

The Reinvention of Hardcore: Authenticity and Identity Among Korean “Real” Gamers

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines how the identities of a once relatively small yet highly committed group of gamers, commonly labeled hardcore gamers, have changed over time in relation to gaming culture, communities, and media environments. Focusing on South Korea, where gaming remains highly popular and the share of deeply committed players is substantial, the study explores how post-pandemic changes have reshaped gamer subjectivities. Based on in-depth interviews with a group that has been relatively difficult to access in academic research, the study contributes ethnographic insight to contemporary game studies while addressing broader questions of authenticity, cultural legitimacy, and identity in digital culture.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

The term hardcore gamer usually refers to players who invest substantial time or money in gaming or possess advanced skills, in contrast to casual gamers, who approach gaming more lightly. Earlier studies describe hardcore gamers as highly committed players with specialized knowledge, a preference for challenge, and a strong attachment to gaming communities, while casual gamers are often depicted as more detached and less invested (Fritsch et al., 2006; Rollings & Adams, 2003; Juul, 2010; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009).

For many years, hardcore gamers helped define dominant norms within gaming culture, while casual gamers were often treated as peripheral or inauthentic. Gaming communities reinforced this distinction and, over time, also became sites where

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exclusionary and toxic subcultures emerged (Chess & Paul, 2019; Condis, 2018; Consalvo, 2012; Braegger & Moeller, 2021).

However, hardcore gamer is now a limited analytical category. It flattens the internal diversity of gamers, reproduces stereotypical and often negative images, and does not adequately capture post-pandemic transformations in gaming culture. In South Korea, the decline of PC bangs¹, the expansion of mobile gaming, and the growing participation of women and older adults have weakened the symbolic centrality once associated with hardcore gamers.

To address these limitations, this study uses the concept of the “(self-identified) Real gamer.” The term refers not to a fixed social type but to a heuristic category for understanding gamers who strongly identify with an authentic gamer self. Real gamers are characterized by heavy temporal, financial, and emotional investment in gaming, active participation in gaming-related communities and online activities, and a strong sense of gamer authenticity. The concept helps capture how older hardcore discourse persists, but in a transformed form, under new cultural conditions.

RESEARCH METHODS AND QUESTIONS

This study examines how Real gamers in South Korea perceive themselves, other gamers, and gaming culture, and how these perceptions relate to earlier hardcore gamer discourse. Thirty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted in the summer of 2024, each lasting about two hours on average. Participants were recruited through social media and selected if they believed they met at least one of the three criteria outlined above. The study asks three questions: What forms the basis of Real gamers’ self-identification, and what sustains it? How do they understand group belonging and gaming communities? How do they interpret post-pandemic transformations in gaming culture?

FINDINGS

Defensive Pride and Ambivalent Recognition

Real gamers continue to maintain subcultural identities rooted in earlier experiences of marginalization, even as gaming has become more socially normalized. Participants expressed pride in their expertise, dedication, and knowledge, but also frequently described themselves as socially misunderstood minorities. This identity was shaped not only by personal experience but also by mediated memories of conflicts surrounding gaming, including anti-game addiction discourse, the shutdown policy, and negative media representations. At the same time, their position is deeply ambivalent. Many participants wanted gaming to receive the same social recognition granted to other hobbies, yet they often dismissed newly participating groups, especially women and older adults, as insufficiently authentic. Their desire for legitimacy therefore coexists with exclusionary boundary-making within gaming culture itself.

Minority Consciousness and Consumerism

This minority consciousness is also increasingly intertwined with consumer identity. Many participants believed that, because they invest considerable money and attention in games, they should be treated as more valuable consumers than ordinary players. Yet they also recognized that even more powerful “whale” consumers

exercise greater influence than they do. As a result, Real gamers occupy a contradictory position: they take pride in being dedicated consumers while also feeling marginalized and powerless within platform capitalism.

Community, Amplification, and the Reproduction of Authenticity

Online communities remain key sites for reproducing Real gamer identity. As more interaction shifted online after the pandemic, gaming discourse became increasingly shaped by vocal minorities using provocative rhetoric. At the same time, many ordinary players avoided these spaces, choosing silence or moving to smaller and less visible platforms such as Discord servers or private networks. Paradoxically, this migration further intensified the apparent dominance of aggressive and exclusionary voices in mainstream gaming communities.

From Subculture to Civic Practice

Contemporary Real gamers are not only consumers or hobbyists but also increasingly visible collective actors. Some participants regarded themselves as legitimate representatives of gaming culture and criticized passive players as “fake” gamers lacking commitment to the community. In some cases, they participated in truck protests², petitions, and coordinated campaigns directed at game companies and public institutions. This suggests that Real gamers are emerging as cultural actors who seek to defend authenticity, collective dignity, and the legitimacy of gaming culture.

CONCLUSION

The identity of the Real gamer embodies both decline and reinvention. As gaming becomes more democratized and socially normalized, the symbolic centrality once associated with hardcore gamers continues to weaken. Yet this very displacement appears to intensify the pursuit of authenticity and distinction. The case of Korean Real gamers reveals broader struggles over inclusion, exclusion, recognition, and cultural capital in contemporary digital culture. Rather than disappearing, hardcore gamer discourse is being reworked through new forms of identity, consumerism, community participation, and collective action in the post-pandemic era.

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ENDNOTES

¹ A PC bang is a Korean-style internet cafe specifically equipped with high-end computers for online gaming. For more than two decades, PC bangs had functioned as hubs of youth sociability: places where young people gathered to play games, chat, eat, and even study together (Yoon & Lee 2023). While they were once a defining space of Korean gaming culture, PC bangs were forced to relinquish their status as the central leisure space of Korean youth with the outbreak of COVID-19.

² A 'truck protest' is a unique Korean method of protest where consumers hire LED trucks to display grievance messages directly in front of company headquarters.