The Production of Machinic Subjectivity in Online PC Games

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the production of machinic subjectivity in Korean online PC gaming culture by applying Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "machine" and Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's framework. It examines PCs as technical machines, PC Bangs as cultural spaces, and the subjectivities shaped through in-game interactions and community practices across four dimensions: technical, corporate, biopolitical, and war machine.

The study investigates PCs' cultural and social significance, corporate mechanisms of control, the biopolitical processes that routinize user behavior, and the potential of collective actions like truck protests and "lying flat" as war machines. By focusing on the relationship between technological machines and subjectivity, this paper contributes to critical game studies by offering insights into how gaming cultures produce, regulate, and challenge dominant subjectivities.

Keywords

online game, machinic subjectivity, PC bangs, machinic enslavement, immaterial labor

INTRODUCTION

Online gaming has emerged as a significant component of contemporary leisure activities. Its scope and influence have steadily expanded over time. The gaming experience for online game users is organized in a machine-mediated format. Unlike North America, where video games on consoles are the mainstream, online gaming on PC(personal computer)s and internet access is popular in East Asia. The prominence of PC gaming and e-sports, particularly in South Korea and China, represents a defining characteristic of PC-based gaming culture (Yoon, 2011).

The spread of gaming culture in South Korea can be traced back to the emergence of 'PC Bangs' in the 1990s and the popularity of the PC game *StarCraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 1998) (Yoon, 2001). PC Bangs are a core element of Korean gaming culture. While they share some similarities with the internet cafes found in other countries, they are distinct cultural spaces characterized by a much higher density of computers and an emphasized role as entertainment venues, achieved by also providing drinks and food. In particular, gaming as a cultural phenomenon began to gain prominence when *StarCraft* became a peer culture for adolescent males and PC

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Bangs became widely available as a place to play the game together. Online communities emerged among users to share tips on how to play the game skillfully, and a spectator culture of learning gaming skills by watching highly skilled gamers was established.

Gaming devices and practices are increasingly intertwined with other media, such as film and music, forming a complex nexus of technological, cultural, and commercial interactions. In this regard, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) propose to analyze games through the theoretical framework of 'empire'. Empire refers to the overarching system of global capitalism and its mechanisms of control and governance. The reason for this analysis is that games have become more than just a medium for fun, but a simulation of virtual reality, labor training, and even a tool for governance (Johnson and Woodcock, 2021). In South Korea, gaming is a popular cultural activity, and Korean gaming culture is not only distinguished by its dynamic integration with other media platforms, including live streaming and personal broadcasting, but also by collective and political action centered on gaming communities (Kim, 2022). These dynamics can be understood as processes through which game users construct and negotiate their subjectivities. The act of using online games is the process of producing subjectivity, and the collective actions of game users reveal political and social dynamics beyond individual actions. Therefore, it is necessary to systematically and critically study the production of subjectivity and its processes in the process of using games.

This paper employs Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the 'machine' to analyze the way Korean online PC game users produce subjectivities and analyzes the production process of mainstream game user subjectivities that are constructed through the act of gaming.

This research focuses on how users connected to machines and networks through the act of gaming are constituted through machinic processes. Games function as instruments of empire, and game users are not merely participants in gaming media but are integrated as machinic assemblages within the broader system. In capitalist societies, media is integrated into the broader system of production, and games as media efficiently incorporate their users. In this context, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) view the gaming behavior of console game users in the United States as an organic mechanical system that facilitates the mechanisms of imperial production. Physical and mental engagement with games by accessing a technological machine called a console can be understood as a hybrid human-machine artifact. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter subdivided these machinic subjects into technological machines, corporate machines, war machines, and biopolitical machines. In their book, *Games of Empire* (2009), Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter present an approach to gaming culture that conceptualizes players and the human-machine artifacts they constitute as parts within a broader mechanical system. Their methods have been applied to gaming cultures in Canada and Europe (Dyer-Witheford & Sharman, 2005; Ruffino & Woodcock, 2021). As an extension of this, *Games of Empire* offers a theoretical and methodological framework adaptable not only to console gaming culture in North America, but also to PC gaming culture in Korea.

Adopting the approach of Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009), this study aims to analyze and discuss the implications of Korean PC game user subjectivities as machinic subjectivities produced through the interplay of social subjection and machinic enslavement. *Lost Ark*, a prominent Korean online game, has served as a critical

platform for collective user activities since 2021, making it central to this study. The machinic subjectivities of Korean PC game players are analyzed through the lenses of technological machines, corporate machines, biopolitical machines, and war machines, and in the process, the study examined how Korean game players operate as imperial machines and explores the lines of flight and multitude's potential for resistance and reconfiguration. The research questions are as follows.

RQ1. How does the PC, as a "technological machine," shape Korean online gaming culture?

RQ2. In what ways has the PC been utilized as a "corporate machine" in the competitive landscape of Korean game companies, and how have these companies identified and reproduced dominant subjectivities through this process?

RQ3. What mechanisms enable users of mainstream MMORPGs in Korea to engage in the production of social machines as "biopolitical machines"?

RQ4. What forms of collective movements arise within Korean online game culture, and to what extent can they be conceptualized as a "war machine" that manifests lines of flight and multitudinous practices?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Formation of Machinic Subjectivities

The concept of the 'subject' is continuously produced and reproduced. Deleuze and Guattari (1980) conceptualize the subject as a "machine" that perpetually produces itself. Subjectivity is not static but is instead constantly in flux, undergoing simultaneous processes of deconstruction and reconstruction. In this process, the 'I' is continuously dismantled and reassembled, with desires emerging as an inherent part of this production. The revolutionary potential of the subject lies in the connections and configurations of these desires. Deleuze and Guattari define subjectivity as machinic, emphasizing that its most fundamental action is the intertwined act of desiring and producing. Machinic subjectivity, therefore, is not merely production—it is the act of desiring—production itself.

Deleuze and Guattari's "machine" is a subject that always desires and produces, and the subjectivity of the machine is production itself. The machine forms an assemblage. Assemblage refers to the process through which a vast social machine is constructed. It consists of material, machinic assemblages and immaterial, enunciative assemblages. Deleuze views the individual as a dividual—a divisible and fragmented entity integrated into larger systems—that integrates into this assemblage. Individuals, as dividuals, form aggregates, data points, and apparatuses within society (Choi, et al., 2022).

The production of subjectivity consists in "becoming" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). Through the divisive production of becoming, subjects are continually produced as desire machines. Due to what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the schizophrenic production (i.e., a form of production characterized by disjunction and multiplicity) of subjectivity, subjects also have the potential to resist or deviate from the roles and

norms imposed by society. Subjects that divide and reassemble themselves not only project and amplify the production of desire in society, but also act as agents of social transformation (Choi, 2019). Their collective actions hold revolutionary potential. A subjectivity that is constantly produced implies a dynamic interplay of political and social forces. Building upon these ideas, this study examines the applications of Deleuze and Guattari's theories of subjectivity for contemporary machinic arrangements in online gaming culture.

Social Subjection and Machinic Enslavement

Italian autonomist theorist Lazzarato (2014) argues that the production of subjectivity in cognitive capitalist society operates through two interrelated mechanisms, through the apparatuses of social subjection and machinic enslavement.

Social subjection refers to the process by which individualized subjects are formed through identities such as gender, body, class, and ethnicity. These individualized subjects enter the social division of labor, forming consciousness, representations, and actions. Social subjection employs language as a medium to generate meaning and representation, positioning subjects within specific social and gendered roles in the division of labor.

In contrast, machinic enslavement integrates individual into machinic arrangements without the mediation of language or representation. Within machinic enslavement, there is no objectified subject; rather, individuals function as pseudo-subjects or pseudo-objects, operating as divisible pseudoparticles within larger systems, such as financial institutions, media, and the internet. These systems do not establish individuals as "citizens" but incorporate them into machinic networks as components. Machinic enslavement transcends fixed roles for subjects and objects, thereby opening possibilities for exodus from social subjection.

While social subjection produces subjects through external frameworks, machinic enslavement fuses individuals with machines, forming "human-machine" assemblages. Social subjection relies on binary models (e.g., male/female, capitalist/worker) to reinforce conformity, whereas machinic enslavement unfolds as an intrinsic, non-binary process. Despite their differing modalities, Lazzarato contends that subjectivity is produced at the intersection of these two mechanisms. Cognitive capitalist societies, therefore, exert dual control over subjectivity through interplay of subjection and enslavement.

Immaterial Labor and Multitude

Cognitive capitalism is structured around immaterial labor. Immaterial labor refers to the production of non-material outputs such as knowledge, services, communication, and relationships (Hardt & Negri, 2004). Immaterial labor is primarily associated with the production of subjectivity rather than the production of objects because it is affective labor.

To conceptualize the production of subjectivity in immaterial labor, Hardt and Negri (2004) propose the concept of 'multitude' as a framework for understanding revolutionary potential. The globalization of capitalism creates new structures of governance, which Hardt and Negri (2000) define as 'empire'. Empire is the governing entity that underpins the globalized capitalist economic system and exploits social life

throughout it. The antithesis of empire is the "multitude" (Hardt & Negri, 2004). Hardt and Negri view the multitude as a new revolutionary power, identifying transnational connections, cultural hybridity, and new technologies as domains of revolutionary potential for the multitude. This paper uses Hardt and Negri's concepts of immaterial labor, empire, and the multitude to understand the nature of online games and to explore the collective actions of game users as manifestations of multitude practices.

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's Study of Game Culture

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) assert that videogames function as media that both disseminate imperial paradigms and mediate forces of resistance against them. Digital and virtual games are intrinsically tied to the dynamics of labor, as they directly derive from society's core production technologies. Videogames heavily depend on engineering and computational properties, which further solidifies their connection to labor. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter examine the machinic subjectivity produced through the mechanisms of immaterial labor across four dimensions.

First, the game user functions as dividual, integrated with a "technological machine" to constitute a "human-machine" assemblage. The console, serving as the primary interface for gamers in the US, is a device composed of hardware and software specifically designed to run games. According to Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009), game consoles, with their computer-like architecture, were smaller and less expensive than personal computers. These characteristics made them ideal for forming the assemblage of the 'gamer-console-television'. In North America, consoles were predominantly positioned as devices for play, catering primarily to children and teenagers, whereas computers were associated with work and productivity, targeting adult users. Over time, consoles became increasingly powerful and compact, spawning expansive gaming networks and communities of dedicated users. Technological machines, such as consoles, are embedded within broader social machines.

Second, human subjects and technological machines are interconnected to form assemblages, becoming components of a larger system that facilitates the governance of global capitalism under a pyramid-like command-and-control structure. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) emphasize that the "corporate machine" of the console operates as a kind of time machine, absorbing consumers' time while generating revenue through software and virtual goods designed exclusively for specific consoles.

For instance, Microsoft willingly incurred losses on each sale of its console, the Xbox, to rapidly disseminate the device to consumers. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) identify this strategy as the mobilization of a specific "desiring machine" that targeted a demographic they labeled "hardcore"—predominantly young males. This overrepresentation of young males as "hardcore" archetypes in the gaming audience contributed to the reproduction of rigid and stereotypical gender norms within virtual spaces, often exceeding those found in the real-world contexts. Hardcore subjectivity subsequently evolved into the dominant or "mainstream" gamer subjectivity, marginalizing and excluding minority participants in the process.

Third, the act of playing console games constitutes a process of machinic enslavement and immaterial labor. As individuals utilize machines for production, the means of production increasingly fuse with their minds and bodies, effectively transforming into

"biopolitical machines." Hart and Negri describe this integration through the concept of the "cyborg." Engaging with a game involves accessing a network of human-machine interactions, wherein the user becomes an integral part of a larger system's production. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) trace how North American console gamers internalize and routinize war through gameplay and how biopower operates within virtual realities. Games entice users into participation, shaping user behavior in accordance with systemic objectives. Player actions are calculated, manipulated and regulated by the game's mechanisms, which effectively guide user behavior (Shin, 2019). The subjectivity that emerges from this process manifests either in ways that align more closely with imperial structures or in ways that generate new currents and lines of flight. Furthermore, Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter advocate for the emergence of "multitudinous games," emphasizing the potential for a great exodus from these dominant structures.

Finally, the machinic subjectivities produced by capitalism are not perfectly controlled. As Deleuze and Guattari note, the production of schizophrenic subjectivities enables unexpected connections and lines of flight. The uncontrolled elements, referred to as "nomadism," give rise to what they call a "war machine. This war machine encompasses oppositional acts and multitudinous practices. According to Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009), the manifestation of the war machine in North American console gaming culture can be observed in practices such as piracy, hacking, and the emergence of new technological devices.

This paper critically adopts the methodology of Games of Empire, which analyzes North American game culture across four dimensions of machinic subjectivity, and applies it to the context of Korean online PC gaming culture.

METHOD

Research Focus

1. Lost Ark and Game Users

This study analyzes *Lost Ark* (Smilegate RPG 2019), one of South Korea's most popular MMORPGs, along with the gaming experiences of its users. *Lost Ark* is a PC game in the MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game) genre, operated since December 2019 by Smilegate RPG, a South Korean game production company. MMORPGs are the most widely played game genre in South Korea (Korea Creative Content Agency, 2022). In line with this trend, *Lost Ark* primarily targeted a predominantly male audience in their 20s and 30s. Each user interacts with the in-game environment or other players within the boundaries established by the game system. The in-game avatar, either assigned to or chosen by the user, serves as an extension of the player's body. Due to the intersection of these elements, MMORPGs offer more diverse gaming experience compared to other genres.

2. Game Community: Lost Ark Inven

Online games are often accompanied by online communities. While the primary purpose of these communities is information sharing, they also function as hubs for opinion formation and collective action (Choi, 2018).

The *Lost Ark Inven* ("*Inven*"), a major South Korean online game community web portal featuring extensive forums and message boards, is one of the most active communities among *Lost Ark* players. Posts about game-related information and various other topics are frequently shared on *Inven*, including strategies to enhance gameplay. Posts that are deemed valuable or useful by a significant number of players—those receiving 30 or more recommendations through the community's "Recommend" feature—are automatically highlighted on the "30 Recommendation Board."

Research Methods

1. Ethnography

This study employed ethnographic methods to analyze the production of subjectivity in the gaming experiences of *Lost Ark* users, a popular online PC game. Ethnography is particularly suited as a method in game cultural studies, enabling the interpretation of the cultural meanings constructed in gamers' everyday lives.

The ethnographic research was conducted over approximately one year and eight months, from August 2021 to April 2023, focusing on the virtual environment *within Lost Ark* and its associated community, *Inven*. This period was selected for two key reasons. First, the "player refugee crisis" and "mass player migration"—a period where a significant number of players, dissatisfied with existing major game titles, collectively migrated to alternative games like *Lost Ark*—among Korean MMORPG users beginning in March 2021 led to a sharp increase in *Lost Ark*'s player base. Second, interactions between game users, community activities, and live streaming by game content creators peaked during July and August of the same year, driven by Smilegate RPG's marketing campaigns targeting the leisure time of young adults. These factors made this period particularly meaningful for observing the dynamics and processes of subjectivity production among game users.

The first stage of the study focused on conducting ethnography within the in-game environment. The researcher joined a *Lost Ark* guild—a type of in-game community—to analyze the various interactions and collective experiences occurring in the virtual space. Guilds vary in size, ranging from as few as five members to as many as 50. Larger guilds often share schedules for group raids, establish dedicated voice communication channels, and organize offline gatherings known as "Jungmo" (short for "regular meetings" in Korean) (Park, 2007). The guild that the researcher joined consisted of approximately 40 members, with whom the researcher engaged intensively. The researcher primarily observed and documented users' behavior through in-game chat interactions and also participated in the guild's offline gatherings to conduct observations and in-depth interviews. This approach aimed to closely examine both individual and collective experiences of users across online and offline spaces, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the production of machinic subjectivity.

The 8 respondents for the in-depth interviews were recruited from the guild members the researcher interacted with. They were exclusively male, in their 30s, and engaged in various occupations such as full-time workers, graduate students, and job seekers. Geographically, most participants were based in Seoul, a densely populated metropolitan city, with a few residing in Masan, a smaller provincial city, and Busan, a major urban center and port city. Weekly gaming hours varied significantly, ranging

from 30 to over 80 hours. Notably, full-time workers in Seoul and Busan generally reported around 40-50 hours of gaming per week, while a job-seeking participant from Masan reported the highest gaming time, exceeding 80 hours per week.

	Gender	Age Group	Occupation	Residence	Gaming Hours (per week)
User A	Male	30s	Employee	Seoul	50 hours
User B	Male	30s	Employee	Seoul	50 hours
User C	Male	30s	Employee	Seoul	60 hours
User D	Male	30s	Unemployed	Masan	Over 80 hours
User E	Male	30s	Employee	Masan	30 hours
User F	Male	30s	Employee	Busan	50 hours
User G	Male	30s	Employee	Busan	40 hours
User H	Male	30s	Graduate Student	Seoul	30 hours

Table 1: The in-depth interviews were conducted with members of the guild through both individual and group interviews, based on participants' preferences. Interviews took place in Seoul and Masan, focusing on four dimensions: technological machines, corporate machines, biopolitical machines, and war machines.

2. Analysis of Game Community Discourse

This study's analysis of game community discourse centers on three main sections of *Inven*: the *Free Board*, the *30 Recommendation Board* (commonly known as the *30 Chu Board*), and the 23 *Job Boards*. The *Free Board* is the most active board, where users post freely on any topic, making it the hub of community activity. The *30 Chu Board* features posts that have already been vetted and highly recommended by a significant number of community users, attracting intermittent or less active users. The *Job Board* focus on sharing information about 23 character roles available in *Lost Ark*, and they are the second most active space after the *Free Board*.

Unlike other boards dedicated to promotion or suggestions, these three boards are characterized by active interactions among users on both in-game and external topics. This study analyzes the key discourses emerging from these thematic boards and examines them through the lens of subjectivity production. By analyzing discussions on *Inven*, this study explores the intersections of individual and collective identities within the community.

MACHINIC SUBJECTIVITY FOR PLAYERS IN *LOST ARK*

Technological Machines: PCs and PC Bang Culture

1. Personal Computer (PC)

The "technological machine" concept proposed by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) is rooted in Deleuze and Guattari's "social machine" which explains subjectivity production through apparatuses that connect individuals to their fragmented bodies within assemblages. While consoles are emphasized as a central technological machine in North American gaming culture, PCs play a pivotal role in South Korea, both in domestic settings and within the PC Bang culture, shaping gaming practices across age groups. Interviews revealed that most *Lost Ark* players began their first digital gaming experience on a PC. PCs functioned as an extension of the body, facilitating ease of control and granting players power within online game environments. Players actively transformed their PCs into optimized technological machines by purchasing "gaming gadgets" to enhance efficiency and precision.

Given that *Lost Ark* is a PC-exclusive game, participants' engagement occurs entirely on this platform. When discussing their experiences playing *Lost Ark* on their PCs, users highlighted two main aspects of the PC environment they found advantageous for their gameplay: the ergonomic comfort afforded by keyboards and mice for complex game controls, and the stability of wired network connections, which is crucial for a seamless online gaming experience. Keyboards offer a full range of control using both hands, and a reliable internet connection is considered a fundamental requirement for immersive online gaming. PCs are particularly intertwined with South Korea's PC Bang culture, where they serve as intimate technological machines that enhance engagement and foster peer-based gaming communities, especially among youth.

2. PC Bang Culture

PC Bangs are integral to Korean online gaming culture, having rapidly proliferated due to factors such as the popularity of *StarCraft*, the IMF economic crisis, and the widespread adoption of high-speed internet in late 1990s and early 2000s (Yoon, 2001). PC Bangs have served as spaces where marginalized individuals could connect online and as economic alternatives, offering access to high-performance PCs and free gaming services. They are highly popular, with 49.1% of Korean gamers reportedly visiting PC Bangs (Korea Creative Content Agency, 2022). The most frequently cited reason for using PC Bangs was socializing with friends or coworkers, followed by high specification and performance of the computers. These findings highlight both the social functions of PC Bangs within Korean gaming culture and gamers' reliance PCs as technological machines.

According to ethnographic observations, PC Bangs functioned as a refuge from societal stigma surrounding gaming, enabling players to become deeply engrossed in the game and fostering new identities that shaped gaming culture. While PC Bangs have been criticized for atomizing social relationships (Kim, et al., 2001), they also played a central role in Korean gaming culture by providing high-speed internet environments and economic advantages.

PC Bangs also served as social spaces where Korean adolescents would gather to play games with friends after school, and PCs mediating peer interactions and contributing to the early formation of gaming subjectivities. These venues offered both individual and collective gaming experiences, while similar spaces, such as school computer labs, allowed youth to engage with games in a social context and familiarize themselves with PCs as technological machines. This PC-centric culture has firmly established PCs, rather than consoles, as the "technological machine" at the heart of Korean gaming culture.

Corporate Machines: Commoditization and Control

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) analyze the operation of the console gaming industry through the lens of the capitalist machine of production, using Microsoft's Xbox as an illustrative example. The Xbox was sold at a low price to penetrate households and subsequently monetized through a software monopoly. In this process, users are positioned as human-machine assemblages bonded to technological machines, contributing to the production of both material and immaterial value through their labor. This strategy, emblematic of North American console gaming culture, finds a parallel in South Korean online PC gaming culture through the freemium model. In South Korea, online gaming culture is deeply embedded in technological infrastructures such as PC Bangs, where special promotions and events incentivize gaming activities, reinforcing the tendency to equate market share with a game's popularity. Within in the South Korean context, PC Bang market share rankings are widely regarded and publicly function as a primary, highly visible benchmark of a game's overall popularity and current standing. This strong emphasis means that game companies often strategically invest heavily in PC Bang-specific promotions and benefits explicitly designed to boost these rankings. However, this equation becomes problematic because while PC Bang market share is an influential metric, it may not holistically represent player engagement or satisfaction across the entire user base, including those who primarily play from home.

Online games like *Lost Ark* generate surplus value by monopolizing the sale of in-game items, embedding user behavior into the corporate machine's production processes. As social machines, these games promote user interactions and the formation of social relationships, blending communal and gaming activities into a unified mechanism. For example, guild systems or external platforms like Discord facilitate user bonding within the game, which aligns with the game company's pursuit of profit.

Microsoft has created and reinforced a particular subjectivity centered around hardcore gamers (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009). These subjects emphasize gaming proficiency and technical gadget expertise, contributing to the construction of a hyper-masculine and gendered environment. Similarly, *Lost Ark* targeted a predominantly male audience in their 20s and 30s, reinforcing mainstream gaming subjectivities rooted in the sexual objectification of female characters and anti-feminist sentiment. Female characters in *Lost Ark* are gendered according to their class, with sexually exaggerated appearances and movements often inviting ridicule and provoking anti-feminist discourse among users.

Smilegate RPG demonstrated responsiveness to its male-dominated community in addressing anti-feminist controversies. For instance, in the "Megal Finger Sign" controversy—which arose when an in-game hand gesture emoji was perceived by some male users to resemble a symbol associated with '*Megalia*', a South Korean

online feminist community, thereby seen as an anti-male sign—the company swiftly modified the emoji in question, thereby validating the collective action of male users and solidifying a hyper-masculine environment.[1] Moreover, meritocracy and fairness discourses became central marketing strategies in games like *Lost Ark*. By emphasizing skill and effort, the game company assured users of fairness, thereby reaffirming and reinforcing specific mainstream subjectivities.

As a result, South Korea's online PC gaming corporate machine commodifies social relationships grounded in peer culture and technological machines, maximizing profits through a process that reinforces mainstream subjectivities while marginalizing minority subjectivities.

Biopolitical Machines: Mainstream Subjectivity

Biopower and Machinic Enslavement

Michel Foucault's concept of biopower refers to the governance of life and bodies through mechanisms of productivity and regulation (Foucault, 1990). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) extend this concept to the gaming industry, linking it to processes of machinic enslavement. They argue that virtual environments created by game companies regulate user behavior and produce dominant subjectivities. This study examines how *Lost Ark* players are shaped into mainstream gaming subjects through their repetitive in-game actions, analyzed from the perspective of the biopolitical machine. Through biopower, individuals are not only controlled but systematically optimized to maximize productivity, aligning their actions with the economic objectives established by game companies. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) argue that in gaming, machinic enslavement leverages biopower to tether users to systems of repetitive labor, ensuring continuous participation in virtual environments.

Production of Machinic Subjectivities

User subjectivity in games is constructed through divisive and repetitive processes of machinic enslavement. In *Lost Ark*, players engage in prolonged gaming sessions, participating in daily quests, weekly tasks, and cooperative content such as raids. Raids, in particular, require groups of four or eight players who must meticulously coordinate their roles, relying on a well-organized division of labor and collaborative problem-solving to accomplish shared objectives. This process enables players to develop expertise in their role and forge social bonds. These practices exemplify the production of machinic subjectivities, where gaming actions transcend mere recreational play and increasingly resemble forms of labor.

Routinized Training

Lost Ark's daily quests, raids, and weekly missions demand that users engage in repetitive tasks on a daily or weekly basis, effectively establishing a structure of routinized interaction and immersion. These activities ensure that users remain connected to the game while simultaneously producing in-game economic goods that the company exclusively controls. Notably, raids function as a training mechanism, cultivating camaraderie and military-style cooperation among players. This reinforces the cooperative structure of the game and enables users to assess their own and others' gaming skills based on proficiency. Through the process of learning and

sharing efficient strategies, players are gradually shaped into cooperative and mainstream gaming subjects.

Guilds and Social Governance

Guilds play a significant role in strengthening the social fabric of online gaming communities through cooperation and discipline among users. In *Lost Ark*, guilds establish rules and assign roles, extending relationships beyond the game and generating deep emotional engagement, such as a sense of loyalty or belonging. This extends to offline interactions, such as "Jungmo" (offline gatherings), which deepen these social bonds. Guild formation, maintenance, and regulation function as a mechanism for game companies to subtly manage and discipline users, embedding them seamlessly within the corporate governance and control. These dynamics instill a sense of belonging while simultaneously increasing users' deep engagement with the game and deepening their dependency on the game as a social framework.

The Role of Biopolitical Machine Subjects

Players of *Lost Ark* function as biopolitical machine subjects, contributing to the game company's economic interests through repetitive and structured in-game tasks. Players perform daily "homework", a term commonly used by *Lost Ark* players themselves to describe repetitive in-game tasks such as daily quests and dungeons. This terminology, revealed during interviews, reflects the way user perceive these tasks as obligatory rather then recreational. Many players experience psychological pressure driven by the fear of falling behind or facing relative disadvantages compared to other players if they fail to complete these "homework" assignments. This repetitive cycle of tasks and cooperative gameplay ensures sustained user engagement in alignment with the company's objectives, thereby maximizing corporate profits. The production of mainstream subjectivity is not simply an externally imposed structure but emerges through the players' iterative gaming behaviors, which inadvertently reinforce the power structures of the game company.

War Machines: Lines of Flight

Definition and Function of the War Machine

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) conceptualize the war machine as the production and operation of subjectivities that generate unexpected lines of flight within human-machine assemblages. These lines of flight challenge the territorialization of capitalism and corporate machines by introducing new currents, as evidenced in practices such as hacking and piracy. For instance, actions like hackers converting the Xbox operating system to Linux or users sharing games freely among friends represent efforts to break free from the structural confines of machine enslavement. However, these actions often remain embedded within the systems created by corporate machines, demonstrating both their potential for deterritorialization and their limitations.

Collective Action: Truck Protests and "Lying Flat" (드러눕기)

In Korean online gaming culture, collective actions such as truck protests and the practice known as "lying flat" (드러눕기) have emerged as prominent ways for users to express dissatisfaction with game companies. These actions, while impactful within

their contexts, reveal both the possibilities and limitations of user agency in challenging corporate structures.

The “Game Industry Chain Wave” of 2021 began with Fate/Grand Order users and spread across multiple games, marking a significant moment in Korean gaming history(Yim, 2021). Users voluntarily organized and funded truck protests, where vehicles with LED billboards displaying messages of dissatisfaction were stationed in front of game company headquarters. Demands included improved in-game rewards, adjustments to monetization policies, and the restoration of promised content. These protests successfully pressured companies to adjust their management policies and showcased the collective power of mainstream gaming users.

“Lying Flat”, a distinctive form of protest within online communities, involves visually spamming message boards with specific symbols (e.g., ●[redacted]), which are designed to resemble a person lying down. This tactic aims to paralyze community boards and force game companies to address user grievances. Unlike truck protests, this form of protest is entirely virtual, making it low-cost and highly accessible. It reflects the collective power of digital action within gaming communities, allowing even casual users to participate. However, the scope of such actions tends to focus on immediate player concerns, such as in-game balance or monetization, without addressing systemic issues in the broader gaming industry.

번호	제목	글쓴이	등록일	조회	추천
59103	[잡담] ●[redacted]	Ecasas	01-06	485	0
59102	[잡담] ●[redacted]	Ecasas	01-06	307	0
59100	[잡담] ●[redacted]	바도쟈아	01-06	286	0
59099	[잡담] 충모닉 홀나 이슬비 키우는데 [2]	응애뉴비에요	01-06	419	0
59098	[잡담] ●[redacted]	둥실	01-06	254	0
59096	[잡담] ●[redacted]	도우룬	01-06	244	3
59095	[잡담] 같이 다말고 접으실분 모집합니다! [1]	두원더스	01-06	408	0
59094	[잡담] ●[redacted]	Ecasas	01-06	307	3
59093	[잡담] 홀나 해보기는 하는걸까.... [2]	윌리엄스콧	01-06	592	0
59092	[잡담] 난 무력화 하나보고도 오 긋~ 했는데 [10]	도구에진심인	01-06	933	0
59091	[잡담] ●[redacted] ㅋㅋ ~	마사블랙	01-06	220	3
59090	[잡담] ●[redacted] 시즌2 복귀하고 홀나했는데 이제 ...	Jansen	01-06	382	0
59088	[잡담] ●[redacted]	웰치스홍과맛	01-06	217	0
59087	[잡담] 홀나는 왜 쌍직각 안막음? ㅋㅋㅋㅋ	딜도아가	01-06	449	0
59086	[잡담] ●[redacted]	폭풍가이	01-06	268	0
59085	[잡담] 여기말고 로아 버그건의 게시판에 쓰면 되는거? [1]	Majes	01-06	437	0
59084	[잡담] ●[redacted]	홀나별	01-06	216	0
59082	[잡담] 설마 바드는 해주는데 홀나는 안해주는건 상상도 못했네요	하렌기사	01-06	457	1
59081	[잡담] ●[redacted]개 씨발년들 진짜	붉은검	01-06	406	4
59078	[잡담] ●[redacted] 서폿홀나 1년 넘도록 방치 장난하냐	Kaluvelx	01-06	483	0
59077	[잡담] 패치보고 도화가 텀렙올리기로 했습니다. [2]	세드엘프	01-06	513	0
59076	[잡담] ●[redacted]와 진짜 좆같네	알세스	01-06	430	6
59075	[잡담] 이럴줄은 몰랐다ㅠ 율법 피면, 궁극기 아멘개선 해주겠지...	잉글홈든	01-06	318	0
59074	[잡담] ●[redacted] 무능한새끼들	뱀부스틱	01-06	459	0
59071	[잡담] ●[redacted] 전재학은 팀장에서 내려와라	클라드시엘	01-06	303	0

Figure 1: “Lying flat" protest example from the *Holy Knight Job Board* on *Inven*, dated January 6, 2023

Despite their immediate impact, these collective actions primarily reflect the interests of mainstream users, often focusing on their capitalist stakes in the game. They ultimately operate within the boundaries of the corporate machines. Truck protests and lying flat typically advocate for increased rewards or fairer pricing models but

rarely question the commodification of user labor or the exclusion of minority voices within gaming environments. These protests inadvertently perpetuate the capitalist logic of the corporate machine, as user demands align with profit-driven incentives rather than challenging the overarching structure. By doing so, they demonstrate the paradox of user agency: while aiming to resist, their actions ultimately support the very systems they seek to challenge.

Possibilities and Limitations of Exodus

While the potential for exodus among online PC gamers has proven difficult to identify due to the entrenched nature of corporate machines, Korean mobile gaming culture shows distinct trends that diverge from the subjectivities associated with traditional PC gaming. The gender and age demographics of mobile games are significantly more diverse (Korea Creative Content Agency, 2022), suggesting the potential to cultivate new forms of subjectivity. Just as Nintendo's Wii broke down gender and age boundaries, mobile games have the capacity to offer alternatives to dominant gaming subjectivities.

However, the corporate machine persistently works to re-territorialize and commodify these emergent flows, limiting the possibilities for an exodus as a war machine. While these disruptions may hint at new trajectories, they are frequently absorbed into the profit-driven systems of game companies. The central challenge for gaming culture lies in navigating these constraints to uncover the latent potential for exodus and to broaden the scope for diverse and multiple practices that transcend mainstream norms.

DISCUSSION

This study has provided an in-depth analysis of the significance of PCs as technological machines and the processes involved in producing mainstream subjectivities within the context of Korean gaming culture. However, some limitations and directions for further research are suggested to guide further exploration.

First, this study’s focus on PC games limits its scope, preventing a comprehensive analysis that includes other technological machines, particularly mobile games. Mobile games differ significantly from PCs in terms of gender and age distribution, offering spatial freedom and easy accessibility, enabling gameplay across diverse settings and schedules, thus attracting a wider demographic(Korea Creative Content Agency, 2022). Future research should center on how mobile game users produce subjectivities and explore their potential for exodus. In particular, understanding how mobile users—who are less influenced by PC-based peer culture and technological environments—form alternative subjectivities present an important avenue for study.

Second, while *Lost Ark* is a representative example of the MMORPG genre, the study does not encompass users of other PC game genres. The ways in which subjectivities are produced likely vary by genre, necessitating research that spans multiple genres. For instance, competitive games such as FPS and MOBA genres may employ biopolitical machines and corporate territorialization in ways that diverge from MMORPGs. Investigating these differences could enrich the understanding of genre-specific dynamics in gaming cultures.

Third, the study is limited by its small interviewee sample size, which consisted exclusively of males. Only eight individuals were interviewed, and all were drawn from a single guild, thereby excluding the broader diversity of potential in-game participants. This narrow sample makes it difficult to generalize the study's findings and may constrain the depth of insight into the wider player experience.

Fourth, further research is required to explore the distinctiveness of collective actions within Korean gaming culture. Korean game users often express their demands through collective actions. Although truck protests and "lying flat" have demonstrated potential for mobilization, as discussed in this paper, these actions remain largely subordinate to corporate interests. Despite their mobilization potential, these actions often lack structural independence to challenge the corporate machine, thereby reinforcing existing power dynamics. Further studies should examine the long-term implications of these behaviors, particularly their potential to evolve into sustained political actions or even revolutionary change.

Lastly, this study contributes to expanding the horizons of critical game studies. By focusing on the relationship between technological machines and the production of subjectivities, it addresses gaps in the existing discourse on the social subjection of game users while offering a novel research direction. By illuminating the interplay between user agency and technological machines, this study provides a framework to analyze how subjectivities are negotiated, contested, and reconfigured in gaming cultures. Building on this perspective, future research can deepen the field by investigating the subversive potential of various technological machines and user behaviors. Exploring these dynamics further can provide critical insights into how gaming cultures are shaped and how they might resist entrenched systems of control.

CONCLUSION

This paper systematically investigates the production of Korean online PC game users' subjectivities by critically applying Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'machine' and Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's (2009) analytical framework. The technological and social meanings of PCs and PC Bangs, which are central to Korean game culture, are discussed and analyzed as the foundational elements for the formation of game user subjectivities. The PC was a key medium in the formation of early game culture, becoming a familiar machine for users through its integration with network communication and its role within youth peer culture in PC Bangs. This phenomenon uniquely highlights how Korea's technological infrastructure and cultural practices converged to create a distinctive gaming environment. These properties of the PC as a technological machine have since provided a basis for users to become deeply engaged in games and influenced their interactions with other devices.

This paper also analyzed how the corporate machine governs game users and reproduces mainstream subjectivities. Focusing on *Lost Ark*, it examined how the corporate machine territorializes user engagement through mechanisms such as freemium models, PC benefits, and in-game power structures. By framing mainstream subjectivities within discourses of meritocracy and fairness, corporations have not only reinforced these identities but also embedded them into users' sense of self.

From the perspective of the biopolitical machine, mainstream subjectivities are shaped through the repetitive, routinized actions of daily gaming, which establish habitual practices and forms of discipline rooted in virtual economies. The biopower

of MMORPGs functions as a system that regulates and structures the lives of users, illustrating how game companies influence the production and maintenance of dominant subjectivities. Finally, in discussing the war machine and the possibility of exodus, this paper highlights how user collective actions, such as truck protests and "lying flat," demonstrate potential for political mobilization. However, these actions remain constrained by capitalist interests and have not yet achieved structure transformation.

This paper contributes to critical game studies by systematically analyzing the processes of machinic subjectivity production in Korean game culture. By illuminating the relationship between technological machines and subjectivity, it provides a novel research framework that transcends conventional structuralist approaches and paves the way for future investigations into the dynamics of gaming culture. Future studies could expand on this framework by examining other regional gaming cultures or exploring how emerging technologies such as VR further reshape machinic subjectivities.

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ENDNOTES

1 The "Megal Finger Sign" controversy refers to an incident where an emoji in *Lost Ark* resembling a hand gesture associated with a feminist community in South Korea, Megalia, sparked backlash among male players. This resulted in Smilegate RPG modifying the emoji to appease the predominantly male player base.