The Foreigner, The Joker: Dual Identity of Migrant Game Industry Workers in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This abstract presents work-in-progress research on the cases of migrant game developers in South Korea (henceforth, "Korea"). Drawn from interview data collected since 2022 (n=11), the abstract will shed light on the condition of the marginalised group of immigrant game industry workers in a homogeneous work culture.

The number of migrant workers involved in game production has steadily risen in recent decades. Statistics show that more than one-third of game developers in Finland (Neogames Finland, 2023; Park, 2024) and the Czech Republic (GDACZ, 2024) have a migrant background, with a similar number also reported in other countries (see also Rocha et al., 2025; Taylor, 2022). Conversely, Korea is a unique comparative case with a well-recognised local game industry yet remains extremely homogeneous (KOCCA, 2025; Newzoo, 2022) .

Then there are human factors in making games, so-called "game development" or "game production", which involve practices that are inherently cultural and contextual (Kultima, 2018; O'Donnell, 2014; Sotamaa & Švelch, 2021). In other words, the game industry may seem highly technical and universal, but in reality, the practices involved in game development are highly local, shaped by individual creative preferences, choice of design and tools, various cultural customs, social norms, regional regulations and others (Keogh & Abraham, 2022; Kerr, 2017; Park, 2024). These factors also contribute to the duration and challenges involved in migrant game developers' relocation, work onboarding, and changes or retention of work practices from previous regions (Houška, 2025; Park, 2023).

To explore how multicultural (or homogenous) workplace environments affect the game development and cultural practices of making games, I have collected semi-structured interview data from 7 migrant workers in the Korean game industry.

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Among these informants, 2 participated in a longitudinal framework, attending additional follow-up sessions. This resulted in 11 interview transcripts for the Korean case study. It is worth noting that these Korean interviews were collected as part of a comparative case study, following up from the case studies on migrant game industry workers in Finland (Park, 2024) – a country that, contrary to Korea, has a strong game industry but a greater emphasis on importing migrant game developers.

Korea has a large domestic market of 50 million people, with 59.9% of the population identifying as active gamers (KOCCA, 2025; see also Chee, 2024; Jin, 2010). Consequently, the Korean game industry has flourished within a domestic-centric ecosystem, with the vast majority of revenue generated locally or from neighbouring markets, such as China and Japan. Korean game production is also domestically centric, with an abundance of specialised educational institutions ensures a steady influx of domestic talent. This leaves local firms with little need to recruit non-Korean-speaking workers from abroad. Furthermore, the country's restricted immigration bureaucracy tends to demotivate game business owners from navigating the complexities of hiring migrants (see also Rocha et al., 2025)[1].

The interviewees represented a mix of both junior and senior professionals. Notably, the vast majority (n=6; 86%) had no prior professional experience in the game industry before coming to Korea and migrated for reasons unrelated to games (e.g., English-language instruction or family reunification through a Korean spouse). Preliminary data suggest that these migrant workers view the game industry as offering significant career advantages—particularly compared with other sectors open to foreign nationals, such as tourism—citing opportunities to work on major mobile and PC titles, competitive compensation, and high standards of living.

However, significant cultural barriers persist at every level of game production, further underscoring the industry's domestic-centric nature and the profound challenges in social integration. For example, our interviewees claimed that their skill sets acquired abroad often became obsolete when working with Korean studios, as many studios use proprietary tools (e.g., internal software) and development methodologies tailored exclusively to domestic production standards (see, for example, Houška, 2025). Additionally, there were local game design preferences that may come as a surprise to non-natives, such as preferred game genres, mechanics, and aesthetics among Korean domestic gamers.

It also showed that migrant game workers were generally assigned to roles outside core development cycles, often isolated in English-centric roles such as localisation or global services. There were even some physically or socially segregated from their Korean colleagues. Then there are highly contextual work customs and cultural expectations that pose significant hurdles for non-natives to integrate with the dominant social groups in the workplace (see also Maiuga, 2025).

Such an insular environment forces migrant game industry workers to adopt two different professional identities to secure their careers. On the one hand, they must suppress their 'foreignness' through assimilation (for the term, see Berry, 1997), constantly proving their proficiency in Korean and adherence to local workplace hierarchies. Simultaneously, they are expected to function as 'jokers', strategic assets who provide cultural translations and insights from outside Korea. But only in ways that align with the Korean industry's generalised and imagined perception of

the ‘Western’ market, focused almost exclusively on a North American, English-speaking, and masculine 'core gamer' subculture (Paaßen et al., 2017).

At DiGRA 2026, I look forward to sharing the initial findings of the research while seeking future collaboration, for example, on cases involving game-work migration in other regions and the localities of game production from the perspective of migrants. Upon completion, this research will contribute to the discipline of game research by providing knowledge about the diverse game development cultures and the conditions of game work.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Additionally, many work-based residence permits in Korea are 'closed', meaning they are strictly tied to a specific employer. Consequently, the termination or modification of a contract directly jeopardises an individual's residency status and may lead to immediate deportation. This systemic dependency often compels workers to endure substandard conditions, such as workplace abuse.