The Rise of Gamer-Consumers: Anger, Protests, and Divisions in South Korean Gamer Activism

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the phenomenon of gamer activism, focusing on the motivations behind online and offline protests against game corporations (e.g., review bombing, boycotting, crowdfunding, truck protesting), which are reshaping game industry practices and regulations in South Korea. Based on semi-structured interviews with those actively involved in Korean gamer protests from 2021 to 2023, the research identified anger towards game corporations over the fluctuating value of virtual capital as a motivational driver to collective actions. Furthermore, the constructed identity of Gamer-Consumers was identified. Gamer-Consumers perceive financial and time investments as integral to the game experience while evaluating their legitimacy as "real consumers" as "real gamers". This fosters divisions and discrimination towards casual players and gender minorities while encouraging game corporations to operate in favor of heavy-spending players. Therefore, while gamer activism plays a critical role in reporting game companies' malpractices, it also raises the concern of polarizing gamer discourse and commodified relationships in gaming culture.

Keywords

Video games, Game research, Game as a service, Gamer, Activism, Consumerism, Capitalisation

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INTRODUCTION

Video games have become one of the most widely enjoyed media in the 21st century (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009; Kerr 2017; KOCCA 2024), with an estimated 3 billion gamers worldwide (Newzoo 2022). As the influence of games arises, so does the significance of online gamer discourse. Gamers are now actively engaging in a group to expand, modify, alter, and influence games on their own terms to influence political and industrial discourse. For instance, *Pokémon Go* (Nintendo & Niantic, 2016) was used as a recurring motif during Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Bill Movement 2019-2020, representing spatial politics in both the virtual and real world (Davies 2020; 2022). Fast forward to 2024, a worldwide online rally of gamers against *Helldrivers 2* (Arrowhead Game Studio, 2024) sparked a mass-scale review bombing campaign online against SONY's attempt to mandate a PlayStation Network account for the game (PC Gamer 2024). As such, collective actions by gamers are becoming more impactful than ever before, posing challenges to conventional practices of making and servicing games.

Coming from this context, this paper offers an in-depth exploration of gamer activism by focusing on the case from South Korea (henceforth "Korea") and their mass-scale gamer protests that have become a 'new-norm' since 2021, with thousands of gamers collectively rallying online and offline against game corporations (Kook 2022; S. Park, Denoo, et al. 2023; Y. Lee 2024). The rally often takes the form of a proxy protest on the street called "truck protest", first began during the COVID-19 pandemic; crowdfund and dispatch LED billboard trucks that display messages on the street to raise awareness of the issue, while complying with social distancing rules (see figure 1). This is also accompanied by various methods such as petition campaigns, review bombing, crowdfunding, and lobbying for law changes. Korean gamers' actions have recently pushed lawmakers to a partial amendment of the Game Industry Promotion Act that now mandates loot box probability disclosure in Korea (enacted in March 2024) (S. Park, Ballou, et al. 2023; Xiao and Park 2024).

Figure 1: An LED billboard truck sent by *Lineage M* (NC soft, 2017) gamers in 2021 (front), parked and protesting in front of the Korean National Assembly (back, the building with a green dome)[1].

Despite its significant impact on the Korean game industry (see also Astle, 2023; Valentine, 2024), the gamer's truck protests received little attention from English-

based game press and academic reports. As Park et al. (2023) have pointed out in the first academic report about Korean *Maple Story* gamers' truck protests (S. Park, Denoo, et al. 2023), thorough inquiries into this phenomenon are necessary to enhance our knowledge of the ever-growing influence of gamers in this networked era. Therefore, this research aims to achieve just that by closely examining the actual stories of activists who participated in protests, investigating why and how these events unfolded.

- RQ 1: What motivated gamers to be part of activism? (e.g., review bombing, boycotting, crowdfunding, truck protesting)
- RQ 2: What implications does the gamer's consumer activism have for games in the networked era?

We collected semi-structured interviews with 17 Korean gamers who engaged in protests against game corporations between 2021 and 2023. The findings from this research contribute to the research discipline of game research and offer further academic insights into the gamer's role in the era of Game-as-a-Service and Free-to-Play — games that operate and service with a continuing revenue model (Alha 2020; Dubois and Weststar 2022; Paul 2020; Dubois and Chalk 2024). It also seeks to provide insights to industry stakeholders about the instrumental impact of gamers' resistance to game developers' practices.

BACKGROUND

Games and Gamers in the Networked Era

The global gaming industry has recently been experiencing a paradigm shift from Game-as-a-Product (GaaP) to Game-as-a-Service (GaaS) (Dubois and Weststar 2022; Wilhelmsson et al. 2022). GaaS represents a form of game operation based on online platforms, where games are provided as a live service through the network and continuously maintained and updated (Cai, Chen, and Leung 2014). It generally goes along with a Free-to-Play (F2P) business model that extracts revenues from players through continuous revenue sources (e.g., in-game items, cosmetics, loot boxes) (Alha 2020; Cleghorn and Griffiths 2015; Elmezeny 2021; D.-E. Lee and Lee 2015).

In the recent decade, GaaS has positioned itself as one of the most prominent business models in the global game industry (Dubois and Weststar 2022; Elmezeny 2021; Nieborg 2015) and enabled gamers to emerge as active "participants" in media or even active "co-creators" (Fröhlich 2017; Kerr and Kelleher 2015; Taylor 2009). At the same time, however, the autonomy of players to engage with games on their own terms is increasingly contested in the context of networked games, for example, restricted from having full ownership of games (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2007; Taylor 2002). Here, the games are only enabled when an internet connection is present, and they are constantly updated and patched according to the game developer's intentions (Švelch 2019; Dubois and Chalk 2024). Individual gamers' attempts to appeal or resist within the game system that is governed by the developers and platform holders are nearly impossible (Whitson 2019) – instead, they must reach outwards to express their resistance (Almaguer 2019).

Gamer Resistance and Activism

Consumer activism refers to the overarching practice of consumers using their purchasing power to influence business practices, policies, community, and personal changes (Chen 2020; Hawkins 2010; Micheletti 2003). As consumers' societal role and economic influence expanded with the maturation of global capitalism, the motives and functions of consumer activism also became more diverse (Kozinets and Handelman 2004), encompassing a broad agenda that includes political and societal aspects. From there, scholars have recognized several patterns of political consumerism (Y. M. Baek 2010; Copeland and Boulianne 2022; Gundelach 2020): boycott, buycott, discursive political consumerism, and lifestyle politics. Among those, 'boycott' and 'buycott' stand for refusing (boycotting) to purchase (buycotting) certain products or services (Hawkins 2010; Katz 2019; Neilson 2010; Warren 2021). Political consumerism also encompasses 'discursive political consumerism' and 'lifestyle politics' (Boström et al. 2019; Micheletti et al. 2005). Discursive consumerism refers to "communication activities targeting companies, the public, family and friends, and various political institutions" that aim to raise specific issues into public discourse to influence other consumers' behavior (Micheletti et al. 2005). One of those examples is 'culture jamming', which challenges consumer culture through speech, writing, and performances (Carducci 2006; Junman Kang 2020). Furthermore, lifestyle political consumerism seeks to alter one's consumption patterns by consciously adopting specific lifestyles and expressing their views on society through purchasing choices (Copeland and Boulianne 2022; Shah et al. 2007).

Scholars and journalists have reported incidents in which gamers voiced their demands to the gaming industry through boycotts (or buycotts), hashtags (#) campaigns, and so forth (Almaguer 2019; Davies 2020; S. Park, Denoo, et al. 2023). One of those examples is the "Korean gamer mass truck protest incident 2021", first triggered by Korean gamers of *Fate/Grand Order* (Aniplex, 2015 & Netmarble, 2017) and *Maple Story* (Nexon, 2003), which then spread to other F2P PC and mobile games. Thousands of Korean gamers crowdfunded and dispatched LED trucks demanding messages to the company's doorsteps on the street (i.e., truck protest) (S. Park, Denoo, et al. 2023; G. Park 2021). The scale and longevity of this collective action eventually led the Korean game corporations to revise some of their monetization schemes (Xiao and Park 2024).

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Korea is located in East Asia with the world's fourth-largest game market (Newzoo 2022), and gaming is ranked as one of the most widely enjoyed entertainment in the nation (Chee 2023; KOCCA 2024). The Korean game industry benefits from the country's technological infrastructure, including fast-speed internet, PC bang, and esports (Huhh 2008; Dal Young Jin 2010). It has also been dominantly PC (28.6%) and mobile (64.4%) focused (KOCCA 2024), with the wide use of the F2P and GaaS since the early 2000s (Alha 2020; D.-E. Lee and Lee 2015; Yoo, Jung, and Lee 2014) — including some of the country's best-known homegrown games like *Maple Story* (Nexon, 2003), *Dungeon Fighter Online* (Nexon, 2005), *Lineage M* (NCsoft, 2017), *PUBG: Battlegrounds* (Krafton, 2017) and *Lost Ark* (Smilegate, 2018).

Historically, Korea's early gaming devices were IBM-clone PCs manufactured in the 1980s by chaebol corporations (for the terminology, see Beck, 1998), sold in cartridges and CDs at a fixed price (H. Yoon et al. 2012). However, in response to heightened economic precarity since the Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s, games that require lower upfront costs began to gain popularity — free upfront and then pay later, i.e., Free-to-Play (Huhh 2008; Dal Young Jin 2010; D.-E. Lee and Lee 2015). For Korean game companies, GaaS was also deemed a reliable source of revenue that guaranteed the protection of their IPs against pirated copies (Nam 2011). Online games with F2P and GaaS also aligned well with government-led initiatives to boost the IT sector to overcome the economic turbulence. This flourished in the Korean F2P online PC games in the 2000s, followed by the boom of mobile games in the 2020s (Dal Yong Jin, Chee, and Kim 2015; D.-E. Lee and Lee 2015).

However, the perception of gaming in Korean society still remains complex. On the one hand, the game industry is idealized as a nation's profound cultural and technical industries that boost the economy (T. Choi 2021; KOCCA 2024; J.-O. Lee 2000). On the other hand, the act of "gaming" is perceived as unproductive and impulsive behavior, to the extent that it was labeled as one of the "four axes of evil" by the presidential decree in 2011 (S. Kang et al. 2013; T. Yoon 2015). Such a contradictory socio-cultural discourse, which views games as both an economic wonder and addictive substances, constitutes the Korean gamer's complex self-identification (Chee 2023; J. Choi et al. 2018). On the one hand, they are early adopters of a lucrative and advanced industry; on the other hand, they are a group of troublemakers outside mainstream society.

Another important societal context is Korea's vibrant culture of protest, which involves mass gatherings, crowdfunding campaigns, and vibrant symbolism. For example, following the political turbulence caused by former President Yoon Suk Yeol in 2024, a series of mass protests took place on the streets, featuring K-pop songs, light sticks, flags, and printouts with memes, as well as crowdfunded food trucks and LED billboard trucks (Yim et al. 2024).

Coming from this context, gamers' protests in Korea are generally organized like this: Gamers would first form a "Task force team", a voluntary group of gamers who oversee the crowdfunding campaigns and rent LED trucks as the cost to dispatch an LED truck per day is estimated at 1,000 USD per day, which could continue for days or even months. Gamers would also simultaneously launch boycott campaigns online, while deliberately bombarding the game's ratings. Such actions are communicated and organized through domestic community platforms (e.g., web forums), which are the dominant social channels for Korean gamers. However, they are only accessible to those with a Korean identification number or a subscribed phone number and thus require identification verification. The task force team members will also draft and publish the public statement towards the game company, while lobbying the press and lawmakers to initiate investigations on game corporations. These collective efforts could lead to public hearing sessions between game developers and protesting gamers, directly putting game corporation executives in the spotlight (for further details about Korean gamers' activism culture, see S. Park, Denoo, et al. 2023). Similar patterns can also be found in K-pop fandoms (see also Jiwon Kang et al. 2022; Yoon-hee Shin 2024), for instance, crowdfunding to dispatch hundreds of funeral wreaths to music agencies (Yasmin 2024).

METHOD

The research design was facilitated around semi-structured interviews, with an aim to delve deep into the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the research participants (Boyce and Neale 2006; Cote and Raz 2015). Participants were recruited through personal referrals, direct contacts, and recruitment postings in gamer web forums and social media channels. The interview guideline inquired three primary topics: (i) the participant's views on gamer actions and discourse, (ii) their self-identification and motivation as a gamer, and (iii) their views and experience in (Korean) gaming culture. The lead author also asked the participants the list of games that they played prior to the interview, to become more familiar with the context, gameplay references, and canons that might emerge in the data.

Overall, 17 participants were recruited for interviews (n=17), each taking 1-2 hours. Research consent was collected from all participants prior to the interview. In total, roughly 30 hours of transcripts were collected. Out of 17 participants, 6 interviews were conducted remotely by using Google Meet. All interviews were conducted and voice recorded in Korean, letting the participants express their experiences and feelings using terms that they were familiar with.

We then categorized each participant's level of engagement as (a) *initiators*: those who actively led actions, such as planning and coordinating offline or online rallies, review bombing, crowdfunding campaigns, and may involved in a task force team[2], or (b) *protesters*: those who actively followed and spread viral campaigns and social media posts, donating money, spreading the discourse, and other similar forms of participation, and (c) *supporters*: those who followed and supported the campaigns while engaged in online discourse. Games that these participants played (or are still playing) that they took action against were: *Com2uS Professional Baseball for Manager* (Ace Project, 2013), *Closers* (Naddic Games & Nexon, 2014), *Fate/Grand Order* (Aniplex, 2015 & Netmarble, 2017), *Mabinogi* (Nexon, 2004), *Ragnarok Origin* (Gravity, 2020), *Maple Story* (Nexon, 2003), *Lineage M* (NC Soft, 2017), *Uma Musume: Pretty Derby* (Cygames, 2021 & Kakao Games, 2023), *Limbus Company* (Project Moon, 2023), and *Genshin Impact* (Hoyoverse, 2020). Some of our participants were top-tier gamers or those involved in task force team activities, and thus, a simple combination of age, affiliation, gender, and games could reveal their identities. Therefore, we anonymised the details of our participants as much as possible to protect their identities (see table 1).

No.	Pseudonymous	Gender	Age	Profile
1	Jiah	F	Mid 30s	Protester
2	Eunseo	F	Mid 30s	Supporter
3	Yaelin	F	Late 20s	Supporter
4	Sohee	F	Mid 20s	Protester
5	Hyejin	F	Mid 20s	Initiator
6	Dahyeon	F	Late 20s	Initiator

7	Juyoung	Prefer not to disclose	Late 20s	Initiator
8	Hyunjun	M	Early 30s	Protester
9	Seunghyun	M	Mid 30s	Supporter
10	Minseok	M	Early 40s	Protester
11	Dongju	M	Late 20s	Supporter
12	Siwoo	M	Mid 20s	Initiator
13	Chanhyeok	M	Mid 30s	Initiator
14	Yaechan	M	Mid 20s	Initiator
15	Moonkyu	M	Mid 20s	Initiator
16	Woojee	M	Mid 20s	Supporter
17	Sunghoon	M	Early 40s	Protester

Table 1: The list of research participants and their profiles.

The collected interview transcripts were then analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2021; Formosa et al. 2022). First, similar patterns that emerged from the data were noted and extracted into initial codes. Then, codes were categorized and cross-checked to articulate cohesive themes. Analysis was conducted in the original language (Korean), and quotes were subsequently translated into English by the authors for this report.

Various surrounding media and social contexts were also taken into consideration during the analysis. For instance, we noticed that participants used online communities and social media channels to spread the information and mobilize. To do so, they generally used closed (i.e., requiring identification to register) Korean gamer web forum platforms, such as Inven[3], Game Meca[4], Naver Cafe[5], DCinside[6], and Ruliweb[7]. Our participants frequently mentioned web posts and videos published in these channels during the interview, which the authors subsequently reviewed. Overseas platforms were used as a supplementary communication tool (e.g., Discord, Twitter) or not at all (e.g., Reddit). Only one exception was YouTube, which was mentioned as a primary channel for watching game companies' responses towards the protesting gamers (e.g., game companies' live hearing sessions). This is perhaps due to the relatively marginal influence of foreign platforms compared to homegrown platforms in Korea. However, due to the volatile nature of the online content, there's also a chance that those online postings and videos might have been modified at some point between the actions and this research, which cannot be verified at this stage.

Overall, four core themes were articulated: (i) self-identification and segregation as consumers, (ii) motivation to participate in consumer actions, (iii) practicalities in spreading the narrative to the non-gamer general public, and (iv) reflections and retrospectives about the actions.

RESULTS

Our data indicated that participants had long been unsatisfied with the quality of their live operation services by game corporations. They were eager to raise their voice through online and offline rallies to gain non-gaming public attention, hoping to influence game corporations' decision-makers eventually. To do so, together with game streamers and influencers, participants frame the issue of the game in a way that appeals to the public. Furthermore, they actively showcased their real money expenditures in games to prove themselves as "real consumers of games", and, therefore, "real gamers".

Anger and Distrust Towards Game Corporations

During the interviews, we noticed shared anger and distrust amongst the participants towards game corporations, especially those who claimed to have played one or two particular games for a long time. Participants noted that game companies failed to improve their business malpractices, alongside slow bug fixes, delayed updates, and unresolved imbalances in certain in-game classes and levels. They described that they wanted prompt responses from game corporations, which 'neglected' their duties to maintain the game services in good quality. For instance, Dahyeon argued that game updates in *Mabinogi*, which they had played throughout childhood, were generally unsatisfactory. There were frequent in-game bugs, technical glitches, and misleading descriptions that seemed easy to fix but were neglected by the company for years.

> "A few years ago, a new buff was introduced in the game. (...) It should have described something like '(this enchantment) increases the damage of Fireball (skill)'. Instead, the description in the game was, '(this enhancement) increases the damage of Fireball Mastery'. The thing is, there is no such skill as 'Fireball Mastery' in the game. (...) They couldn't properly write a description of the buff that they just designed?" (Dahyeon)

Such neglected services made them feel that game companies have little to no attachment to the game that they produce. Furthermore, they felt like being treated as "cash cows" that were being "milk(ed)". Chanhyuk, who plays *Lineage M*, claimed that gamers used to call each other sarcastically a 'herd of cash cows'. As such, other participants cynically called themselves "호구 (hogu)" (i.e., a Korean slang word for passivists that easily falls into scams), "pigs and dogs" (i.e., 'slaves' in Korean slang), and "(a herd of) black cows" (i.e., a synonym for 'hogu'). They also asserted that many game companies are solely interested in introducing more paid-systems rather than reinvesting their profits to improve the game's customer service.

The in-game virtual economy also often fluctuated due to companies' unilateral decisions, which frustrated those who devoted so much time and money to the game. Siwoo once had their long-accumulated wealth in the game (e.g., in-game gears) losing value when the company decided to update some bugs, but only after neglecting it for a long time. For Siwoo, this was a matter of broken trust with gamers who have spent significant amounts of time, effort, and even real money on the game:

> "The bug was there for six months. No matter how you looked at it, it looked like a critical error. (...) We sent complaints (to customer support), but there was no response. The company did not even verify whether it was a bug or not. Some did get a reply that it was not an issue. So we just assumed everything was good, perhaps this bug-like is actually intended by their game design. (...) But after six months, the company announced, 'Oh it was a bug. Sorry!', and reset everything. All our effort and money (for six months) suddenly became worthless." (Siwoo)

Our participants complained that there were limited ways for gamers to voice their concerns to these corporations, as most games' official customer channels were either slow to respond or offered only generic, bot-like, repetitive replies that were meaningless to gamers. This further stimulated their distrust, leading them to take collective actions. Minseok described how they first rallied an online campaign with other gamers, spamming the game's official web forum with posts with "드러눕기 (lie down flat)" emoji [8], hoping that this would draw the attention of the game's community managers and eventually reach their core developers. Dahyeon took even further action by participating in online protests, which they called "occupying server(s)" — a large number of gamers would gather on a specific game's server at a promised time to demonstrate online. However, their efforts also failed to draw a response from the company. Similarly, Chanhyuk recalled their past one-sided attempts to communicate with the company's customer support, to quote, "(felt like) returning to Korea in the dictatorship era". Such attempted communication being blocked fueled gamers' distrust and even conspiracy toward the game corporations.

However, to our surprise, our participants continued playing those games despite their frustrations. We then noticed that the participants were emotionally, socially, and financially attached to the game that they play. All games that participants were involved with were multiplayer online games, with some having played since childhood. This includes MMORPG (massive multiplayer online role-playing games), which its game system encourages individuals' constant and long-term commitment. Quitting those games meant losing their social group and childhood memories. For instance, Dahyeon played *Mabinogi* throughout childhood and until now, calling the game "like (my) sibling". Some participants also pointed out the fear of losing the value of their real-money spent on in-game items over time, a fear of losing their wealth and time invested in the game for years. As Chanhyuk said:

> "I don't want to start over again from level one or try to meet new people. I'd rather just continue with what I've built so far in this game. (...) So I want (the game) to keep on going. But for that, the game needs to be well-managed. I want the game company to take good care of the game, and have some devotion to the game that they service." (Chanhyuk)

Seeking for Public Attention

We noticed that many of our participants, at some point during the interview, tend to use similar phrases when they explained their motives for participating in collective actions. To our surprise, they were so identical to each other word-to-word that it was as if they were reading certain scripts. It later became clear in the analysis that these participants were directly quoting a YouTube video, titled *[페그오 트럭시위 현장출동]*

세상 어떤 업계에서 소비자를 이렇게 대하는가 ***([Live report of Fate/Grand Order truck protest] What industry in the world would treat its consumers this way?)*** that was published on 15th January 2021[9]. The video was created by game YouTuber Kim Sung-Hoi (so forth "Kim"), which has recorded 1.1 million views at the time of writing this report (see figure 2). This indicates game streamers and influencers were integral parts of streamlining the protesters' message.

Figure 2: A screenshot of Kim's YouTube video, asserting the deceptive attitude of game corporations with a subtitle: "Can you imagine this sort of treatment (to customers) would ever happen in other industry sectors?"

In the video, Kim asserted that Korean gamers are not receiving "fair treatment" from game companies, despite their righteous and fundamental rights as "consumers of game products". While directly quoting Kim, many of our participants argued the game companies' irresponsible game service is a "deception" and the relationship between gamers and game companies has never been fair, violating the fundamental value of "fair trade" in a capitalism economy; gamers pay money to companies and in turn should receive equivalent value. Participants who were most active in campaigns also asserted that all other gamers should see themselves as consumers.

Furthermore, while quoting Kim, participants unanimously agreed that gamers' collective actions must also appeal to those outside the game. They claimed that it was the only way to increase the possibility of successful counteraction against game corporations, following several failed attempts at emoji campaigns and occupying game server protests (mentioned in the previous chapter). Yechun, for example, asserted that gamers must rally outside the game world by spreading out a convincing and cohesive message that would also resonate with those who may not be knowledgeable in games.

> "There were also a lot of people protesting online back then. But their voices were never heard. However, by bringing it to the street, despite a much smaller number of gamers involved than before, it was successful. I think the attention from the outside (gamer) played a much bigger role." (Yechun)

To garner further public attention, gamers framed their complaints as an issue of distrust in the market and neglect of consumer rights, translating their game-specific, immediate topic into something more easily understood by broader audiences. Some also pointed out that such an effort also helped to counteract a negative social

perception of gaming in Korean society. That was because, according to our participants, gaming is often perceived as "child's play" or something only for "immature adults" in Korea. Therefore, narrating their game-related concerns with a broader context (i.e., deception and a violation of consumer rights) was deemed necessary.

In that regard, participants said truck protests (or other similar vehicle-using protests, see figure 3) are one of the most efficient methods for gaining public attention. Many claimed that the primary advantage of truck protests is the visibility, with large LED billboard trucks that visually attract random pedestrians. Dahyeon, who participated in truck protests in 2021, reflected that putting vehicles on the street to protest is funny (and sarcastic) and therefore attractive enough to draw the attention of random people, even if they don't know much about the issue. This eventually led to public media coverage of the issue and enabled gamers to gain even broader public support over the issue, leading to a governmental investigation into game corporations.

Figure 3: Various forms of vehicle-using proxy protests, such as using a horse wagon (left)[10] and an airship (right)[11].

To Be Real Consumers

We noticed that the participants were eager to emphasize the significant contribution they had made to the game's revenue during the interview. From there, we sensed a strong sentiment about capitalist values shared in these gamers' activism. For example, Seunghyun said that they once shared screen captures of their in-game payment history (i.e., the total amount of money spent in the game in question) in gamer community forums to assert their righteousness as a game consumer. This was called "영수증 인증 receipt revealing)", aimed to show the game company how much these paying gamers are concerned about the game's faultiness. Similarly, Minseok said this is to threaten the company with the potential loss of recurring revenue, as these once-paying players are no longer spending money on games. Similarly, Siwoo disclosed the amount of crowdfunded money for renting LED billboard trucks for protests on the Internet.

> "Truck protest was also about showing them (the company) that, 'This was money we originally intended to spend on you, but it's now vanished into thin air on the street'. That was one of the reasons why we disclosed all those crowdfunded amounts to the public." (Siwoo)

However, connecting their spending to their legitimacy in protesting also had consequences. The main issue was the disparity in purchasing power among individuals; some could afford to spend more money on games, while others could not. This gap between the high-spenders (so-called "whales") and those who do not was so severe that it was difficult to make a consensus amongst the activists.

Here, the term "real consumer" was frequently used among the participants. For instance, several participants who were active during the mass truck protest against *Maple Story* in 2021 recalled that there was a series of conflicts between the protesters. The primary issue was whether their task force team members were the "real consumers" of *Maple Story*, with some gamers questioning whether they had spent enough money on the game to truly represent *Maple Story* gamers throughout the protest. Polarization, hate speech, and blackmailing between gamers also occurred during this time. Similar patterns also emerged in other games. Seunghyun, who was active in a protest against *Genshin Impact*, claimed that it is right to exclude 'non-real consumers' from the protest as it is natural for profit-seeking companies in a capitalist economy to listen primarily to paying gamers who are (according to Seunghyun) more likely to be male:

> "The company should respond to its primary consumers more promptly. Otherwise, the value of the product will deteriorate. I mean, think about it. Who actually gives them money? It's the game's primary, core, heavy-spending gamers. And those are men." (Seunghyun)

Cross-referencing the secondary sources (e.g., web forum posts) also revealed that there were indeed heated debates among the gamers from November to December 2023 on 'who is deemed to be real consumers (of the game)', aligning with the time when anti-feminism campaigns were prominent in Korean gamer communities. During this time, the allegation sparked that one of the game artists who worked in *Maple Story* was supposedly a feminist and posted discriminatory statements towards men (and some other issues) on social media. This was further escalated into an online controversy that so-called "hidden feminists" have secretly seeded mocking visual symbols against men in various in-game graphic assets like user interfaces, promotion posters, cinematics, maps, and so on. This then escalated to *Genshin Impact*, resulting in airship protests (see figure 3 above) and criticism towards the Chinese Communist Party — blaming China's authoritarianism as a reason why Hoyoverse, the Chinese corporation behind *Genshin Impact*, is not responding to Korean gamers' collective actions.

According to these gamers, including our participants, hunting down these hidden symbols and feminists in the game industry was a legitimate action of "real consumers", fighting for those who spend an significant amount of real money and time on games. Which, according to their speculations, is more likely to be male. Conversely, they deemed those who may have little to no real money on games as "not real consumers" or "fake consumers" — those include casual, non-paying, or low-spending gamers, which they claimed were more likely to be female. This further justified the segregation of certain gamers during protests and campaigns, while generally favouring the heavy-spending gamers.

There were also participants who opposed such anti-feminism in the game communities. However, these individuals also repeated the rhetoric of "real consumers" during the interview to justify their actions against the game

corporations. When asked about their motivation for joining the campaigns, these participants responded that they wanted to show the world that there are also real consumers. They openly showcased their purchasing histories through web forums and social media, trying to prove that their expenditure on games is also substantial. Hyejin, for example, said that they felt game companies were over-representing toxic game consumers on the internet, and asserted how much other like-minded consumers deserve to be acknowledged as well.

> "I think there's over-representation of certain gamers (on the Internet). It's just that those most radical (gamer web) forums happen to be more male-dominated. (...) So we wanted to tell the company, 'Stop paying too much attention to these problematic people, instead, look at us.'" (Hyejin)

Some noticed the irony of the situation, that gamers' emphasis on their purchasing power eventually makes them more subordinate to game corporations' exploitation. Dongju, for example, expressed their mixed feelings about this consumer-driven logic normalized surrounding the gamer's collective actions. While Dongju praised the game company's improvements in hearing customers' opinions since the truck protests, they also felt disappointed when the company began to prioritize high-paying players. They felt the company's focus on capitalistic "money-making choices" is eventually undermining the excitement of gameplay.

> "I had considered myself a loyal customer (of the game) too. And surely we want the developers to focus on gameplay. However, Korean game companies don't seem to operate in that way. Looking at it now, it's clear they always just think about what is profitable or what is not profitable." (Dongju)

DISCUSSION

"Gamer-Consumers"

Our data revealed that anger toward game corporations was the primary motivation driving individuals to take collective action outside the game world. This anger stemmed from dissatisfaction with the quality of live game operation services, especially when compared to the significant time and financial resources they had invested in the game. Additionally, their frustration at feeling powerless within a game system controlled by these companies further fueled their activism even in the real world (Almaguer 2019; Švelch 2019).

Our participants tend to self-identify themselves as consumers first over gamers. We also noticed that they, as well as other Korean gamers on the Internet, tend to collectively use the term "gamer consumer activism (게이머 소비자 운동)" when describing their actions against the game corporation. From there, we realized that our first question needed revision. Above all, we noticed that our inquiry should pinpoint these individuals' strong correlation with their consumptive behaviors on gameplay (i.e., the time and financial resources they invested in the game) and how that shifted them towards consumer activism. For these consumers, perhaps rallying in the form of consumer activism was not unordinary but rather natural (e.g., Katz, 2019; Kozinets et al., 2004; Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022), which explains how their protesting methods resemble other political consumer movements (Copeland and

Boulianne 2022; Shah et al. 2007) and in the context of commodified play (Elmezeny 2021; C. S. Lee and Seo 2024; Lizardi 2012; Nieborg 2015).

From there, for the clarity of the discussion, we decided to address our participants as "Gamer-Consumers" — inspired by how they and other gamers on the internet actively described their actions. Therefore, we redefined our first research question: *What motivated Gamer-Consumers to be part of consumer activism?*

Game as Dark Commodity

There was division between activists, stemming from the assumptions that heavy-spenders (and thus "real consumers") are more likely to be of a certain gender: a specific gender should be more represented during activism. Furthermore, our analysis indicated a strong sentiment of consumer centrism (i.e., 'the consumer is always right') while regarding games as commodities (see also (Micheletti and Oral 2019; B. Y. Park 2019).

Gamer-Consumers do not distinguish gameplay from consumptive behaviors. Rather, they recognise consumption as a primary element for gameplay. While they feel anger towards game corporations' poor service quality and are eager to raise their voice collectively, they do not question the fundamental issue of the game's aggressive monetizations (e.g., loot boxes, excessive price tag, in-game item trade market) and game system that requires long-term commitments. Rather, they choose to keep and nurture the game's virtual economy, to which they have devoted their time and social relationships (see also C. S. Lee & Seo, 2024; Skoric & Kwan, 2011; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006), and most of all, money. This explains what triggers their emotions (anger) and motivations to rally against the game's service.

Gamer-Consumers seek consistent justification for the commodification of play (supporting C. S. Lee and Seo 2024; Nieborg 2015) while supporting the wealth gap and power structure instituted by game corporations such as P2W (pay to win) (see also Cleghorn and Griffiths 2015; Freeman et al. 2022; Petrovskaya and Zendle 2022). Their frustration over the game service, which angers them to protest, is not about aggressive monetization itself. Rather, it was more about failing to receive fair treatment as a righteous consumer when the game failed to provide sufficient value in return for their financial and time investments. They were angry, particularly due to the uncertainty in the virtual market (e.g., fluctuations in in-game currency and item values) and the game corporations' lack of immediate or coherent response to address these issues. It is a good reminder that in the case of mass-scale truck protests in 2021 (S. Park, Denoo, et al. 2023), which some of our participants were also involved in, erupted *not* because the gamers were tormented by the game's toxic monetization that requires 10k-200k USD of real money. Instead, it was because a single game update caused rapid in-game market fluctuation, turning once-deemed expensive in-game items worthless. Therefore, needless to say, consumer activism is perhaps a natural response to Gamer-Consumers, a response to problematic situations that may jeopardize their normative consumer-centric values and wealth.

Gamer-Consumers also tend to profile those who play games as a mundane part of their everyday life as 'non-real consumers' and use that logic to justify the discrimination towards gamers with a lower purchasing power or gender minorities.

This radicalized view resembles #gamergate (Braithwaite 2016; Mortensen 2018) (see also Braegger & Moeller, 2021) and constructed masculine gamer identities (Howe, Livingston, and Lee 2019; Oransky and Marecek 2009; Paaßen, Morgenroth, and Stratemeyer 2017; Shaw 2012), while echoes gender stereotyping (Alha 2024; Lopez-Fernandez et al. 2019; Ruberg 2018) and toxicity in gamer culture (Kelly, Nic Giolla Easpaig, and Castillo 2023; Kowert 2020; Shi et al. 2019). Those outside this constructed identity, such as female gamers, were then pressured to attach themselves with behavioral markers that are seen as consumeristic (e.g., pressured to also reveal their expenditures in games) (see also McCullough, Wong, and Stevenson 2020; Ruotsalainen and Meriläinen 2025). And this pattern appears to have long been rooted in Korean gamer culture, already back in 2016, as the excerpt from Moonkyu suggests:

> "Do you remember that time in 2016, when the game *Closers* had this issue with their feminist voice actor? Many complained about it and sent complaints to the game company demanding changes. (...) *Closers* is a game targeting men. So, the game company should have handled this carefully to make sure this sort of thing (i.e., hiring an active feminist to work on the game) wouldn't happen. For the sake of their important customers." (Moonkyu)

Gamer-Consumers do indicate similar tendencies with toxic hardcore gamer discourse (Mortensen 2018) with masculine cultural codes (Kivijärvi and Katila 2022; Paaßen, Morgenroth, and Stratemeyer 2017), boosted by the growing influence of online community and streaming platform discourse (Massanari 2017). Such exclusive attitude also echoes Consalvo and Paul's critical analysis of "real game" discourse, in which gaming (and game dev) communities seek legitimacy of certain games that they play (or make) based on their personal view and preferences in its game developer, the game's contents, and most of all, the game's payment structure (Consalvo and Paul 2019) (see also Dubois and Weststar 2022; O'Donnell 2014; S. Park 2024; Paul 2018). Like these gamer discourses, Gamer-Consumers in Korea also see themselves as a minority in Korean society (e.g., J. Choi et al., 2018; S. Kang et al., 2013) expressing concerns that gaming is somehow stigmatized, and thus eager to surface their agenda in a way that would appeal to other consumers in the capitalism economy. This echoes previous studies, the reactive response of hardcore gamer groups in response to press and medical studies blaming gaming for contested issues such as mass school shootings (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2011) (see also Anderson, 2004; Kümpel & Haas, 2016). As such, our findings answered our first (elaborated) research question: *What motivated Gamer-Consumers to be part of consumer activism?*

Games to Satisfy Consumers

Gamer-Consumers are eager to influence the game's service. They are engaged in a systematic manner, forming "task force teams" and coordinating campaigns with the ability to persuade public discourse and even policymakers. From there, our analysis indicated that game corporations are also actively adhering to Gamer-Consumers' demand (see also Elmezeny 2021; Micheletti and Oral 2019).

Between November and December 2023, in response to the outburst of anti-feminism by Gamer-Consumers against whom they claim as "hidden feminists" (mentioned earlier in the Result chapter), major Korean game corporations responded by taking

swift actions. This includes revising all suspected in-game assets while terminating the contract with targeted staff or subcontractors (B. Baek 2023). Several Korean directive-level game developers also immediately held an emergency YouTube live stream to address the game's actively paying gamers, fearing that the situation could escalate into mass-scale protests and boycotts. But these companies' response also raised criticism as many of those suspected "hidden feminists" cases were fabricated or exaggerated by haterism and polarized online discourse (Chae 2023; Kim 2021) (see also Burn-Murdoch 2024; The Economist 2024), putting the most vulnerable workers in the game industry in further despair (e.g., artists, testers, and voice actors, who are often freelance or sub-contracted) (see also e.g., Ozimek, 2019; S. Park et al., 2022; Švelch, 2021; Zoraqi & Kafi, 2024). Gamer-Consumers' aggressive actions, followed by companies' response to satisfy their "real consumers", fuel the vicious cycle of more excessive and complex in-game monetization (supporting Micheletti & Oral, 2019), favoring heavy-spending gamers, widening the wealth gap between high and low spenders also in the virtual world.

It is also notable that Korea has perhaps the oldest F2P-focused game industry, traced back to the early 2000s (Alha 2020; D.-E. Lee and Lee 2015; H. Yoon et al. 2012). Therefore, the Korean Gamer-Consumer case serves as a stark reminder of how mature F2P and GaaS can impact players' gameplay and spending behaviors in the long run. We conclude that Gamer-Consumer activism, despite its success in prompting game corporations to revise some of their failed game service practices, may be leading us to further hyper-capitalization in the virtual world of games. Furthermore, we speculate that this would not remain an isolated case in a far-eastern country like Korea. As the Game-as-a-Service matures (Dubois and Weststar 2022; Dubois and Chalk 2024) and the complexity of the virtual game market capitalization increases, similar incidents could occur in other places in the world. It may not be LED billboard trucks on the street, but something more appealing and reachable forms in local streets. Henceforth, we answered the second research question: *What implications do the Gamer-Consumer and their consumer activism have for games in the networked era?*

CONCLUSION & FUTURE STUDIES

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 Korean participants, all of whom were actively engaged in protests (e.g., boycott campaigns, crowdfunding, truck protests) in 2021-2023 against game corporations. Our analysis revealed that distrust towards game corporations, characterized by the fluctuating value of virtual capital (i.e., the value of in-game items, time invested in games, and social capital accumulated over time), due to game corporations' unpredictable game services, triggers anger and collective actions among these individuals.

There was also significance of gamers' collective actions and status of the commodification of play, which we summarized as the rise of Gamer-Consumers; a group of consumers that identifies their consumption as inseparable from their gameplay experiences. Gamer-Consumers frequently compare the amount of money spent on games through online communities to validate who the "real consumers" are (and thus the "real gamers") — the righteous ones who can raise their voices about game corporations' business malpractices. This leads to segregation and discrimination, resulting in hate speech and conspiracy towards certain gamers and

genders. It also encourages game companies to focus their business on satisfying those who spend more money on game services (i.e., high-spending players). Overall, our findings revealed the growing power of gamers to contain and balance the business malpractices of game corporations, while also highlighting the worrying polarization and capitalistic extremism within the gaming world.

The qualitative approach of this research allowed the in-depth analysis of the case, and the representative position of these 17 Korean participants offers an inspiring overview of the growing phenomenon of gamer activism and its impact on the industry. However, we are also aware that this is just a snapshot and does not account for the entire phenomenon. Lastly, we consider the views and actions reported from our interview data as not an isolated pattern within Korea or the video game market — it is perhaps not an exceptional case for video games. Similar patterns may also be found in other regions with local contexts, such as their popular on social media and streaming platforms that commodify social engagement. We, therefore, consider further explorations on consumer-centric phenomena in other forms of entertainment in other regions of the world are needed, as it would provide a deeper critical understanding of ever-increasing transactional and commodifying social relationships in the networked era.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Source: Daily Consumer Economic News, 6th April 2021. https://www.dailycnc.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=205591

[2] Known as "Chong-dae-jin (총대진, i.e., the front liners)" in Korean, it refers to groups of gamers who voluntarily step up to coordinate a coherent protest agenda, crowdfunding campaigns, and public statements. Their task may also involve finances (e.g., finance reports to gamers on how well the money was spent for renting LED trucks) and lobbying (e.g., hiring legal consultants for a lawsuit against game corporations). In some cases, task force team members are elected or nominated by other gamers, generally through online surveys or virtual meetings shared through web forums and social media (see S. Park, Denoo, et al. 2023).

[3] https://www.inven.co.kr/

[4] https://www.gamemeca.com/

[5] https://section.cafe.naver.com/ca-fe/

[6] https://www.dcinside.com/

[7] https://bbs.ruliweb.com/

[8] Emoji that looks like a person lying flat on the floor: ●▃▅▇▅▃▂▇

[9] Source: https://youtu.be/MWhW3i7V80I?si=_qkTXwWXl040tWIm

[10] Source: Ajunews, 29th August 2022. https://www.ajunews.com/view/20220829135345605

[11] Source: Yonhap News Agency, 21st December 2023. https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20231221087900017

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