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Kids in the Basement: Space and Virtuality in American and South Korean Esports

In April 2016, TODAY show hostess Megyn Kelly introduced America to Jake Lyon and Shane "Rawkus" Flaherty -- two competitors in Blizzard Entertainment's newly formed *Overwatch* League. Lyon and Flaherty do make a living playing the colorful first-person shooter video game, but unlike what the interview title suggests, these two esports professionals are far from "...2 Kids Who Get PAID to Play Video Games, $50,000 Minimum!" (Kelly). Esports, or professional video gaming, has been a growing industry in America for over 15 years, and in 2018 had captured the attention of "38 percent of young Americans [who] identified as fans of esports or competitive gaming, similar to the 40 percent who said they were fans of the NFL," according to a poll by the Washington Post (Ingraham). However, many news websites and daytime television shows still portray the existence of esports as a shocking revelation. Esports fans expressed distaste for the Kelly interview online in the YouTube comments, claiming that phrases like "kids" and "messing around in the basement," are condescending towards the two players who are in their mid-twenties and should, fans argue, have been treated with the same respect granted to sports stars (Kelly).

The treatment of esports stars in America contrasts starkly with the treatment of their counterparts in South Korea, the esports capital of the world. Dedicated television channels broadcast esports continuously, and many companies proudly feature professional gamers in advertisements to promote their products. One can argue that the prominence of gaming in Korean culture is an epiphenomenon of a desire to assert a strong national identity and spread a

"cultural wave" after a long history of colonization[1]. Esports is seen by the Korean government

as a valuable cultural export, broadcast to the world alongside K-pop music and television

dramas as a part of Korea's cultural and national identity (Taylor 17). Through examining

gameplay in the Korean and American cultural contexts, one observes the impact of what is

viewed as a casual, social activity on both personal and cultural identity. In 2000, the popularity

of gaming caught the attention of the Korean government, which founded the Korean e-Sports

Association (KeSPA) under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism -- an agency which registers

and posts official rankings for professional esports players (Chan). In November 2018, *League of*

Legends star Lee "Faker" Sang-hyeok, one of the world's most popular esports players, appeared

on the morning television show *Annyeonghaseyo* (English: *Hello Counselor*) alongside famous

pop music idols and actors. Although the hosts were not aware of *League of Legends*, which

Faker describes as "the most popular game among young people," they do not doubt the

existence nor the legitimacy of professional gaming as a career, in contrast with the American

journalistic attitudes exemplified by Megyn Kelly ("Guests").

Further examination of video game play in South Korea reveals a key difference between

American and Korean play. Unlike in America, where avid gamers are commonly perceived as

playing alone, inside of their homes, or even the basement, in Korea, gaming is seen as a social

activity. PC bangs[2], or internet gaming cafes, are destinations for teams to collaborate, friends to

socialize, and couples to go on dates. Sentiments such as those expressed by one Korean, who

claimed that "Of course [my girlfriend and I] come to PC bangs, like everyone else… Here we

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[1] See: Taylor, TL *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming,* pg. 17-27 for further elaboration on the political, economic, and social factors influencing the growth of South Korean esports
[2] Pronounced "PC bahngs," literally translated as "PC rooms"

can play together and with friends. Why would I want to play alone at home?" (Schiesel), are common.

Sociological research on sport and competition has focused on the role of designated spaces for players to socialize and practice. Applying spatial theories to both virtual and physical esports space I argue that the production of space plays a critical role in constructing player, fan and industry identities. Dimensions of perceived, conceived, and lived space in relation to the status quo established by casual gamers are essential for the understanding and development of esports. In analyzing space, one can find great value in French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's use of a three-part dialectic to model the complexities of social space[3]. Analysis of Lefebvre's spatial triad has been utilized in game studies to describe characteristics in-game worlds and fictional cities, however Garry Crawford claims that "[One aspect of the triad] appears to have been cherry-picked by some Game Studies scholars… without the need to likewise import or even consider its wider theoretical context" (Crawford). Thus, I present an analysis of the entire triad, as well as a shift of focus from in-game spaces and virtual worlds to the spaces of out-of-game interaction.

Lefebvre's model consists of "spatial practices," "representations of space," and "spaces of representation" also referred to as "perceived," "conceived," and "lived" space respectively (Lefebvre 33). Perceived space, or spatial practice, refers to the inherent, commonly held precepts of a given space and the specific uses for which a space is designated -- such as an office building's specification as a work space or that of a bar for socialization. Representations

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[3] While I agree with Rob Shields's critique (as presented in *Lefebvre, Love, and Struggle* Ch. 10) that this model is confusing and ill-defined, I still find Lefebvre's use of the tripartite dialectic useful for distinguishing the components of social space. Another researcher who employed this model in describing the spaces of a particular profession is Dharman Jeyasingham in "The Production of Space in Children's Social Work: Insight from Henri Lefebvre's Spatial Dialectics."

of space, or conceived space, refers to the space's physical design, and the meanings intended by architects, planners, and designers. The third premise is lived space, or spaces of representation -- one's individual experiences and associations, described by Lefebvre as "Space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols… the dominated… space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (Lefebvre 39).

Commentary by Rob Shields in *Lefebvre, Love, and Struggle,* describes how this model is a modification of the prototypical Marxist dialectic which integrates an affirmation and a negation to generate a synthesis. This modified dialectic employs an affirmation, a negation and a third premise -- the negation of the negation which subverts both of the original two, in order to generate the synthesis. Shields summarizes this model thus:

> The three [dimensions of space] make much more sense if they are rethought as a dialectical contradiction of: everyday perception/practice [perceived space/spatial practice] versus spatial theory/concepts [conceived space/representations of space] relativized by a transcendent, entirely other, moment: creative, fully lived space [lived space/spaces of representation]. If we still insist on counting terms or positions any notion of a totalizing synthesis lies in a fourth, transcendent term, what Lefebvre calls *l'espace* itself -- best understood as "the spatialization" (Shields 120).

This model is further nuanced by the changing relationships between these parts. The balancing and re-balancing of these elements has created unique spatializations throughout history. Applying this model to gaming and competition spaces over time reveals new insights into the role space plays in developing and legitimizing new competitive mediums. These insights can

then be applied to the growth and development of esports, for players, fans, and the general public.

While some may balk at the concept of video gaming as spectacle, the concept is not as novel as one would imagine. As early as the 1970s, American gamers had an established space to play, compete, and spectate -- the arcade. Michael Z. Newman's *Atari Age* explores the development of the arcade as a successor to other coin-operated entertainment spaces. While 1950s dime museums and early 1970s pinball rooms were perceived as seedy hangouts for unsavory youth, the suburban mall arcade in the late 1970s prioritized cleanliness in order to appeal to middle-class families (Newman 29, 31, 34). Application of the Lefebvrian triad demonstrates how this new, clean arcade is a product of historical perceptions of gamers and gaming space. To emphasize the contrast between the disreputable gaming halls and the new, family friendly arcade, the proprietors of these establishments sought to promulgate an image of cleanliness. Newman writes: "Video games had no old reputation as playthings of gamblers, criminals, and hoodlums. They were considered more 'intellectual' amusements, which was an indication of their class status in relation to other games" (Newman 39). The production of this new space in turn created a new generation of arcade clientele: affluent adolescents obsessed with watching each other play, aiming for high scores and getting the longest playtime out of a single quarter.

This arcade generation experienced co-located gaming similar to the PC bang, which continues to serve as a primary space for gaming in Korea. Both spaces serve as a designated location for gamers to hone their skill and engage in informal, spontaneous competition with friends. In fact, Jun-Sok Huhh in his article "The Culture and Business of PC Bangs in Korea"

claims that "the corporeal function of the PC bang can be seen as a contemporary equivalent of the social space of the arcade in the 1970s" (Huhh 30). The two spaces were developed at roughly the same time, but served different purposes in their respective societies. While a desire to attract well-off patrons catalyzed the growth of the American arcade, the Korean PC bang's genesis can be attributed in part to the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s. The space was created when, as a way to revitalize the national economy, the Korean government focused on improving broadband capabilities. At the same time, Korean companies acquired rights to American real-time strategy game *StarCraft* and distributed it to the PC bangs that were popular hangouts for the youth and recently unemployed. The game's popularity exploded, and countless gamers flocked to PC bangs in order to play. As Dean Chan puts it "Although broadband connection was, strictly speaking, not necessary… early Korean Internet users, nonetheless, considered a fast and reliable connection indispensable when playing *StarCraft,* effectively consolidating the PC bang as the preferred gaming venue" (Chan 26).

The arcade or PC bang's importance lies in its ability to facilitate both online and offline interactions between gamers. Both serve as examples of what American sociologist Ray Oldenburg refers to as "third places" or "the great good place"-- spaces away from home (the first place) and work (the second place) that exist to promote informal socialization and connection with one's friends and neighbors (Oldenburg 14)[4]. Third places, according to Oldenburg, not only play a key role in one's personal well-being, but also pave the way for casual interaction between neighbors and build community. While games are often viewed as an

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[4] While Oldenburg claims on pg. 31 that "a room full of people intent on video games is not a third place," as he believes that players will be more focused on the game than on socialization, I believe that evidence strongly indicates that out-of-game talk is a prominent and essential aspect of gaming spaces. See Judith Ackermann's "Anything but Speechless" for more on face-to-face communication in co-located gaming settings.

activity for youth to relax after a long day of school and studying, ethnographer Florence Chee argues that PC bangs serve a far more diverse clientele, and are a vital third place in Korean culture. She writes:

> In Korea, such third places become especially important because entertaining one's friends is rarely done in the home. At a third place, such as a PC bang, one can choose from online games, e-mail, online chat, Websurfing, visiting matchmaking sites, people watching, eating, smoking, being with big groups of friends, or just being with one's significant other in a friendlier setting. A PC bang also has been known to be a cheap place for shelter in the middle of the night, or within the broader context of an unkind job market, a place for the unemployed to spend the day. Given these social dynamics, the PC bang is the site of numerous significant social interactions (Chee 231).

Even after in-home internet connections were strong enough to support the play of popular online games, Koreans still gravitated to the PC bang as a site for collaboration with in-game teammates, participation in local competitions, and offline socialization (Huhh). The importance of offline interaction is not to be underestimated. Not only does shared space allow in-game guilds to meet up in person while collaborating on in-game missions and battles, it also paves the way for casual, out-of-game talk.

It was this interaction with his good friends, not the intense, repetitive practice that one may associate with high-level gamers, that motivated 24-year-old South Korean professional *League of Legends* player Joosung "Olleh" Kim to pursue esports as a career. In November 2018, I conducted a brief interview with Olleh via online call, inquiring as to his personal experiences of becoming a professional player as well as his overall observations of Korean

game culture. He shared that he played *League* for the first time when a good friend invited him to a PC bang before high school graduation-- their last chance to hang out together before their different college plans separated them. At the PC bang, Kim was introduced to the game that would eventually become his career, and fondly described times when he met up with friends for casual play and friendly one-on-one competitions. Just three months later, Kim moved to Seoul after being scouted by KT Corporation, one of the largest telecommunications companies in Korea, to join the KT Rolster Arrows, a professional *League of Legends* team (Wang). Kim's story is just one example of the importance of offline contexts in constructing the overall gaming experience. The application of Lefebvre's model demonstrates how spaces of representation manifested in the conversations one has with their friends and teammates usurp the designations of the space itself -- in this case the PC bang was originally just a provider of fast Internet access -- thus creating a spatialization unique to the individual (Huhh 27). Gamers' lived experiences have driven the production of the PC bang space we are familiar with today with all of its norms and connotations.

While the PC bang continues to thrive in South Korea, designated, social gaming spaces in America are incredibly scarce. While some gamers organize LAN parties or live near a PC gaming center, the stereotypical gamer in America plays in a room by themself. This idea of gamers as "kids in the basement" stems from the culture of post-WWII American suburbs. In his arguments about the lack of third places in America, Oldenburg claims that consumerism-focused urban spaces in America have fostered the belief that in order to take a break from the business of everyday life, one must retreat away from community spaces instead of enjoying off-time in a social establishment. "Thus," writes Oldenburg, "while Germans relax

amid the rousing company of the *bier garten* or the French recuperate in their animated little bistros, Americans turn to massaging, meditating, jogging, hot-tubbing, or escape fiction. While others take full advantage of their freedom to associate, we glorify our freedom *not* to associate" (Oldenburg 10). This freedom not to associate has been manifested in casual gaming. As arcade favorites became available for home play, gamers forewent the relative unknown of outside space to play in the familiar safety of the home. "Domesticating" the arcade experience by moving it into the home allowed video games to fit into the idealized vision of the middle-class American experience and gave them a consistent identity (Newman 76). And modern gamers have taken this a step further. Not only are games played in the home, they are also typically seen as a solo activity, not as the group bonding experience advertisers often promulgate.

While the domestication of gaming has made American gamers more reclusive, that does not mean they are not social. For many casual gamers, online relationships take the place of in-person ones, and the culture of gaming in America is one largely confined to online spaces of interaction. Research on these online communities reveals how gamers' development of social capital allows them to produce a new type of social space confined entirely to the Internet. Research by Sabine Trepte identifies two types of social capital-- "Bridging social capital refers to weak social ties in which people feel informed and inspired by each other. Bonding social capital refers to strong social ties delivering emotional support and understanding" (Trepte 832). Trepte asserts that both of these are fostered in online gaming spaces. While physical proximity is one of the factors that contributes to the formation of social capital, social proximity plays a large role as well. For in-game clans, active members and administrators/leaders gain friendship and social support as they collaborate on out-of-game activities such as clan management (Trepte

837). Video games' focus on collaboration and interaction paves the way for the formation of connections between players with common interests.

However, despite the fact that online gaming communities and Oldenburg's third places share many common characteristics, these virtual spaces are not, in fact, truly "great good places." In "There's No Place Like Home," Jeffrey Wimmer isolates Oldenburg's essential identifiers of a third place, and evaluates whether or not online gaming spaces meet each criterion. Overall, Wimmer concluded that "Due to the entertainment and profit orientation of the providers, online gaming platforms and their gamer networks can only be compared with real third places to a limited extent. Yet, they do support social interaction among their users, and thereby provide a form of public value for the gaming community" (Wimmer 121). While online gaming communities facilitate group action and have numerous positive social effects, they do not emphasize conversation as a primary activity -- one of Oldenburg's key identifiers.

Conversely, co-located gaming enables far more conversation -- both related to and unrelated to actions in the game itself. A study on discourse at Local Area Network (LAN) parties found that participants were communicating during 99% of their time at the event (Ackermann 186). The addition of in-person talk can turn what is perceived as a solo activity into a third place activity, and allows participants to reap the numerous benefits of regular third place attendance. Hence, one can conclude that the differences in spatial practice between online gaming spaces and in-person third places contribute to a difference in gamer identity. According to Oldenburg, people who frequent third places infuse their day with "novelty, perspective, spiritual tonic, and friends by the set" (Oldenburg 44). Frequenting such a space positively affects one's outlook on life and allows them to spend time with a diverse group of others. In

some parts of Korea, PC bangs are found on nearly every block, giving gamers a chance to interact and play with those they live closest to (Chee 232). When a role of games in society is to facilitate interaction, gamers are inherently seen as more social and given greater opportunity to form connections. Furthermore, co-located gaming allows players to manifest their in-game identity through physical, in-person action. Dean Chan observes that in-game team hierarchies in online game *Lineage* force each player to maintain a specific role, whether that of a leader or a soldier. During *GongSunJung*, or massive combats between teams, the players' behavior in the PC bang mirrors their social role in the team, with "leaders" barking orders and "platoons" sitting next to one another furiously coordinating each maneuver. Games such as *Lineage* are, Chan argues, built for PC bangs and in-person collaboration, and they allow groups to translate out-of-game social roles and group dynamics into in-game activities (Chan 28).

The spaces of professional play are also important to consider when examining how esports is affected by the relationship between space and identity. Examining traditional sports allows one to see how professionalized competitions have evolved alongside societal values, and offers another perspective on modern perceptions of spectatorship and space. Contrasting spaces such as a massive arena and a local gymnasium clearly demonstrates the difference between the scale of professional and casual sport. Professional competitions are given dedicated spaces that display the grand scale of the event. The development of these spaces over time demonstrates how fans produce space that reflect their ideal viewing experiences. Soccer fields, for instance, are transitioning from outdoor grass to domed stadiums with huge television screens, floodlighting, and plastic artificial turf. Critique on these spaces describe them as "placeless," or "inauthentic," forgoing the natural, rough elements of sport in favor of a standardized, uniform

entertainment space (Bale 40-41). However, these spaces demonstrate the audience's desire for a safe, comfortable place to watch the game.

Television and screens have also become an essential part of the viewing experience. Argues John Bale, the fact that the best seats in the stadium offer a premium view of the screen suggests that television is not a substitute for being at the stadium in person but an integral part of watching the game (Bale 33-34). The connection between screen and spectator has paved the way for esports, where one hundred percent of the action takes place on screen. Screens mediate the relationship between the professional player and their avatar, then broadcast the avatar's movements to the spectator. While this reliance on screens has fostered what may appear to be extreme placelessness in esports, one cannot claim esports to be "inauthentic" in the same way that the domed, jumbotron-laden stadiums of professional soccer have, to some, taken away from the fundamental, rough-and-tumble nature of the sport. Screens, in this context, unlike in the context of traditional sports, do not mediate the experience, they are the object itself. Instead, esports spectatorship is often interwoven with other aspects of the social gaming experience, creating authentic channels for fans to connect with the game and its professional players. Just as traditional sports fans have adopted modern luxuries and technological advancements to create their own viewing space, esports fans have also produced their own ideal space for spectatorship. The use of screens as a medium does not speak to a lack of authenticity, rather it demonstrates one of many key distinctions between esports and traditional sports, an epiphenomenon of contrasting spectator expectations and experiences.

Aside from mediating spectatorship, screens and technology also facilitate the production of spaces for player-fan interaction that do not exist in traditional sports. Olleh explains that as

an esports professional, he does not see himself as an "idol" like a professional athlete would be. Instead, he believes that esports players are "closer" to their fans-- people fans can connect with as opposed to untouchable celebrities (Wang). The social spaces that gamers use to interact with one another also allow them to interact with professional players. In many multiplayer games, high level gamers have a chance of being placed on a team with or against their favorite professional players, who often livestream casual play before or after practice. T. L. Taylor writes in *Raising the Stakes,* "this connection, between everyday leisure and fandom, between amateur and pro players, helps build strong affective attachments" (Taylor 189). Other online social networks also facilitate interaction between players and their fans. In February 2018, I led a group of Olleh's American fans in creating an online discussion server on Discord, a social platform made for gamers, to create a space for fans to interact with both Olleh and one another. In line with Trepte's research on social capital in games, server administrators and some active members have built bridging social capital with Olleh, and both bridging and bonding social capital with one another. Fans frequently discuss topics unrelated to Olleh and *League of Legends* and exchanging advice on real-life topics such as careers, friendships/romantic relationships, and family issues with other members. The ability for fans and professional players living across the world to share spaces in this way demonstrates the role of space in contributing to the unique identity of the American esports fan.

However, the barrier of entry into esports fandom is a steep one. The relative obscurity of esports spaces in America makes it difficult to draw a mainstream audience, and although spaces like the Olleh community are beneficial and enjoyable, they do not grant the benefits of third place participation. Even in South Korea, where esports is a larger part of culture, fans note a

distinct generational gap in esports knowledge. But according to Korean e-Sports Association (KeSPA) head Jun Byung-hun, this gap can be closed. Says Jun,"Parents view games as distractions from studying, he said, while children see them as an important part of their social existence… The best way to avoid addiction is for families to play games together" (Mozur). Just as social space allows gamers to connect with one another, producing new, in-person social space for non-esports fans to connect with gaming culture will help esports develop its mainstream identity. Like gaming in arcades and PC bangs, gaming at with family also paves the way for offline and online connections. After studying a series of personal interviews with gaming families, researcher Lina Eklund notes that "the informants emphasize digital games as social facilitators, offering arenas for joint activity, while adding continuity to relationships with family members, those both close and geographically separated" (Eklund). Just as playing sports together is a stereotypically American way for fathers and sons to bond, playing video games together creates similar space for interaction.

Promoting esports as a social activity will not only dispel the "kids in the basement" stereotype, but, as shown by the development of American baseball, will also help to bring the competition into the mainstream. Many American news sources attempt to equate esports and their traditional counterparts such as baseball, which have become accepted and even celebrated parts of culture much like esports have in Korea. However, in order to become the heralded competition that it is today, baseball underwent a construction of space similar to Korean esports. According to Benjamin G. Rader's *American Sports,* baseball began in the 1840s and 1850s with small ball playing fraternities, which gave young men "opportunities for displaying their physical skills as well as companionship and a stronger sense of belonging" (Rader 53). Baseball

fraternities were a place where players could cultivate relationships both in-game and out-of-game. As competitive teams began to gain more notoriety in the newspapers, fraternities began to refer to baseball as "the national game." The game's unifying nature appealed to those tired of the divisiveness present in the mid-1850s, and baseball soon became a key part of America's identity (Rader 54).

From a social pursuit for young men to a national pastime-- both American baseball and Korean esports have followed this path. Baseball fraternities and PC bangs have given these competitions visibility and legitimacy. While these spaces do help players prime themselves for competition, their primary purpose is casual, friendly play. For competitors and spectators, these are third places, places that provide reprieve from the struggles of everyday life and opportunities for co-located play. In the world of American esports, online social spaces serve as a primary medium for gamers to form communities, play casually, and view professional matches. While these online spaces cannot be considered a true third place, spectators, professional players, broadcasters, and game designers have all contributed their experiences into the world of esports, and crafted a spatialization that reflects the idiosyncrasies of American esports.

The mainstream media has propagated stereotypes of esports that focus solely on the concept of the industry, and do not take into account this spatialization. "Kids" do not become esports fans by playing games alone in the basement, but by frequenting third places and building social capital. Many attempt to legitimize esports in America by flaunting the massive venues, the big-name investors, and the hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue. However, the development of Korean esports or American baseball calls for a change in focus. Producing

space, particularly third places, plays an integral role in the formation of both professional and spectator identities and creates new spatializations unique to esports. Opportunities for co-located play redefine the role of games in society, and give gamers a chance to negotiate in-game and out-of-game social roles while forming connections with others. Highlighting the contrast between American and Korean esports ultimately demonstrates how both casual and professional gaming identities are influenced by their spatializations.