

Sex, Fame, and PC Baangs

*How the Orient plays host to PC gaming's
strangest culture*

Seoul, South Korea. To a fanfare of Asian nu-metal and the sound of a thousand screaming fans, a young Korean man enters a dazzling arena. Like an American wrestler at the heart of a glitter-glazed royal rumble, he strides down a ramp toward the stage. Adorned in what appear to be a space suit and a large white cape, he heads out to meet his opponent on the stadium's ziggurat focus. Amid a blaze of flashbulbs and indoor fireworks he climbs the steps and is exalted by the thronging crowd. Only 20 years old, and with no less than half a dozen TV cameras tracking his progress, this bizarre figure seems to be unfazed by his predicament. Diligently he waves to the crowd.

My interpreter, the amiable Mr. Yang, leans forward. "To my brother he is a great hero. My brother can't get enough of this. He has been to see him play many times."

"So this guy has a lot of fans?" I say, knowing the answer but nevertheless incredulous.

"Hundreds of thousands in his fan club," says Yang. "Impossible to track the number of people who watch him play."

Impossible, because the man on the stage is on Korean television almost every day. He is about to sit down and play what is close to becoming Korea's national sport: Starcraft. His name is Lee Yunyeol, or in game [RED]NaDa Terran. He is The Champion. Last year his reported earnings were around \$200,000. He plays a seven year-old real-time strategy (RTS) game for fame and fortune, and to many Koreans he is an idol. Every night over half a million Koreans log on to Battlenet and make war in space, many of them with dreams of becoming like Yunyeol. But his skill is almost supernatural. Few people who play all day long will be able to claim a fraction of his split-second timing and pitiless concentration. Yunyeol practices eight hours a day, and his methods and tactics are peerless. Well, almost peerless. In fact there are two or three other players who command similar salaries. They might not hold the crown now, and one of them will probably take it from him soon, but for now at least, Yunyeol is king.

The existence of people like Lee Yunyeol ensures that South Korea is unlike any other gaming culture on Earth. Here the PC is the most important games machine, and major corporations such as Samsung and Fila will pay thousands of dollars to have their logos adorn the best players in the country. This is a culture in which 1 in 20 people has played a massively multiplayer online (MMO) game (it's less than 1 in 70 in the United Kingdom) but where Half-Life 2 barely raised a mention. Regularly playing online sessions of the Blizzard games, such as Diablo II, Starcraft, or Warcraft III, is more common among Koreans than owning a PlayStation. This is a country in which having a subscription to an online game is becoming the rule, rather than the exception. There are five cable channels devoted to games and one of those just to RTS titles like Starcraft. Recorded and edited bouts of top-level Starcraft matches account for

viewing figures in the millions, taking up 1 percent of all the TV watched in Korea. There are two weekly newspapers and three four-hundred page monthly glossies that cater just to PC gaming. There are 26,000 gaming cafés in Korea, which make \$6 billion a year from tens of thousands of visiting gamers. Seoul is nothing less than a PC gaming hotbed of imagination-defying magnitude.

Intent on uncovering the true story of Korea's peculiar obsession with PC games, I boarded a Boeing bound for that sprawling metropolis and undertook a mission to see it all.

KOREA'S GOT SEOUL

Seoul is at the epicenter of a new East Asian game culture. From Bangkok to Tokyo, millions of Asians are logging on to online games. Their ranks, particularly in the growing economy of China, are rapidly expanding. In South Korea alone, there are nearly 2.5 million people playing online games on a regular basis, and it's the inertia of South Korea's vivacious game culture that is forging the path that other Asian countries are following. As broadband Internet proliferates in Asian countries, so does the South Korean arsenal of online games. Companies like Blizzard Korea, Webzen, NCSoft, and NetMarble are ensuring a future for PC games, and it's a future quite unlike anyone in Europe or the United States would have conceived of. Out here Star Wars games are barely recognized, and while pro games of FIFA occasionally turn up on TV, Halo and Vice City are practically unheard of.

So how did this happen? In this modern world of global marketing, how could one country turn out so at odds with the rest? Well, it has taken some unique economic and political circumstances to make this strange situation a stone-cold reality. South Korea has had a turbulent history and has

long endured an intense rivalry with nearby Japan, thanks to the Second World War and previous decades of rampant Japanese imperialism. This rivalry led to decades of trade restrictions that made early generations of Japanese game consoles prohibitively expensive for Korean gamers. If you wanted to play video games in South Korea, then the cheapest way has long been to use a PC. During the 1990s, when gaming first really took off, Koreans were tucking into much the same feast as the rest of the world, only their menu didn't include Sega, Sony, or Nintendo.

But there is another far more significant factor that defined how the Koreans approached gaming. The nationwide focus on the development of cutting-edge technology led their newly democratic government to seize the potential in broadband communications, and, in the late 1990s, they used the then state-owned telecommunications company to install the infrastructure necessary to connect almost every building in Korea to high-speed broadband. The Koreans have taken to the Net with the greatest of ease, with 60 percent of households boasting a broadband connection, compared to just 17 percent in the United Kingdom. It's almost like the Net has been in Korea forever, such is the ubiquity of high-speed connections. Walk past a Burger King in one of Seoul's teeming malls and you'll see people logging on as they munch on a Whopper. It's everywhere, and it's cheap.

This investment was to have a knock-on effect on the growth of small businesses. After Asia's economic downturn in 1997, people were looking for cheap ways to set up a business, and one option was to create an Internet café. Pretty soon every town and city in South Korea were packed with cybercafé start-ups. In the United Kingdom and United States there has been a small but concerted growth in the existence of Internet cafés and gaming centers over the

last decade, but in South Korea their rapid expansion was practically a cultural revolution. These gaming cafés, the “PC baangs,” soon became the key centers for a youth culture thirsty for social activity and cutting-edge entertainment, and there are now 28,000 of them across the country. For around 50 pence an hour gamers can log on in a baang, play a few games, smoke a few cigarettes, drink some Lineage-branded Coca-Cola, and eye members of the opposite sex. For a culture still steeped in conformity (almost all cars are black, white, or silver, and the middle apartments in a block are the most desirable), games provide a unique outlet for personal expression and a rare chance to be different. PC gaming is not the provenance of a hard-core few, as it is in Europe and the United States; instead it has become the major form of entertainment for young Koreans right across the peninsula. Social, cheap, and available to everyone, online gaming has taken this nation of 45 million people by storm.

KINDS OF LAG

You know that a day is going to be a strange one when, awake in a Seoul hotel room at 3 a.m. (reeling with the worst kind of jet lag), you turn on the TV to witness ex-*PC Gamer* editor James Ashton talking about what a great game character Mario is. “It’s just so much fun,” says Ashton, without enthusiasm. This chance fragment was simply a random moment in a torrent of repurposed Western TV that turns up on Asian screens, just another node in the international marketing machine. For the most part, however, Korea has little need for the Western (or Japanese) approach to gaming TV. Flip through the five Korean gaming channels and you’ll see *Starcraft* being played for hours at a time. Fast and frenetic, the games are accompanied with the pogoing voices

of hysterical-sounding pro-gaming commentators. I was to be informed that these video game anchormen have reached the same sort of status that sports commentators enjoy back home, their distinct characters and ability for smart observations as beloved and revered by the Korean youth as *Match of the Day* pundits are by soccer hordes in the United Kingdom.

Flick to another channel and we plunge headfirst into a stream of advertisements for games that are unseen outside of Korea, all of them online—the cell-shaded Freestyle Basketball, the apocalyptic fantasy role playing game (RPG) Archlord, and a host of indecipherable super-cute games that leap out of the screen with ultrastylized chipmunkesque squeaking. Then it's time for a show in which couples who met while playing Lineage II talk about their love for each other, before doing in-game battle with other couples for fame and prizes. The duels are smartly edited spectacles of pixel magic, and I have almost no idea what is going on.

Korean TV, you should understand, provides a barometer for the rest of culture. Games are so popular among Korea's youth that you often have to be a gamer to be able to socialize—the content of all Korea's game media reflects that fact. TV shows are often designed purely to keep gamers in the know, while gaming magazines and their counterpart Web sites are all about making sure players have the latest tips and walk-throughs, as well as telling gamers how their favorite Korean rock band regularly plays online games. Gaming is so cool that it's practically mandatory, and being good at games can be a great social boon. The hugely popular Lineage II is even being touted as a way for young people to meet partners, with Valentine's Day events held inside and outside the game earlier this year. That's not to say that the only games people play are Star-

craft or heavy-going RPGs—for the most part people still play casual games, such as the Mariokart redux *Kart Rider*, golf games, or one of Korea's many minor Anime-eyed fancies. But however lightweight the game, it is still online, and almost always about playing with other people.

BAANG THE MACHINE

Escaping from the hotel and heading out onto the streets, I leave the business district behind and seek out baangs downtown. I find a few, poster-smothered, smoky, and slightly intimidating. Not in the way that the scary biker pub at the end of my road is intimidating but in that way something familiar made alien is intimidating. It's just a Net café, almost like the ones back in Blighty. There are rows of PCs in a room with a few soda machines and a bored looking girl sitting at the front desk. It should be home territory, but I know I don't belong here. I wonder if it's just because I can't speak the language and most Koreans are hesitant about trying to speak English. Perhaps it's because the games are unfamiliar: the English names on game posters seem incongruous above a splash of Korean text.

I wander past a few scattered gamers. Even at 10 a.m. there seem to be some committed souls plugging away at the beasts of *Lineage* or *Mu Online*. But that wasn't as incongruous as I'd built it up to be in my head. I knew that Korea gamers were obsessive on a scale we have made legendary, but here they were, casually smoking (in the well-signposted smoking section) or chatting languidly about *Starcraft* tactics in the gloom beneath a tatty *Warcraft* poster. These baang customers rarely have to buy games; they simply create an account and then pay for Net time in the baang, with the café manager sorting out the license fees. This means that genuine game retail stores are limited and unusual—

everything gamers need can be downloaded online to play at home or is already installed on a PC baang machine.

This is what is different about Korea: in the United Kingdom you're most likely to encounter other gamers while at the games shop in town, browsing the new PlayStation releases, but in Korea you're most likely to encounter them while out playing. That's something that only a tiny fraction of American or European gamers experience, those who go to local area network (LAN) events or a local Net café on a regular basis. It struck me that baangs are no different at all than LAN cafés and gaming centers anywhere in the world; it's just that there are a lot more of them in one place. Thanks to their popularity and the traffic of youth through them, their credibility is much greater. In fact, their place in the cultural consciousness of all of Korean youth is greater. The cool kids wouldn't be seen dead in a UK LAN joint, but in Korea couples regularly go to baangs, and the walls will often be densely flyposted with gig lists or fashion advertisements. Standing there in the Korean baang, it doesn't feel strange at all: It seems like this is just the way it was supposed to be. Indeed, I think back to playing at the gaming center in Bath. Would those guys be in the slightest bit surprised that this is how the Korean youth spends its time? It's the same kind of escapism, the same kind of detached socializing, but on a vast scale. I wondered if perhaps this was a reflection of a deeper national psyche. Korea has always been a shy, inward looking country (the Korean peninsula was once known as the hermit kingdom), and so perhaps their greater obsession with digital entertainment was some manifestation of that humble Korean ego. These people want to be sociable, to have things to see and do, but many of them have turned to games, rather than bars and clubbing, to find that solace.

Further it seems as if more and more Koreans are head-

ing back to their homes to play, now that PCs are cheaper and broadband can easily be installed at home. I sincerely hope that the popularity of baangs isn't simply a blip that will fade with time. I'd hate to think that Korea would be known as the hermit kingdom for anything other than historical reasons.

CARE AND COMMUNITY

Later that afternoon I pay a visit to the customer service desk of online gaming giant NCSOFT. The company, profoundly committed to providing a comprehensive service to its hundreds of thousands of customers, is proud to be able to offer face-to-face consultation in its customer care. The help desk for Lineage and Lineage II is a discrete office in the teeming hi-tech district of southern Seoul. The manager comes out to greet me, along with my interpreter and the NCSOFT publicity manager. The staff here represent the last word in care for aggrieved players, and the small team deals with 400 to 500 face-to-face consultations a week. It is here that problems with players' accounts, and more often the complexities of the company's attempts to outlaw online trading, are dealt with when the in-game petitions and extensive phone support fail to provide a solution. Players face a ban if they're involved in online trading, and many come to appeal the ban in person, since the situation is sometimes simply a misunderstanding. I watch a young gamer explain his situation to the man at the counter. The consultant looks sympathetic, while the gamer looks weary and sad. The Kevlar-clad guard standing nearby doesn't seem to care and cracks open a can of Pocari Sweat, the delicious, if absurdly named, popular energy drink.

Whatever the nature of the misdemeanor the policy must, NCSOFT insists, apply to everyone. As if by way of

example, my guide disappears for a few minutes, returning to inform me that she had just found out that her own account had been suspended. She had, it seemed, been unfortunate enough to find some loot that had been black-marked by the gamemasters (GMs). She had chanced on a dropped rare item, known to the GMs to have recently been sold over a virtual trading market. Unaware of the danger and delighted with her find, our guide had picked it up and equipped her level 42 prophet. She hadn't been the one that bought it (that would have been utterly dishonorable), but when the virtual cops caught up with the item, it was found in her inventory. A quick check of server logs from the customer service boss, and it was concluded that she was not to blame. The problem account was reactivated. "Even though I work for NCSOft, I have to go through the same process as everyone else," laments the unfortunate young woman.

Onward to the telephone support rooms, where two women in their mid-30s, one heavily pregnant, tell me how proud they are of their team. The room is filled with young women, each one sitting at a computer and chattering into a headset. It could have been almost any call center in the world, except that everyone in this room has at least a level 40 character in either Lineage 1 or 2, sometimes both. The staff is mostly female because, I was informed, their feminine calm makes it easier to placate their mostly male, often rather irate customers. Their customers are, of course, the hundreds of thousands of Lineage players who log on to the servers every day across Korea. The games are so popular that there is, inevitably, some trouble. One of the worst aspects of this is the capacity for hackers and digital thieves to break into people's accounts, stealing their characters and looting their inventories. This kind of cybercrime isn't that common, but among an online population of hundreds of thousands, it becomes something that must be dealt with

every day. More common are antisocial behavior and player killing, both of which are ubiquitous in the game but frowned upon when the players abuse their high-level powers. I am shown a prison within the game, a place where the GMs can incarcerate the unruly avatars in the most extreme of cases. “They can’t escape from here,” says an NCSoft GM, a plump girl in a frilly pink skirt. Ominously she turns round to confide: “None of these people can see me.” I can only hope that she’s referring to the game.

ZERG IDOLS

While RPGs attract many players from all walks of life, the real fanaticism is to be found in the competitive games that have made it onto TV. Early on a Friday night in Seoul’s vast COEX mall complex, Interpreter Yang and I stand amid the television show audience at a regular Starcraft league game. One of five major leagues, and one of the key events for gaming television, the Ever Starleague has gathered an audience of about 500 people, with a few more standing outside watching the game on large screens. This is a small but regular occurrence, a far cry from the stadium events in which [RED]Nada Terran must defend his crown. For those events, says TV show manager In Ho Yoon, people will camp outside the night before, just so that they get the best place to sit when the thousands of fans file into the stadium. Vaguely mesmerized by the fast-paced RTS action, I am jolted from my reverie by a sudden roar from the assembled fans. Men and women, who a moment previously had been silently and studiously watching the buildup of Zerg and Marines, suddenly erupt into screams and chants. The chubbier of the two stone-faced players is in trouble and will soon concede defeat.

Ho Yoon says that Starcraft is now a self-perpetuating

phenomenon. In fact, it is to its benefit that the game is quite old, since the players who started out as the teenagers who first made it popular have subsequently grown up with the game and have inducted younger fans into its ways. With constant TV coverage, the game has continued presence in the Korean gamer's consciousness, and the lure of sponsorship for professional play means hordes of Koreans continue to want to get involved.

The games continue, and a striking young man in a white jumpsuit, apparently one of the country's best, attains an easy win. The crowd hoots and cheers. What is most important, says Ho Yoon, is the personality of the players he films. It is that personal appeal, along with their skill, that fills out the fan clubs and keeps the TV ratings high. I watch the blank-faced players preparing for the next match of the evening and am somehow reminded of a droning Nigel Mansell accepting the award for sports personality of the year. Still, it's what you do with your talent that really counts, and these guys (some of them dressed suspiciously like Formula One drivers) are superstars in their own right.

After the match my guides decide to go outside to enjoy a refreshing cigarette, and Ho Yoon asks me about gaming TV in the United Kingdom. Deleting *Gamesmaster* from my memory, I tell him about *Time Commanders*. He's not heard of the *Total War* games and says that they sound interesting. I agree but nevertheless feel slightly embarrassed—our fusty old war reenactment show doesn't exactly have a crowd of teenage girls perched attentively on the front row of the audience.

THE MIRROR WORLD

Back at NCSOFT HQ, I am introduced to Y. H. Park, the lead designer of *Lineage II*. A stooping, smiley man in his

late 30s, he bubbles with energy and explains effusively (in Korean) just how the game has fulfilled the expectations of both himself and his team. Lineage II is, in Asia at least, the benchmark game against which everything else is measured. A significant step onward and upward from Lineage (the game that initially made NCSOFT popular and that has continued its own popularity), Lineage II provides greater scope and flexibility for a new generation of gamers. It has so far attracted 4 million subscribers across East Asia and regularly boasts 120,000 concurrent users in South Korea alone. On the world stage it is beaten only by Blizzard's phenomenal World of Warcraft, with the American company once again demonstrating that they are one of the few Western companies who are able to satisfy the tastes of the Korean palette.

Part of the reason for Lineage's success (aside from the ubiquitous marketing) is the need for Koreans to socialize and to distinguish themselves from their peers in what is (although heavily Westernized) still a fairly conformist society. It is perhaps because of this urge for socializing that player versus player combat also remains extremely important to the average Korean player. NCSOFT is hoping that the arena combat of Guild Wars is going to provide the next generation of pro-gaming ambition, perhaps even supplanting the mighty Starcraft in its wider, TV-friendly appeal. It's been something of a success, but the full extent of its impact has yet to be made clear. When set against the backdrop of Starcraft, the budding RPG has a long way yet to go.

With so many players available to play online games, it seems as if Korea provides the ideal petri dish for such experiments in next-generation gaming. Yet there is a problem with this, and it finds its root in Y. H. Park's admission that no one really knows what the life span of MMOs really is, least of all in Korea. They will, he says, keep creating con-

tent for Lineage II for the foreseeable future but only in the form of new dungeons, new quests, and new items. The game will remain the same. And, when so many Koreans want to commit to a single game and not try anything very new or different for several years at a time, why should they change the formula? This kind of commitment means that the evolution of MMOs is likely to be slow, and perhaps less interesting, than that of other genres. When games like the now-ancient Ultima are still going, and still collecting cash, there seems little reason to push the games to new heights.

TRUBLE IN PARADISE

With a little more probing, it seems to some that not all aspects of the Korean game scene are unproblematic. For many gamers this is no Eden. For fans of Western games, the first-person shooters (FPS), strategies, and RPGs that are so popular in our part of the world, life is more difficult. Their interests lie outside the accepted Korean mainstream and, as such, get very little support. Despite critical acclaim, *Half-Life 2* sold only moderately, and other games, such as the *Knights of the Old Republic* and other Bioware titles, have to be ordered from the United States, or pirated, if the gamers want to play them at all. One individual from the Korean games industry, who wishes to remain nameless for the sake of his continued employment, told me that he believes that the overbearing power of the major online game publishers in Korea ensures that any creativity or outside influence is stifled. The gigantic Net-gaming magazines, each one dealing exclusively with online games, which weigh in at over 400 pages each, almost fail to mention non-Korean games, and only *World of Warcraft* makes a significant dent in the editorial content of either magazine. The reason, of course, is money. Advertising keeps maga-

zines and television channels afloat, and so they feel obliged to cover the games that pay for their advertising space. This, our confidant explained, makes the Korean scene dangerously narrow and victim to some very dull gaming. There is a third magazine, one that doesn't deal just with Korean Net-RPGs, but it's not nearly as influential as the hefty Net magazines or the free newspapers that report on events in Starcraft and Lineage. Worse, explained our contact, most of the online RPGs being pumped out of Korea are in pretty bad shape, with only a few companies like NCSoft being in any position to make them bug free and fun, as well as providing the support necessary to deal with player problems. People play many of these games, he laments, just to pass the time. "Little more than glorified chat programs" is a criticism of MMOs that we've heard many times over the last few years, and now, in this heartland of the MMO, it feels strange to hear those same words issue from Korean lips.

So the current climate can be depressing for Korean gamers who want to try something new and different. Even Counter-Strike: Source, initially popular in the PC baangs across the peninsula, has been virtually eradicated thanks to licensing troubles. The FPS genre has only the tiniest niche to play with and other game types even less so. Nor have consoles found much of a foothold, with the big publishers dissuaded by piracy or the forbidding nature of the Korean gaming scene. GTA3 has been made illegal by strict censorship laws, and even Starcraft has had to be neutered to avoid upsetting South Korea's sensitive authorities, red blood being replaced with black, and so on. It seems that most Western publishers don't have the cash, or the inclination, to break into the market and may never do so. Western visitors to Korea generally find the Kart Racer-playing, Starcraft-obsessed Koreans perplexing, and U.S. developers particularly have little or no idea how to breach the Korean gaming

consciousness. In one meeting, a Korean journalist recounted to me his discussion with Epic's Mark Rein when the FPS mogul visited the country: "He couldn't believe any of what he saw," laughed the Web site reporter. "These games were so ugly and old-fashioned to him."

TALE'S END

Perhaps my contact was right. Perhaps, with an alienated "hard core" desperate for something different, this was not the Promised Land of the PC after all. Yet I had a niggling feeling that my contact was idealizing the more varied European and American approach to gaming in the same way that I had idealized the Korean love of all things online. Furthermore, I had to balance his pessimism against the soul-warming admissions of the devoted Lineage II player that I had met earlier in the week.

A bubbly, bookish-looking young lady by the name of Lee In Sook had told me all about her great love for Lineage II and how she'd dutifully whiled away the hours grinding her character up to level 72, a major accomplishment for a gamer anywhere in the world. (Lineage II is not exactly forgiving; it takes around 2,000 hours of play to get a character into the 70s.) In Sook is, even by the remarkable standards of Korean RPG players, profoundly committed to her game character. Moreover she was committed to the people she played with. She was proud to have made so many new acquaintances in her time at the reins of a small but busy community of around 80 other players. Her clan, she explained, was one of friends, and she was looking forward to a summer break when she and some people from the game would go away on holiday together.

I'd heard this kind of story numerous times since arriving in Korea. The community is so close, with so many play-

ers within the Seoul area, that the capture or loss of a castle within Lineage II will regularly be celebrated or commiserated by a huge postgame meet-up. The clans routinely socialize in the baangs, and spectating some Starcraft matches after work is just another way to enjoy the company of like-minded people.

In Sook was the embodiment of what I'd come to expect from Korean gamers: someone deeply enamored with online gaming to the point where it defined her worldview and provided for her social life. She admitted that she was often at the computer a little too much (join the club) and that even gaming friends would complain at her to come out to PC baangs with them, but she felt that she had genuinely found a place to belong in her role as leader and organizer. Helping beginners in bimonthly sessions, or just hunting Lineage II's legions of monsters with her friends, had become a better hobby than she could ever have hoped for. Her opinions are echoed throughout Korean culture: Games are the best of pastimes, and if you can make friends while playing them, well so much the better.

But what about making money? In Sook said that she felt that virtual item trading was a bad thing and not at all in the spirit of true gaming. But it was, she acknowledged, a great shame that pro-gaming was limited to the likes of Starcraft. She would dearly love to play RPG games for a living. I nodded, echoing her sentiment. If Eve Online could be a real job, I suspect no one would ever see me or my gaming colleagues again.

As In Sook departed NCSOFT's skyscraper office, I stood and looked out over the Seoul skyline—a teeming jungle of a city that seems on the brink of turning *Blade Runner* into a sunny reality. Truly, I mused, this is the crucible of a foreign gaming culture. The attitude of the place seemed at odds with the way that people approached gaming in the United

Kingdom, and yet there was nevertheless some shared vision, some inkling that we are, and have to be, akin in gaming. In *PC Gaming*. I found it hard to know whether perhaps, in some obscure way, the Koreans are simply tasting the future before the rest of us can catch up with them. Perhaps their adventures in the extremes of online gaming simply serve as an echo of a world that other cultures could one day find themselves immersed in, once broadband access is as common in our countries as it is in Korea. Perhaps it is a portrait of an alternate history, one that we could have experienced were it not for a few crucial differences. For good or bad, fun or tedium, this total commitment to multiplayer gaming is just one possible path along which Western gamers might one day tread. Or perhaps not. Perhaps we'll never see the like of it again.

But could this explosion of social gaming really be just an Asian phenomenon? Or could the whole world one day share in a transcontinental culture of massively multiplayer virtual worlds? Are we all stumbling toward some incredible Net-game future that lies beyond any present-day imagining?

Patently digesting my seemingly deranged mumbling, Interpreter Yang simply shrugged. No one can really predict what will happen or what games we, or the Koreans, will be playing a few years from now. Who could have predicted anything of what had come to pass in Korea? "You know," said Yang, himself a veteran of *Starcraft* and *Diablo II*, "I don't really play much anymore, but my favorite game has always been *Monkey Island*."

"Yeah," I said. "I think some people back home like that one too."