course of long, intensive practice sessions. The majority of Korean *StarCraft* professionals belong to teams that are sponsored by large media and/or telecommunications companies who provide their teams with dormitory-style apartments where pro-gamers live, eat, and train together. Practices last around ten hours per day on average, consisting of finger exercises for maintaining flexibility and dexterity, drilling with teammates, and physical workouts like running or playing soccer. One retired *StarCraft* pro-gamer told me that ten hours of daily practice was the bare minimum that players needed to simply maintain their physical conditioning and familiarity with current strategies and counter-strategies; anything less, and a gamer would fall so far behind professional *StarCraft*'s pace that they would find it exceedingly difficult to catch up again.

The physical and mental quickness that pro-gamers develop have value in Korea's information society beyond what APM rates measure. In actual-world participation frameworks outside of e-sports, pro-gamers are marked by their perceived mastery of information and communications technologies' tools and tempos. In explaining why his company saw value in sponsoring a *StarCraft* team, Yun Min-sung, a former marketing director for SK Teletech, drew a parallel between "pro-gamer" and how sports have been connected historically to labor organization in society: "Back in the past when hunting was the main source of daily bread-winning, physical abilities were the core values and the sports which [were] suitable to it had the most value. . . . In the information age, values like gaming abilities, which obtain and process a large amount of information within a short period, would be the alternative values for sports" (quoted in KeSPA 2008, 64). Yun's folk theory construes pro-gaming in accordance with chronotopic representations of informatized Korea, projecting the same quality of quickness that is indispensable for e-sports performances onto a general social type that is well-attuned to high-tech, high-speed Korea's spatiotemporality.

Extending Play Ad Infinitum

Playing games at *PC bang* contrasts sharply with the experience of being at a professional *StarCraft* competition and the frenetic pace of Korean e-sports. Besides the clicking of mice, the clacking of keyboards, and the digitized sounds of gunfire and sword battles, *PC bang* are quiet places, especially during daytime hours. Most customers remain seated at their individual stations for the

duration of their stay, motionless except for their hands and fingers as they play their preferred online computer games. *PC bang*'s "sensory atmospheric" (Schüll 2012)—low interior lighting schemes, covered windows, and climate-controlled temperatures—contribute to a sense of being separated from the hustle and bustle of "ppalli ppalli munhwa" in the world outside. It is easy for gamers to lose themselves in a *PC bang* and to experience a distorted sense of time passing more slowly; for example, once at the end of an eight-hour-long gaming session, Bong-hyön, an avid gamer in his mid-thirties and my guide to *PC bang* and online games, remarked to me as we exited the café that he was surprised that it was nighttime already, thinking that we had only spent a few hours inside.

PC bang spatiotemporality correlates with chronotopic representations of digital gaming social types as well. Once celebrated as indexes of Korea's high-tech, sophisticated information society, *PC bang* are now more readily associated with social decay. For instance, a psychology professor at a Korean university told me that that "good kids" do not go to *PC bang*, construing a relationship between *PC bang* and their customers and qualities of dirtiness and idleness. I heard similar characterizations from some of my gamer interlocutors, like Chi-ün and Mi-jöng, two self-described e-sports "fan girls" (*sonyöpaen*) who told me that although they loved playing games, they never went to *PC bang* because they considered them to be "dirty" places.⁸ These perceptions derive in part from *PC bang*'s spatial aesthetics, but they are also projected onto a specific type of digital gamer, the so-called *PC bang chuktori*, in an interpretive schema that equates the "dirtiness" of *PC bang* and the "slowness" of these spaces in comparison to society at large with a non-normative sociality.

Chuktori—a portmanteau of the verbal phrase *chukch'igo anja itta* (to sit in one place) and the noun particle *-tori*, an antiquated slang term for "guy"—is a pejorative term that refers to someone who spends an inordinate amount of time just "hanging around" a particular place, such as a nightclub, a billiard hall, or, in the case of *PC bang chuktori*, a gaming café. It is a derogatory and moderately offensive label that my interlocutors would only ever apply to

8. One of my former teaching assistants, a Korean woman in her late twenties, told me that *PC bang* are not places where "good girls" typically hang out. Jöng-kyöng, a gamer in her early thirties, told me sheepishly that she was unusual among her female friends because she visited *PC bang* on occasion, although she also said that she disliked the "dirtiness" inside most of them. Their opinions concur with previous research findings that "many women disliked the smoke filled atmosphere and the dirty and dark conditions of some PC-Bangs" (Stewart and Choi 2003, 74). An analysis of *PC bang* gender dynamics and the fact that they are overwhelmingly male-dominated spaces—over 80 percent of the customers I observed during fieldwork were men—is beyond the scope of this article. However, *PC bang* communities' androcentric homosociality is certainly connected to the centrality that cigarette smoking, a highly gendered practice in Korea (see Dredge 1980), had inside of *PC bang* at that time.

themselves in jest but would whisper surreptitiously to each other to describe other *PC bang* customers. Bong-hyŏn explained to me that *chuktori* were easily identifiable by the accumulated stacks of empty paper coffee cups and ashtrays overflowing with cigarette butts on the desks at their stations, telltale signs that they had been seated there for several hours on end. He added that to be considered a “true” *chuktori*, a customer would have to visit the same *PC bang* at least three days in a row and spend the majority of their days there. In more extreme cases, *chuktori* have been known to spend several consecutive days at a *PC bang* without leaving, sometimes even falling asleep at their terminals.⁹

In my observations, nearly half of all customers spent either less than one hour (18 percent) or between one and two hours (27 percent) continuously at a *PC bang*, with an additional 20 percent staying 2–3 hours. Fewer than 1 percent of the customers I observed could be categorized as *chuktori* according to Bong-hyŏn’s criteria, and so their behavioral patterns designated them as well outside the mainstream for Korean digital gamers. Even though many *chuktori* exchanged friendly greetings and sometimes even checked in on each other during trips to and from the bathrooms or instant coffee machine, for the most part they isolated themselves from the rest of the *PC bang*, focused completely on the games they were playing. This pattern, too, distinguished them from other, more casual gamers, who often go to *PC bang* because they are spaces where they can interact and socialize with friends (Chee 2006; Huhh 2008).¹⁰ Instead, *chuktori* sociality could be described more as “alone together,” whereby they “play surrounded by others instead of playing with them” (Ducheneaut et al. 2006, 410), at least in digital gaming culture’s actual-world participation frameworks.

With respect to the qualities of social atomization that are part and parcel of chronotopic representations of informatized Korea, *PC bang* and *chuktori* also align with certain digital gaming performances. One such performance is a slow, repetitive style of play called *nogada* that, like APM, is central to gamers’ sociotemporality. *Nogada* is derived from the Japanese word *dokata* ‘unskilled manual laborer’ and is most often used to reference construction workers and work. Among Korean digital gamers, *nogada* is a slang term that draws an anal-

9. Even more extreme are the cases of *PC bang* customers who have *died* while engaged in multiday-long marathon gaming sessions (e.g., Shin 2005). Though such incidents are exceedingly rare—representing a fraction of a percent of all *PC bang* gamers—the attention given to them in news media reports has contributed to negative characterizations of Korean digital gaming culture.

10. Florence Chee observes that the practice of going to *PC bang* to be among friends is “especially important because [in Korea] entertaining one’s friends is rarely done in the home” (2006, 231) because of space limitations.

ogy between the onerous qualities of construction labor and the tedious, extended periods of time spent killing enemy characters and monsters in the hunting zones of an online game's virtual world that are common features of playing MMORPGs. Moreover, as that analogous relationship is projected from practice onto gamers, *nogada's* temporality complements well *chuktori* sociality. While not all *chuktori* play the types of games that require *nogada*, many of those who I interacted with during fieldwork did.

I learned about *nogada* as a participant observer in *Lineage II*, a popular MMORPG developed by NCSOFT, Korea's third-largest game company. *Lineage II* players "do *nogada*" in order to collect in-game currency that can be used to purchase items, and to earn "experience points," which they need to "level up" their characters, that is, progress through the game's structure in which higher-level characters are more powerful and capable of completing more difficult in-game challenges. The number of experience points that are required to level up increases exponentially with each level and consequently so does the amount of time one spends playing the game. Leveling up was a primary goal for *Lineage II* players because it afforded them participation in activities and areas of the virtual game world that could be accessed only by characters who had reached a certain threshold and in which there were more opportunities for collecting rare game items and interacting with other players. Additionally, characters that had reached level 99, the highest level in the game, and the players who controlled them enjoyed elite status in *Lineage II's* virtual- and actual-world participation frameworks because it indexed not only their expertise and familiarity with the game, but more importantly the dedication of time that was required to do so, that is, doing countless hours of *nogada*. For instance, I was able to raise my *Lineage II* character from level 1 to level 65 in just over twenty hours of total playing time, primarily through completing in-game quests and participating in collaborative activities called raids. However, fully leveling up to 99 took me more than 800 additional hours, much of which was spent doing *nogada*. Because of *nogada's* centrality in their gameplay, non-Korean digital gamers sometimes derisively label Korean MMORPGs like *Lineage II* as "grindfests,"¹¹ an epithet that accentuates the slow, laborious qualities of their play experiences and compares them with what is called "grinding" in other MMORPG contexts (Taylor 2003).

11. This MMORPG.com forum thread started in 2009 is an example of a typical discussion of this sort: <https://forums.mmorpg.com/discussion/236863/korean-grind-mmos>, accessed September 10, 2018.

Within *Lineage II*'s virtual participation framework, *nogada* is one of the structuring tempos of play experiences, measured in the keystrokes needed for a kill, the number of kills needed to level up, and the number of levels needed to reach one's goal. While my interlocutors often described *nogada* as boring because of its slow pace and the fact that it was typically done in isolation from other players, it was also, ironically, the fastest way to level up their characters. Once a player has learned the game's basic commands and keyboard-mouse operations, there is nothing complex about doing *nogada*, just steady repetition and a willingness to spend long periods of monotony alone in *Lineage II*'s virtual hunting grounds, dutifully killing monsters and progressing incrementally toward the next level threshold. Doing *nogada* thus affords a way of extending play ad infinitum for those, like *chuktori*, who want to keep playing uninterrupted, as it can be done any time and for as long as players desire. And since they are open twenty-four hours per day, *PC bang* are ideal sites in digital gaming culture's actual-world participation frameworks for doing *nogada*.

Two *Lineage II* players who I came to know well doing fieldwork in *PC bang* were experts in performing *nogada* and could reasonably be classified as *chuktori* (although they would most likely not appreciate my saying so). The first was the aforementioned Bong-hyön, and the other was a pensioner in his mid-sixties whom Bong-hyön and I affectionately called "Mr. Legend" (*Rejöndü ajössi*). Both men were avid *Lineage II* players for whom *nogada* was a daily routine, albeit for different reasons. Bong-hyön told me that *Lineage II* and the *PC bang* were places where he felt comfortable and relaxed, separated from the constant stress of looking for work and life at home with his parents who were pressuring him to move out and get a job. *Nogada* afforded him the ability to temporarily withdraw into the spaces and times of the *PC bang* and *Lineage II* and to experience a sense of productivity as he worked to level up his game characters. Mr. Legend's presence in the *PC bang* simulated an office worker's routine, as he arrived in the morning, sat down at his regular station, logged into *Lineage II*, and stayed until "clocking out" around 5:00 p.m. His reasons for doing *nogada* were also more obviously instrumental than Bong-hyön's. Mr. Legend sold the items that he collected during his *nogada* sessions to other *Lineage II* players on a gray-market, real-money trading website and used this income to support his presence at the *PC bang*, as well as supplement his pension. Though Bong-hyön, Mr. Legend, and I sat side by side nearly every day, we rarely spoke to each other while we were playing save for asking if anyone wanted another instant coffee or Mr. Legend asking Bong-hyön for another cigarette. Though our bodies were

present in the actual-world space of the *PC bang*, our attention and activities were focused narrowly on *Lineage II*'s virtual-world participation framework.

As with pro-gamers and the quickness that APM measures, the social type to which *PC bang chuktori* belong and the quality of social atomization that inflects both their subjectivity and *nogada*'s performance are projected beyond digital gaming culture in chronotopic representations of personhood in Korea's information society. Gamers like Bong-hyön and, to a lesser extent, Mr. Legend belonged to the legions of *bijönggyujikja* (irregular workers), temporary, daily, and part-time laborers whose number surpassed the portion of Korea's regularly employed workforce in 1999 (Chun 2009, 538). A number of the other *Lineage II* players who I encountered in *PC bang* and could also be lumped among the *chuktori* were employed sporadically in the construction industry, working short-term contracts punctuated by periods of unemployment. Their employment volatility allowed them the temporal flexibility to spend these periods playing games in *PC bang*. Keeping in mind that *nogada* describes both construction work and a style of play in MMORPGs, these particular types of gamer, then, alternated between being engaged in virtual- and actual-world *nogada*.¹² *Chuktori* and *bijönggyujikja* exist at the margins of digital gaming culture and Korea's information-driven economy, respectively, becoming increasingly separated from the breakneck pace of "ppalli ppalli munhwa" and the dominant temporalities of Korean society at large.

Chronotopic Representations and Possibilities for Being and Acting

In the Korean cultural chronotope organized around informatization, quickness and social atomization are pertinent spatiotemporal qualities linked to certain social types to which individuals orient in various participation frameworks. Digital gaming culture is one of the arenas of contemporary Korean social life where these social types and their associated performances are encountered. Critical attention to digital gaming performances as semiotic endeavors, characterized to differing degrees by these spatiotemporal qualities, surfaces chronotopic representations of personhood in informatized Korea that are contrasting yet complementary.

The seemingly divergent social types described above—the pro-gamers defined by the quickness of their e-sports performances, and the *PC bang chuktori* defined by their relative social isolation and solitary style of play—represent two of the ways Korean digital gamers orient to those chronotopic representa-

12. I am indebted to Sunyoung Park for drawing my attention to this relationship.

tions. The quickness of professional *StarCraft* performances and the APM metric that renders those performances quantifiable exist in iconic indexical relation to pro-gamers' physical movements: their lightning-fast manipulation of keyboards and mice. At the same time, pro-gamers themselves are indexical icons of Korea's informatization chronotope, representatives of a social type who excels at the directive of "ppalli ppalli munhwa" to do things rapidly. The slow, repetitive gaming performances known as *nogada* are indexical icons of another social type: the *chuktori* whose relative withdrawal from social life outside of the *PC bang* and the virtual worlds of games like *Lineage II* exemplify qualities of social atomization. Though they are oriented toward different poles, pro-gamers and *chuktori*, along with the spatiotemporal qualities of their gaming practices, are coproduced in chronotopic representations of informatization: If the speed of e-sports performances that APM expresses epitomizes the informatization chronotope's idealized quickness in embodied form, then the slower style of play that *nogada* represents and the disconnection from actual-world sociality that it entails are perhaps inevitable symptoms of informatization's accelerated pace. In short, while pro-gamers are construed as keeping pace with informatization, *chuktori* are falling behind.

Returning to where this article began with Kim Young-ha's *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself*, two additional vignettes capture well the contrasting yet complementary spatiotemporal qualities and related social types emphasized in chronotopic representations of informatized Korea. In the first, as he races his taxi along a stretch of highway just south of Seoul, K observes:

Most of the road between Gwacheon and Uiwang is suspended in the air. Overpasses and trusses support this highway. And the view-blocking, antinoise barrier renders the world below invisible. No one on the ground can see the cars moving, just as the drivers can't see anything below. Low-wattage streetlights are placed only intermittently, so the road is very dark. The headlights shooting out from the front of each car only illuminate the ten meters immediately in front of them. At these speeds, that distance disappears in less than one second—each car racing through the darkness as fast as possible, dashing forward like racehorses with blinders on both sides of their eyes.

(Kim 2007, 21–22).

In the second, C enjoys a moment of silent introspection as he waits for a colleague to meet him at a coffeeshop: "He cherished the time he spent waiting for someone to show up. During that time, he wasn't obligated to do anything.

He could read a book or people watch. This was the only time he didn't suffer from a sense of debt to himself. He was free from the compulsion to be productive" (82). Both characters' experiences are analogous to digital gamers' semiotic orientations vis-à-vis chronotopic representations of informatized Korea. Moreover, they demonstrate how the spatiotemporal qualities of quickness and social atomization converge and diverge at different times and in different contexts: K's embrace of faster and faster speeds leads, ultimately, to a point at which the surrounding social world falls away and the "[taxi] is his world," while C arrives at a similar point of social disconnection by acquiescing to the slowness and stillness of waiting alone "in his world, the world he knew." Projecting their stories onto digital gaming culture's social types, are the experiences of pro-gamers and *PC bang chuktori* really so different after all? Or, in the final analysis, do they simply embody two possibilities for being and acting as represented in the informatization chronotope?

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