

# Intersectional complexity between players and non-players in Bhutan

Hitoshi Fujiwara

Toyo University

5-28-20, Hakusan, Bunkyo, Tokyo, 112-8606, JAPAN

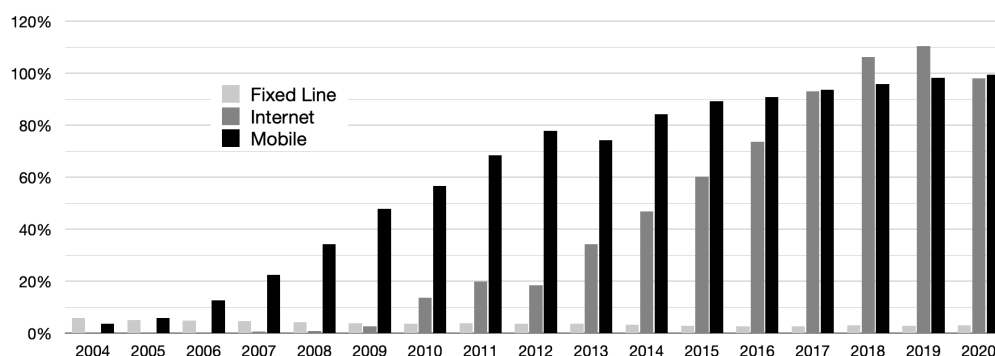
[fujiwara030@toyo.jp](mailto:fujiwara030@toyo.jp)

## Keywords

Bhutan, history, gaming culture, narratives, players, non-players

## INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Bhutan, located in the Himalayas, sandwiched between China and India, is globally known as ‘the last Shangri-La’ and considered the happiest country in the world (Forbes, 2017). It consists of 40,000 square kilometres of land mostly covered by high mountains and deep ravines, 0.8 million people, mostly occupied by devout Buddhists. The society has drastically developed through the penetration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for a quarter century, after the first TV broadcasting service and internet service started in 1999. Then, mobile communication services started in 2003, and the population of mobile subscribers became the majority soon (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Penetration of ICTs in Bhutan 2004-2020  
(Ministry of Information & Communications, 2021).

The author has been researching the social impact of ICTs penetration since 2010, and continues to explore the social tensions between those who have adapted to the new environment and those who have not. The author has focused on digital gaming for five years, paying particular attention to players and non-players. This research primarily aims to state the complex stories or narratives related to the gaming culture of Bhutan, such as the conflict or the interaction between players and non-players, the formation process of the gaming community, and the narrative of a non-player who had enjoyed playing before.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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## GAMING CULTURE AND ITS STORIES

By the beginning of the 2010s, it was hard to say video gaming had been popular in Bhutan. Console (including handheld), arcade, and PC games, mostly popular all over the world before the early 2000s, were too expensive to play for Bhutanese. Smartphones began to spread around 2013 and quickly penetrated the market between 2015 and 2016, and introduced new habits: communicating on WhatsApp and Facebook, watching movies on YouTube, listening to music on SoundCloud, sharing emotional moments on Instagram and TikTok, or playing mobile games. Gaming started to become one of the distinctive functions of mobile, in spite of the performance of device and the connectivity of internet were a low specification.

During the late 2010s, single-play and free-to-play casual games such as *Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012) or *Clash of Clans* (Supercell, 2012) were also popular in Bhutan, similar to the rest of the world. At that time, most Bhutanese didn't have a credit card or other billing method, and it was no easy matter for the Bhutanese to pay the costs of playing. On the other hand, Bhutanese youngsters also have easy access to the global gaming market thanks to their high literacy rate in English, as a result of the modernisation of education. After 2020, online multiplayer games such as *Mobile Legends* (Moonton, 2016) or *Ludo Club* (Moonfrog, 2017) had gained popularity, and the pay-to-play method had spread rapidly. Currently, their playing experiences have become more and more enriched.

Here is a case study of *PUBG Mobile* (Tencent, 2018), the mobile version of *Player Unknown's Battlegrounds* (Krafton, 2017), a globally popular online multiplayer title, which penetrated into Bhutan around 2019. It is said that *PUBG Mobile* was the most popular game in Bhutan (Bhutan Broadcasting Service, 2019), and its popularity has lasted up to the present. Thousands of Bhutanese players had formed groups on Facebook to share their impressions, skills, or experiences. These social-media-based players' communities led to the subsequent establishment of the Bhutan Mobile Gaming Association and its subsequent membership in the Bhutan Olympics Committee. From the perspective of promoting gaming culture, *PUBG Mobile* has played a significant role in the gaming history of Bhutan.

On the other hand, between 2019 and 2020, traditional media such as newspapers and television broadcast a great deal of negative coverage of the title. Parents and teachers had argued against playing *PUBG Mobile* due to its addictive and violent nature (Bhutan Broadcasting Service, 2019), and the government had decided to temporarily ban downloading (The Bhutanese, 2019). Unsurprisingly, the player community voiced fierce opposition to this decision, and by this point, tensions between players and non-players had reached a breaking point.

## NARRATIVES BY PLAYERS AND NON-PLAYERS

Tables 1 and 2 show the outline of fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2025.

<b>Purpose</b>	1. To explore how game players are forming their own community 2. To consider how non-players are trying to control gaming 3. To understand the real status of video games in Bhutanese society
<b>Method</b>	Semi-structured interview, snowball sampling

<b>Periods</b>	SEP and DEC 2021 (online) and SEP 2022 (offline)
<b>Informants</b>	319 in total: online = 308; offline = 11 (as follow-up) Sex group: male = 166; female = 142 Age group: under 20s = 97, 20s = 120, 30s = 57, 40s = 22, over 50s = 12

**Table 1:** Interviews on ‘Attitude toward playing video games’ in 2021 and 2022.

<b>Purpose</b>	To explore personal history and memory related to gaming
<b>Method</b>	Semi-structured group interview by the life history approach, conducted with students from SC and JNEC
<b>Informants</b>	51 in total: SC students = 38; JNEC students = 13 Sex group: male = 24; female = 27
<b>Periods</b>	SEP 2023 and SEP 2025

**Table 2:** Academic workshops in 2023 and 2025.

The collected narratives are shortly described as follows.

- Why are Bhutanese players addicted to gaming? The most important keyword was ‘friends’. As people exchange information with friends about game features, graphics, updates, etc., they become deeply involved in gaming.
- How to control the negative effects of gaming? The majority said that parents and teachers should be responsible for limiting the time spent playing. Many also said that the games which caused negative effects should be banned at the government level, remembering the dispute over *PUBG Mobile*.
- What are the images of players? Negative opinions: waste of time and money; mental problem; etc. Positive opinions: enhancing productivity and creativity; admiration for talented or professional eSports players; etc.

## CONCLUSION

Almost all the researchers have never thought much of the scale of the gaming industry, players’ taste, or the emerging e-sports culture in Bhutan due to the lack of impact on the global gaming market. As mentioned above, gaming infrastructure was away in Bhutan in the 20th century, and then mobile technology enabled players in Third World countries, including Bhutan, to enjoy digital entertainment after its penetration. Because of its rapid penetration, old-fashioned Bhutanese adults are refusing to play games, and they still believe that gaming is a bad habit. Although this kind of conflict story is not new in the global gaming history (Juul, 2011), it would be meaningful to explain the details based on the cultural and technological background of one country. The narratives by players and non-players are also supposed to be significant for global game studies. One of the key findings is that both positive/negative images have been mingled and complicated between players and non-players; for example, some players stressed the negative impact, and not a few non-players started to appreciate the positive aspects. The relationship between the gaming community and traditional society has been changing.

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