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Culture and Business of PC Bangs in Korea

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In this article, the culture and business of PC bangs in Korea are explored. Once just a convenient spot for high-speed connection, the PC bang has become a space for nurturing online gaming cultures. This article addresses two central characteristics of PC bang that have ensured its success. First, the paper explores the social and cultural dimensions of the PC bang as a space that nurtures the negotiation of offline and online relationships around online gaming cultures in Korea. Second, the paper discusses the role PC bangs play in the emergence of online games as a dominant game genre for Korean players. On the business side, a specialized pricing policy for PC bangs has made a vibrant business environment both for game publishers and PC bangs. Recent introduction of a micropayment business model, however, could be read as the demise of game publishers and PC bangs' synergies.

Keywords: *PC bang; broadband Internet in Korea; Korean online games; StarCraft; Lineage*

South Korea (henceforth Korea) has become a key player in the global online gaming industry. This is a surprising phenomenon given that Korea played an insignificant role in the games industry prior to the emergence of online gaming.¹ Although the fast spread of broadband Internet connection facilitated this change, it was the release of the online game *StarCraft* by Blizzard Entertainment that really ensured Korea's position in the global gaming industry. Up until 2002, the sales record of the game in Korea was estimated to be 3.5 million copies—more than half of the worldwide sales volume of 6 million (Kim, 2005). With the launch of *StarCraft* young people en masse abandoned popular leisure activities such as billiards, arcade games, and Korean checkers. Interest in *StarCraft* went beyond the actual playing of the game, encompassing other game-related sectors such as e-sports.²

The spectacular popularity of *StarCraft* forged a particular relationship between Internet users and game developers that ensured the success of other massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as *Lineage*, although its game play was not innovative.³ Rather, its success was guaranteed by its cultivation of emerging interactions among MMORPG players. This phenomenon was perhaps even more surprising given most Koreans entering the world of online gaming had little if any experience in electronic gaming such as console and PC games. This, of course, begs the question: What was so compelling about online games that they attracted novice gamers en masse?

There were other decisive factors that contributed to the success of online gaming in Korea. Local experts have argued that the high rate of broadband penetration helped by the high proportion of apartment living coupled with the particular relationship Korea has toward the Internet and community informed the success of online gaming (e.g., Kanellos, 2004; Kosak, 2003; Pyramid Research, 2002; Russell, 2006). Chee and Jin (in press) stressed political economic factors that have cultivated the mainstream success of Korean gaming. In this article, I would like to focus on an element that has been relatively ignored until recently: the *PC bang*.⁴ Although the PC bang has played a critical role in shaping and forming the sociocultural context as noted by Florence Chee (2006), the role of the PC bang in the dynamics of business—despite its significance—has been neglected. In the face of the high accessibility of broadband available in homes, many Korean players continue to prefer the social context of PC bangs, highlighting the importance of the space in providing context and meaning between online and offline experiences of online gaming. In sum, this article addresses the unique and localized characteristics of the evolution of PC bangs in the rise of Korean online gaming.⁵

First, I discuss the short history of PC bangs in the context of the Internet and gaming cultures in Korea. The second section deals with the cultural specificities of the Korean PC bang. The third section illustrates the business relationship that PC bangs have with game publishers. The final section summarizes the discussion to reflect on the contemporary milieu of PC bangs.

The Game of the *Bang*: The Emergence of PC Bangs From Convenient Connectivity to a Dedicated Gaming Place

To non-Koreans, the notion of the PC bang is often misinterpreted as some local version of an Internet café. However, for Koreans, the PC bang is a social space that traverses online and offline co-presence (Chee, 2006), a space that is associated with the phenomenon of online gaming and the online/offline communities it reproduces.

The first Internet connections in Korea were introduced 1994. Apart from the connectivity offered by universities or research laboratories, most individual users were connected to the Internet via dial-up modems. At that time networks mainly consisted of text-based bulletin board system services, not the Internet with graphical Web browsers. As a matter of course, the Internet was limited to the concerns of amateur enthusiasts.

In 1995 the first commercial examples of Internet cafés, providing faster connection, began to emerge. This was a far cry from the 22,000 PC bangs that now grace most second-level buildings in Korea's capital, Seoul; these earlier examples tended to be located near universities to service students. These early Internet cafés offered little more than a place for Internet connection and office-related exercises such as document printing. The number of Internet cafés remained insignificant until 1998, when two critical events redefined the role of technology in Korean everyday life. In the

wake of the 1997 economic crisis of the Asia-Pacific region that saw Korea bailed out by the International Monetary Fund, 1998 heralded not only the implementation of broadband policies by the Korean government but also the introduction of StarCraft.

In 1997, the government eliminated the long-term monopoly of Korea's only telecommunication company, Korea Telecom (KT). In 1997 telecommunication competitors such as Hanaro Telecom, which started its main business with the broadband connection—asymmetric digital subscriber line—were established. For Hanaro, this choice was strategic because it believed that the broadband connection business would have more competitive advantages than voice call. Whereas the voice-call market was already saturated, with KT capturing more than 90% of voice-call users, broadband connection represented an unexplored realm in the world of telecommunication services at that time. It would appear that the decision was obvious.

Concurrent to industry development, the government viewed broadband connection as a foundation for advancing in the so-called information era. In addition to various kinds of national campaigns celebrating the possibilities of the Internet, the Korean government gave Hanaro a head start by prohibiting KT from entering the broadband market, at least for the time being (Aizu, 2002). Later, this advanced the sound competition between the two companies in broadband markets that contributed to the fast and wide spread of the Internet.⁶

Without the demand for content such as online games, there would not have been any need for a faster dial-up connection. StarCraft served as a catalyst for creating an increasing demand for broadband connection. Although broadband connection was not necessary for game playing, early Korean Internet users considered broadband connection indispensable when playing StarCraft. Moreover, the introduction of a low, monthly, flat ISP pricing policy for broadband connection also encouraged online gaming to flourish. It was these events that led to opportunities for both Internet cafés and game developers. One such example was the seminal MMORPG Lineage, by NCSoft, launched in February 1998. It was the first generation of MMORPG online games that took advantage of high-speed Internet connection. The huge success of Lineage helped to forge a receptive environment for online gaming in general. Once the uncertainty about the business was lifted, a big rush to the MMORPG in Korea began in late 1999 (see Table 1).

It should be noted that these events had gained their momentum through the pivotal role of the PC bang. As shown in Figure 1, the growth rate of PC bang businesses between 1998 and 1999 was remarkable. This growth was inevitably informed by the fact that in 1998 Internet cafés offered their visitors a more comfortable and conducive environment for gaming. At first, the ambience of the place altered from a quiet library style into an open, frenetic coin-operated setting, with most selling snacks and beverages. Food delivery was also allowed for customers. The pricing policy of PC bangs encouraged their visitors to play longer; the more you stayed on, the lower the hourly charge. It was not a coincidence that the Korean word “Game *bang*” became interchangeable with PC bang.

Table 1
Trend of Game Developers and Publishers in Korea, 1999–2004

Type of Company	Year					
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Developer	416	952	1,381	1,774	2,059	2,567
Publisher	278	547	736	859	921	1,001

Source: *Game BaekSeo* (Game White Paper, 2005; p. 118, Table 1-3-1-01), Seoul, Korea: Korea Game Development & Promotion Institute.

Another clue to the cultural transformation of the PC bang can be provided by its business trends after 2000. It is intriguing that the number of PC bangs has remained high despite high broadband penetration in the home. If the convenience of broadband had been the only or most significant motive for visiting PC bangs, business should have declined from 2000. However, as can be noted from Figure 1, the business of PC bangs has changed little since widespread use of home broadband. This phenomenon suggests that what attracts players to the PC bang is not technological (i.e., broadband access). In short, the PC bang was far from just a site for broadband connectivity, but an active part in fostering the social and cultural aspects of Korean online gaming that ensured its mainstream success. In the next section I discuss the cultural specificities of the PC bang.

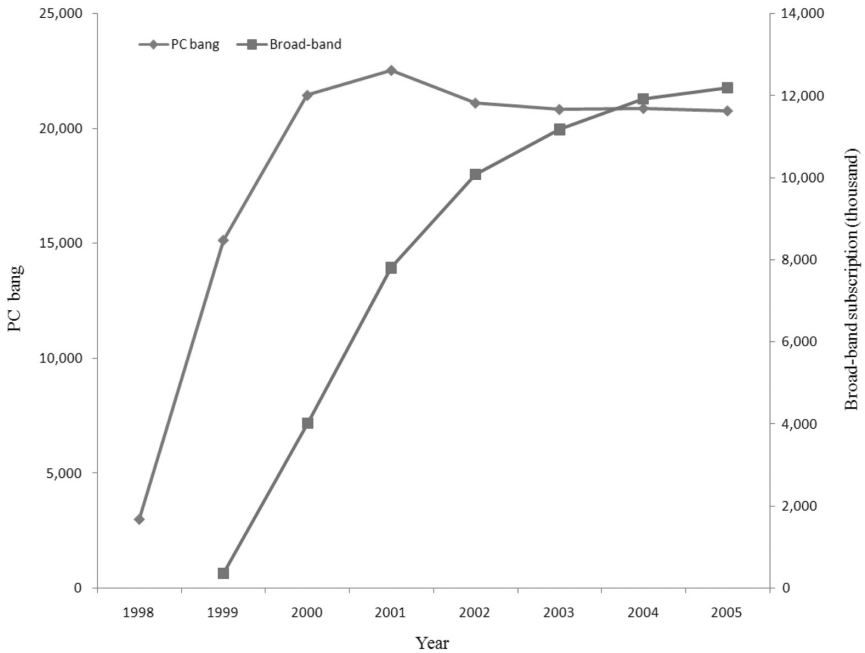
Locating the PC Bang: Cultural Specificities

As noted, once home broadband was easily available, one would expect that there would be little motivation or reason to visit a PC bang. If you could enjoy playing games in the comfort of your home with lower costs, why bother to venture out to play the same online games? So the question remains, Why does the PC bang continue to be so compelling to many young Koreans?

The Arcade Equivalent in the Age of the Internet?

The rise of online gaming in Korea is synonymous to the birth of the PC bang. Compared with other gaming forms, online games forged new gaming territories by increasing the capacity of the game to include many players. Departing from the experience of single-player or limited multiplayer games, these games forced new modes of game play and a sense of community that precipitated from online to offline relationships (Chee, 2006).

Figure 1
Trend of PC Bang and Broadband Subscription in Korea, 1998–2005



Although many interface designs have sought to create feelings of contact in online relationships, contact via the Internet is still a mediated and indirect experience. Gaming interactions in the virtual world are inevitably informed by offline experiences and significantly offline context. Therefore, we take our offline experiences into the world of online game play. In short, the significance of playing online games—surrounded by other players in the offline context—creates particular relationships and online and offline synergies that cannot be underestimated. Thus, the corporeal function of the PC bang can be seen as a contemporary equivalent of the social space of the arcade in the 1970s.⁷ It is interesting that the PC bang, as a space for forging emerging online gaming cultures, reenacts the fun of the arcade age. The PC bang has functioned as an offline complement to the indirectness of online gaming. Although the contents that PC bangs delivered such as MMORPG were nascent, the PC bang made use of playing practices that have their genealogies in old arcade gaming.

A typical example is small-scale local StarCraft contests that were popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Before the official coining of the e-sports industry, PC bangs often sponsored StarCraft contests of their own. Although Battle.net—a service

provided by the developer to make online matches among players—was a reliable large-scale scoring board for the competition, players often wanted to contend and compete directly in the same offline space. These early local contests founded what would become the burgeoning e-sports industry in Korea. Aside from competitions in Battle.net, Korean players derived much pleasure in playing StarCraft with players while sharing the same physical and cultural environment. Even today, professional league game players (“pro-leagues”) still conduct preliminary elimination contests in PC bangs—still the ground for aspiring e-sports superstars.

In Korea, one of the favorite leisure activities for young people is playing online games with their friends at the PC bang. As Chee (2006) observed, PC bangs operate as “third spaces” in between home and schoolwork. It is not unusual for schoolchildren to drop by their local PC bang with their classmates to play casual online games. Despite their ability to access the games at home via fast broadband connection, it is the physical, offline social space of the PC bang that compels them to return day after day, month after month, year after year. Here the ongoing popularity of PC bangs demonstrates the significance of the offline social setting in maintaining online game play.

The PC Bang and MMORPG Players

Generally, Korean MMORPGs have placed too much emphasis on fighting among players. More often than not, this bias has invited misunderstanding by non-Korean players and game critics in the form of media effects arguments. In comparison to MMORPGs made in the West such as EverQuest and World of Warcraft, Korean games seem to possess less crafted and complicated narratives. However, such readings miss the point of online gaming as a social activity in which players bring to the game offline forms of socializing. The crucial point is that the so-called dearth of prefabricated contents in Korean games lends itself to players importing their own modes of play and socializing in the game space. Most Korean online games have evolved along this path, in which credence is given to users’ participation in the virtual showdown. This is clearly evidenced in the phenomenon of GongSungJun—a massive territorial warfare between two guilds in Lineage.⁸ With these kinds of in-game warfare, common to all other MMORPGs, the pivotal role of the offline site of the PC bang in nurturing online relationships such as guilds cannot be underestimated.

Since the early years of Lineage, some PC bangs supported their representative guilds in the game. They gave their guilds discounts and special allowances such as the exclusive occupation of the PC bang when big battles were waged. These guild members provided stable revenues for PC bangs. In addition, in-game battles carried out at their PC bangs were perfect sights for promotion (Huhh & Park, 2005). So-called real-money trading (RMT) also originated from the promotional strategies of PC bangs. In 2000, as the competition among PC bangs increasingly intensified, some invented promotional tools for attracting customers. One such promotional activity was the purchase of in-game

items from their expert customers to entice new customers. Thus the birth and rise of RMT in Korea directly resulted from local trading between PC bang owners and their visitors.

It was the emergence of RMT that really initiated the rapid growth of a secondary market for MMORPG players. The experience of RMT at PC bangs provided a simple way for players to learn about RMT. At an early stage of RMT, PC bangs afforded one of the strongest buying powers in the market (Gamestudy.org, 2005).⁹ Around 2001, some PC bangs started turning themselves into so-called gold farming shops that specialized in making in-game items for RMT. Because many players were on the receiving end of RMT, the trend was viewed favorably, which undoubtedly ensured the prospering of RMT.

Game On: The Evolution of Business Between PC Bangs and Game Publishers

As can be seen, the PC bang has played an integral role in the rise of Korean online gaming. Hence, it is not so surprising that PC bangs have worked closely with game publishers. As mentioned previously, the first best-selling game in Korea was StarCraft. The success of StarCraft resulted in its Korean publishing agency, Han-bit Soft, becoming a major company in the games industry. The sales volume of StarCraft at PC bangs, as well as sales from individual users, was estimated to be considerable.¹⁰ As most of the visitors wanted to play StarCraft by network connection, owners were forced to buy the game.¹¹ StarCraft was exceptional, however. Neither single-player games nor games with limited multiplayer contents distributed as stand-alone CD-ROM packages like StarCraft have gained such noticeable success. In contrast to this slump in sales for other games, MMORPGs distributed exclusively online have maintained high popularity since Lineage. Therefore, it is unquestionable that main business partners of PC bangs have been online game publishers.

The Price of IP: IP Pricing and Solutions for Korean Online Gaming

What is so compelling about selling online games at PC bangs? At a glance, there appears to be no compelling reason why a customer would buy a game at a PC bang. A player who would play an MMORPG at a PC bang might not only have to endure the subscription but also the additional charge by the PC bang. Game publishers, however, invented a smart pricing strategy called Internet Protocol (IP) pricing, targeting the PC bang.

IP pricing means that the game publisher charges a price according to the number of fixed IP addresses used by each affiliated PC bang. With this policy, for example, a player could enjoy Lineage only at PC bangs without paying a subscription for an individual user account. In the beginning, this approach was only exercised by a select few PC bangs that made use of free playing as their promotion. It was NCSoft

Table 2
Revenue Profile of NCSoft by Business Sector, 2000–2004

Type of Sector	Year				
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
PC bang	39,386	61,370	53,331	48,005	74,600
Individual user	10,738	43,558	74,726	88,603	133,788
Other affiliates	4,479	8,336	4,680	1,681	547
Loyalties	1,296	9,327	21,873	28,248	37,959
Total	55,900	122,593	154,610	166,537	246,894

Note: The data are U.S. dollars in ten thousands.

Source: *Fact Sheet* (NCSoft, Inc., Seoul, Korea; retrieved from http://www.ncsoft.com/kor/nccompany/ir_data_report04.asp).

that introduced IP pricing for the PC bang to undermine industry competition around ordinary simple pricing (Wi, 2006, p. 83).

On the one hand, IP pricing helped online game developers and publishers to have a more secure infrastructure for profit. As Table 2 suggests, during the early years, earnings from PC bangs had been the biggest part of revenues for game publishers. In addition, IP pricing made it possible to predict the demand of a game under development more accurately than before, which in turn helped to fund its costs.

On the other hand, IP pricing was a convenient option for both players and PC bangs. The actual hourly price for playing at a PC bang was slightly higher than a monthly subscription. The player, however, could avoid the term limitation of flat monthly pricing and did not need to subscribe to a broadband connection. Needless to say, as stated earlier, the economic and social advantages of playing at PC bangs were also an important motive for visitors. IP pricing allowed customers of PC bangs to have more flexibility and advantages over individual subscription.

PC bangs could also profit from IP pricing, which was important, given the minimal profit margins stemming from the gap between user pays and charges by game publishers. From 2000 to 2004, the average monthly charge at an IP was about US \$50 (Wi, 2006, p. 103). If the IP of a PC bang was assumed to be occupied for 10 hr per day, monthly revenues from this would amount to about \$450.¹² Even with other operational expenses, the costs of managing PC bang overheads were relatively small, ensuring a good income.

Conflict From Micropayment and Reconfiguring the Relationship

As the heyday of MMORPG faded, casual games that emphasized the competitive dimensions of multiplayer experience—rather than the previous typical massiveness as witnessed in Lineage—emerged as the next online gaming trend in 2004.¹³ Because

casual games are basically free, profits for publishers are via micropayments by players for in-game cash, in-game items, and so on. It is not hard to imagine that this change caused a conflict of interest between PC bangs and game publishers. Unlike the MMORPG with its subscription, there was no nominal price for playing such a game, resulting in IP pricing policy within PC bangs that was irrelevant. However, the relationship between game publishers and PC bangs continued as the latter still provided a large portion of game publishers' total revenues.

A typical incident in this new relationship was demonstrated in 2005 with the conflict between game company Nexon and PC bangs. Nexon, one of the giants in the Korean gaming market, made a determined decision to force PC bangs into the same IP pricing for its casual games as applied to the MMORPGs. Unequivocally, PC bangs were fiercely against this policy. According to their claim, players do not have any incentive to visit PC bangs for playing such casual free games, and thus the implication of IP pricing would encroach on their potential income. The early stages of confrontation escalated into collective refusal by PC bangs to all charges associated with Nexon games.

However, this collective action was soon undermined as individual PC bangs quietly decided to pay the charge set by Nexon. With the popularity of Nexon's *Kart Rider* surpassing the registered subscriptions of *Lineage* (Hjorth, 2006), PC bangs had no other option. Nexon also backed down by implementing a series of decreases in their charges for IP at PC bangs. Although Nexon won the conflict, the profitability of the PC bang was not seriously damaged. This is another clue in the complex culture and business of PC bangs in Korea that has continued to remain popular despite shifts in the gaming industry and game play.

Today's relationship between the two institutions in Korean online gaming—the PC bang and game publishers—is heading toward a more cooperative future. Some recent games based on micropayment models do not charge in PC bangs, with a few publishers even sharing their revenues from selling virtual assets with PC bangs. *Special Force*, another popular online game by Neowiz, sought to intentionally emphasize cooperation between game publishers and PC bangs. Neowiz considered the PC bang as not just a revenue source but rather a strategic partner in enticing players to pay more for particular games. To enhance this scenario, Neowiz added various exclusive in-game items that could only be purchased at PC bangs. A growing number of publishers were taking similar approaches by giving extra bonuses to users purchasing virtual assets at PC bangs. This kind of cooperative strategy is emerging as an alternative model for micropayment-based games.

Conclusion: Specters of the PC Bang

This article has outlined some of the defining characteristics informing the culture and business of PC bangs in Korea. The PC bang is definitely a distinctive business

operating from Internet cafés in that it puts much more emphasis on online gaming and the association with offline socializing. It evolved from a convenient spot for high-speed connection to a dedicated online gaming place. The PC bang has functioned as a social space for converging online relationships with the indirect nature of online gaming. In a sense, it is the arcade redux in the age of the Internet.

The PC bang has also been an important collaborator in the business of online gaming, as demonstrated by the cooperative role it has played with game publishers in IP pricing. With the recent rise in casual gaming and the implementation of free-to-play games with micropayment, the relationship between game publisher and PC bang has taken on a new dimension. However, this delicate ecosystem could be possibly undermined in the future.

Last year witnessed a serious threat to the Korean gaming industry that occurred with the scandal of *Sea Story*. Played on an electronic gambling coin-operated machine, *Sea Story* basically served to blur boundaries between gambling and gaming in Korea (Kim, 2006). The aftermath was even more destructive than the actual scandal. The huge success of *Sea Story* has induced some PC bangs to be transformed into illegal online gambling houses. These PC bangs are mutually syndicated via secretive Internet networks that provide gamblers with more real and large-scale environments. The implementation of the regulation against such undesirable deviations from the original PC bang has not been perfected and seems impossible to ensure.

If the present rapid turnover trend continues, many PC bangs will no longer be recognizable as the former phenomenon for supporting online and offline gaming and socializing. Returning to the earlier arcade discussion, arguably the PC bang, an original and integral part of the culture and business of Korean gaming history, could become a gaming specter. Like the arcade, the PC bang could possibly become a place of, and in, the past. This possible death of the significance of the PC bang will inevitably affect the future of Korean gaming. Game over?

Notes

1. Before 1998 when Blizzard's *StarCraft* came to Korea, electronic gaming had been a dark shadow in Korean culture. The business started in the early 1980s with the illegal copying of Japanese arcade games (the importing of Japanese products was not allowed until early 2001). All games operating in arcades were pirated versions orchestrated by local engineers. Arcade games gained some popularity among the youth; most parents tended to take the media effects approach toward gaming, viewing it as possibly undermining children's education. The government considered computer gaming as a matter of regulation, thus the affairs on gaming became the responsibility of the Ministry of Health. The popularity of arcade games was not diffused enough for electronic gaming to enter into mainstream culture. PC gaming therefore remained the prerogative of geek culture.

2. See Lee (2005) for an outline of e-sports in Korea.

3. The game scored 5.5, "mediocre," at Gamespot.com (Dulin, 2002).

4. Rossignol (2005) provided a nice outline of PC bang culture and other Korean gaming scenes by non-Koreans.

5. My perspective is one of more endogenous explanations on the big bang of Korean gaming. For a different perspective that places more emphasis on the structure of political economy, see Chee and Jin (in press).

6. The role of the Korean government in the development of Korean online gaming has been limited. Chee and Jin (in press) highlighted Korean government direct intervention in the games industry. But government interest followed the big and spontaneous success of StarCraft and Lineage. It is debatable as to how influential the Korean government's role in promoting the online games industry was in the resulting success of online games in Korea.

7. A documentary film by Lincoln Rucht (2007), *Chasing Ghosts: Beyond the Arcade*, illustrated this point very well. The title "Golden Age" could be viewed as a comment on the directness of gaming experiences.

8. The guild in Lineage is called "Blood Pledge," also the subtitle of Lineage. Many gamers in Korea say that GongSungJun may be the most addictive online gaming experience.

9. The mediation business for RMT started in late 2001 when Itembay (<http://www.itembay.com>) was first established. Itembay has been the largest middleman in Korea ever since, currently occupying about 60% of RMT mediations.

10. There are no precise statistics for the sales volume in PC bangs. About 30% of total sales are estimated to be from the purchase of PC bangs.

11. Park and Gillespie (2004) pointed to piracy protection as a contributing factor to PC bangs' success in Korea. This assertion, however, is not supported by actual facts. Initially, the online game in general is less at risk from piracy than the PC-based stand-alone game. There is no compelling reason why PC bangs did not support a piracy industry. As we have witnessed in various examples, no stand-alone games, with the exception of StarCraft, have gained from such regulations in piracy. Actually, piracy was not even in the list of issues relating to the rise of PC bangs.

12. The average hourly price of a PC bang was US \$1.50. Consequently, monthly revenues from an IP for 10 hr a day could be about \$450.

13. The casual game in Korea is not a pokerlike or puzzlelike game but an easy-to-learn arcade-style action game. Sometimes, game developers call it the "mid-session" game.

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