The Dynamics of Digital Play in Asia

Introduction to the Third Special Issue of Asiascape: Digital Asia

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Introduction: Asian Video Games

Digital gaming is one of the most popular pastimes when it comes to digital media usage, and it often outranks other digital activities, such as reading online news, searching for information, listening to music, or streaming movies. While watching television programmes and films is still among the most popular cultural activities around the world, digital gaming has progressively become one of the most dynamic digital cultures, particularly for youths. This is certainly the case across Asia, where digital games, encompassing console, handheld, online, mobile, and PC games, are a crucial sector of the cultural industries and youth culture, though often in diverse ways.1 Aphra Kerr pointed out in 2006 that ‘digital games are an intrinsic part of contemporary global flows of cultural goods, services and images in Western societies’ (Kerr 2006: 1). Ten years later, this flow has taken on a new guise, and the rapid growth of digital technologies and digital games in Asia has shifted the locus of game innovation and practice. In the early twenty-first century, Asia has gained the global attention of the game industry.

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1 A number of different terms are in use today to describe gaming activities, such as digital games, computer games, video games, and interactive games (see Wolf 2001; Kline et al. 2003; Kerr 2006; Jin 2010). In this special issue, the contributors use the terms ‘digital games’ and ‘video games’ interchangeably to refer to the entire field and to embrace arcade, PC, console, handheld, mobile (or smart), and social games in all their diversity (originally, the term digital gaming did not include arcade games, an early form of video gaming).
The vast popularity of digital games in Asia is closely related to the widespread proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which have facilitated communication and interaction at an unprecedented level in Asia (Hjorth 2008). As a region, ‘Asia is marked by diverse penetration rates of gaming, mobile and broadband technologies, which are subject to local cultural and socio-economic nuances. This makes Asia a compelling case study for both gaming and mobile technologies’ (Hjorth 2007: 369). In particular, Japan, Korea, and China are the three major players in Asia’s digital game industry. In this regard, on the one hand, Hjorth (2007, 2008, 2011) argues that Japan and Korea – based on the differing technological, economic, political, social, and cultural contexts – have developed their digital game industries in two opposing directions, representing two futures for gaming. First, as two opposing global mobile and gaming centres, Seoul and Tokyo provide two very different potential paths for gaming and mobiles. Unlike Japan, which pioneered the keitai (mobile) IT revolution, Korea has become a centre for MMOGs (massively multiplayer online games) played primarily in the social spaces of internet cafes, the so-called ‘PC bangs’ (Hjorth 2007: 370). Second, Japan has been the pioneer in mobile (privatized) convergent devices and thus mobile gaming, while Korea’s emphasis on online MMOGs has been driven by the increase in broadband subscribers (ibid.: 2007; Jin 2010; Fung & Ho 2015).

On the other hand, Cao and Downing (2008) propose that Korea and China serve as the two central towers of gaming in Asia, as China is gaining increasing importance in the Asian gaming scene. Therefore, Hjorth (2008) considers these three major players, namely Japan, Korea, and China, to provide a ‘three-stage gaming paradigm’ in which she suggests that economic, cultural, and ideological weights have been shifting from Japan as the ‘geo-imaginary center’ to Korea during the rise of the Korean wave,2 and that these trends are today shifting further to burgeoning China (cf. also Fung & Ho 2015).

Indeed, scholarly attention once focused primarily on the new media technologies centre of Japan. Since the 1970s, Japan has led the way in the global rise of personal technologies, from the worldwide uptake of the Sony Walkman to the innovation of DoCoMo i-mode, which became known as the ‘mobile IT revolution’ due to its ability to create convergence between mobile telephony and the internet (cf. Hjorth 2008: 3). At the same time, Japanese enterprises started to develop console systems and games, which are some of the most advanced in the world, although the Japanese industry has not been able to

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2 The ‘Korean wave’ refers to the sudden growth of Korean cultural industries and the exports of Korean cultural products, such as films, television programmes, music, and video games in Asia, starting in the late 1990s (see Kim & Kim 2011).