Fragmented industrial structure and fragmented resistance in Korea’s digital game industry

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Abstract
This article is part of the special issue Creative Labor in East Asia. By exploring specific politico-economic and institutional, conditions promoting actually existing precarity in Korean digital game labor, this study aims to examine how the industrial and institutional conditions of precarity affect digital game workers’ subjectivity. Under this theoretical and empirical consideration, the study first delineates how the rapid industrial transition to the mobile game market happens in relation to the Korean government’s deregulation policy on that particular market. It then scrutinizes the ways in which this industrial shift deepens labor precarity, promotes degradation of skills, and ultimately fragments workers in the digital game industry. Based on this structural analysis, it argues that the fragmented industrial structure of the digital game industry in Korea not only actually fosters contrasting labor subjectivities but also promotes fragmented resistances among Korean digital game workers. By critically evaluating both possibilities and limitations of the recent firm-centered union movements created by digital game workers, the study ultimately concludes that finding a way to connect organized unions to unorganized freelance workers is absolutely necessary to actually transform “precarity” into “solidarity.”

Keywords
Creative labor, digital game, digital labor, East Asia, precarity
Since the beginning of the new millennium, the Korean Wave has been re-generating and re-branding itself into the “Digital Korean Wave” with the fast growth of the digital game industry. This rapid industrial expansion of the Korean digital game industry—focusing on the development of online gaming—along with its increasing global circulation and consumption into the Western market offers a unique opportunity to examine “whether digital culture has changed the nature of the Korean Wave, from a regionally focused intracultural flow to include a Western-focused contraflow” in scholarship and media coverage (Jin, 2016). In contrast to the substantial attention on the consumption (i.e. Hjorth, 2007; Yoon & Cheon, 2014) and circulation (i.e. Jin, 2011; Jin & Chee, 2008) of Korea’s digital game industry in the global cultural market, there has been relatively little academic attention on the production side of this equation. This research will begin to fill this gap by exploring the so-called “Digital Korean Wave” from the standpoint of the production system itself and the characteristics of the industry from the viewpoint of its creative workforce. The data from this research are based on qualitative in-depth interviews with 22 digital game workers, including various occupations such as game designer, artist, programmer, project director, project manager, and quality assurance (QA) and customer service (CS) staff in various kinds of game-related companies in Korea.

After examining recent debates on digital and creative labor, we will locate our theoretical framework in close connection with the way Asian scholars working on the topic of digital and creative labor try to contextualize the problem of creativity and precarity. Based on this theoretical consideration, we approach Korean video game labor as follows: First, we assume that more concrete political, economic, as well as institutional analysis, in the sense of Stuart Hall’s (1986) famous formulation of a material base only providing a “net of boundaries” or “the scope of choices,” is necessary before we move to the question of political agency and labor subjectivities, so it first explores how the rapid industrial transition toward the mobile game market takes place in relation to the Korean government’s deregulation policy on the mobile game market. Second, we examine how these political, economic, institutional and regulatory changes affect digital game workers’ working conditions and workplace politics. Thus, we scrutinize in what ways this industrial shift deepens labor precarity, promotes degradation of skills, and ultimately fragments workers in the digital game industry.

Third, we scrutinize how digital game workers experience, evaluate, negotiate, and even resist the changing institutional environment and working conditions. By asking how these precarious working and living conditions influence digital workers’ self-identity, we assume them to be “self-reflexive and negotiated autonomous subjects” (Banks, 2010) with given working and living conditions, rather than simply perceiving them as unilateral victims of the given precarity or voluntary conformists within the industrial structure. Through this framework, we attempt to read the ongoing negotiation and invented strategies of Korean digital game workers in relation to the concrete institutional and politico-economic context. Therefore, we show that the fragmented industrial structure of the digital game industry in Korea not only actually fosters contrasting labor subjectivities but also promotes fragmented resistances among Korean digital game workers. Finally, we try to explore how new forms of sociality could potentially be derived from the given precarious working and living conditions, by interpreting the potentiality of “political change” expressed in the recent uprising of the digital game workers’ union movement without romanticizing them. Thus, we argue that finding a way to connect organized unions to unorganized workers in the independent sector is indispensable to transforming “precarity” into “solidarity.”
Contextualizing “precarity” in Korea’s creative cultural industry through the lens of the actually existing precarity in the Asian context

In current academic discussion on creative and digital labor, the concept of “precarity” has been widely highlighted because it not only illuminates the very nature of work experiences under unstable labor conditions in the creative cultural industry (below CCI) but also reveals a new form of power, producing a specific subjectivity whose central psychological disposition is occupied by “risk” and “uncertainty” (Neilson & Coté, 2014). In a similar vein, Lorey (2015) argues that “precarization” as a deepening process of precarity in work–life should not only be perceived as a structural process describing labor insecurity, it also needs to be considered as a new mode of governing and being governed—with significant implications fostering certain types of subjectivities associated with “creative” labor. Simply put, traditionally, political economists in media and communication studies tend to be more interested in shedding light on how new mechanisms of (self-)exploitation and more covert forms of inequality emerged in CCI (Christopherson, 2008; Fuchs, 2014; Miller et al., 2005). On the contrary, cultural studies scholars influenced by neo-Foucaultian approaches of “governmentality” prefer to explore how “creative dispositif” (McRobbie, 2018) consisting of cultural discourses of “self-enterprise” (Gill, 2014; Neff et al., 2005), “passion for creativity” (Kim, 2014), and “autonomy” (Banks, 2010) promotes new types of labor subjectivities in alignment with growing global neoliberalism.

Alongside these two research trends, more recent studies—known as the “precariat movement” approach to creative and digital labor—explore the possibility of political insurgence by creative workers who no longer conform to the role model of worker in a post-industrial/neoliberal economy, but solidify themselves as a new form of political agency in opposition to their precarious working and living conditions (e.g. de Peuter, 2014a, 2014b; Kim, 2019; Murgia, 2014; Standing, 2011). This recent approach raises new research questions of how the felt and embodied experiences of precarity can possibly be translated into new modalities and grammars of solidarity and confrontation—and what the conditions and mechanisms for cultivating this new political agency might look like. And yet, what seems more important is to not universalize or hastily generalize this emerging new phenomenon, but to presume “the historical malleability and multiplicity of agents, forms and sites of workers’ responses to exploitation” (de Peuter, 2014b). In this regard, it is necessary to explore more concrete examples of both exploitation and struggle against precarization beyond the well-reported (or somewhat “overly represented”) Western experiences.

Looking beyond the Western situation to Asia, which offers a different politico-economic legacy from its Western counterpart, one sees relatively scant studies done on this growing field of research, although the Asian CCI’s global penetration and its derivative soft power have been gradually expanding through cultural globalization. Notably, Fung (2016) problematizes the very concept of “creativity” itself because “the socio-political contexts in which creative industries are developed and sustained, and in which creative laborers work, produce and are reproduced, result in different conception of creativity” (Fung, 2016, p. 202). For instance, in China’s political environment, creative labor can be perceived as not “creative” enough in comparison to its Western counterparts (Fung, 2016, p. 202). Along the same line, Lin (2019) also asks whether the distinct political and institutional contexts of China’s state-owned media system lead to different manifestations in terms of the condition of autonomy and the role of self-realization in creative labor. He argues that the governmentality of “creativity dispositif” not only dictates that creative workers “be creative”— it also prescribes them to “(be creative) for the state” in the
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Chinese context (Lin, 2019). Moreover, in his analysis of the politics of creative city policy in Seoul, Kim (2019) also shows that various policy actors—including city government officials, policy experts, and creative workers—promote and foster two contrasting sets of labor subjectivities, such as “a conformist self-development creator” and “an artist laborer” by ordering and reordering the material and symbolic work of the creative city policy. To sum up, scholars who are working on the topic of creative labor in Asia do not simply repute the theoretical concepts and empirical findings derived from the Western cases; rather, they attempt to carefully contextualize them, raising the question of how (in)consistencies found among different contexts might then speak to theoretical debates on precarity in creative labor.

Based on this theoretical and empirical consideration, we argue that what is important is not to exaggerate both singularity and synchronicity of increasing precarity in CCI. Rather, it is necessary to capture the current emergence of precarity by attentively balancing the global features of precarization in CCI with specific institutional, cultural practices within the given politico-economic conditions. In this regard, we consider the term “actually existing precarity” productive to connect the more theoretical debates surrounding precarity with the actual lived practices of precarity in specific political, cultural, and economic contexts. This concept is borrowed from urban geographer Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore’s (2002) renowned concept of “actually existing neoliberalism.” In order to explain the gap between “what globalizing neoliberal urban policies postulate” and “what is actually materialized in concrete local situations,” they suggest considering conceptualizing the contemporary neoliberalization processes not as uniform and immutable laws, but as uneven and contradictory tendencies (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). By applying this non-deterministic viewpoint to precarization processes in the Korean CCI, we argue that “Korean creative workers are confronting the global tendency of precarization, but with Korean characteristics.” In this regard, it might be somewhat obvious that precarization processes might take place in the Korean CCI, but we do not assume that those precarization processes produce uniform and immutable laboring subjectivities in alignment with Western counterparts. Rather, we are open to presume that there would be “too many” possibilities of the emergence of various different labor subjectivities in the context of Korean CCI. By offering the perspective of actually existing precarity, we will provide a meaningful example of how political economic analysis can be productively and meaningfully connected to the problem of agency and subjectivity.

Structural changes in the digital game industry in Korea: the emergence of the mobile game market and its pitfalls

Since 2010 South Korea’s market share in the global game industry has increased considerably, making it the world’s fourth-largest game industry after the United States, China, and Japan—with a market size of 14.53 trillion won (about US$14 billion) and 6.2% of the global market share (Korea Creative Content Agency, 2019). In less than a decade, however, the Korean game market structure has drastically changed from a PC online-game-centered market to a mobile game–oriented one. In fact, in 2011, the market share of PC online games accounted for 89% of the Korean domestic game market, in terms of sales. Yet, PC online game sales have gradually decreased in the past several years, with its market share only accounting for 40.2% in 2017. On the other hand, mobile game sales, which only accounted for 6% of the total sales in 2011, increased to 54.9% of entire market sales due to the changing platform environment (See Figure 1 below). As such, it is known that now only a few big game companies, such as NCsoft and Netmarble, produce PC
online games in Korea. Action games for the Sony Playstation console and adventure games for PCs are now rarely produced in Korea. However, this mobile game-centered market transition, which is expected to continue into the future, reveals a different trend from the global market, in which console games, arcade games, and PC package games still occupy a relatively high market share. For example, according to the Korea Content Creative Agency (2019, p.31/619), sales as of 2018 reveal that while the market share of mobile games accounted for 35.8% of the global game market (Console games: 27.5%, PC games: 18.4%, Arcade games: 18.3%), it accounted for 53.7% of the Korean domestic game market (PC games 40.5%, Console games 4.3%, Arcade games: 1.5%). So how and why did this rapid transition happen? Based on our interviews, three different factors were involved.

First, one of the key factors in promoting this transition is that the Korean government implemented deregulation policy on the mobile game market in terms of a national game rating system. Traditionally, all games released in Korea had to be reviewed for assigning age and content ratings by the governmental division, the Game Rating and Administration Committee (GRAC), in which procedures and standards were more strict than other countries such as the self-regulating systems found in the United States and EU. Since the 2010s, because of the rapid spread of smartphones, mobile application open markets such as Apple’s App Store and Google Play Store were introduced in South Korea. At that time, since there were too many mobile games in those global mobile application markets, it was not realistic for GRAC to screen and rate all those mobile games by itself. As a result, with the revision of the Act on Promotion of the Game Industry (Article 21) in 2011, the Korean government decided to authorize market platform operators such as Apple and Google to conduct their own ratings on mobile games. It can be a typical example of how the transversal nature of digital technology makes it impossible to limit within national boundaries. However, unexpectedly, because of the deregulation policy caused by the expansion of the global mobile open market system, mobile games can be released with relatively little government regulation other than PC games; this naturally provided some incentives for small- and medium-sized game production companies as well as personal developers and amateurs who can potentially produce and enter the mobile game market more easily than the PC game market.

Second, in contrast to the implementation of deregulation policy in mobile games, the Korean government tightened its regulation on the PC game market by implementing a so-called “game
shutdown policy,” which took effect in earnest in 2012. This “somewhat controversial” policy was introduced with the aim of preventing side effects from excessive game immersion by teenagers, limiting the use of PC online games during late-night hours by teenagers under the age of 16, from 12 p.m. to 6 a.m. and forcing service providers to identify personal IDs and forcibly block access to teenagers. Yet the technical, operational, and regulatory burdens of having shut down systems unexpectedly have led many small and medium game companies to move to mobile game platforms, which is free from this regulation.

Third, in addition to the deregulation of the mobile game market and re-regulation of the PC game market, the sharp increase since 2009 of the governmental game rating review fee (which all PC game developers have to pay to GRAC to complete the game rating review process) became another factor in motivating small- and medium-sized game companies as well as personal developers to produce more mobile games rather than PC games. According to the data provided by the Game Developer Solidarity, the number of PC game rating reviews nearly halved from the previous year after a 10-fold increase in review fees in 2009, and again fell to less than half the previous year after the game shutdown policy was implemented in 2012 (see Figure 2). These governmental regulatory changes have dampened the PC game market, generating the main reason for the transition to a mobile game market.

From a developer’s perspective, even though the opportunity to create and sell games is augmented due to the opening of the new mobile game market, he or she has to face fierce competition because it is much easier for anyone to make and release mobile games via mobile platforms than PC games. In this environment, the small- and medium-sized Korean mobile game companies’ dependence on both global mobile platforms such as Google and Apple and local Korean big IT companies like Kakao and Naver is gradually increasing, since the former serves as an exclusive distribution channel, and the latter takes a major role in channeling service and marketing. The problem, however, is that from the perspective of game developers, they have to share their profits with those global and local big IT companies, inevitably resulting in lower profitability. Typically,
small- and medium-sized game companies have to share about 50% of their revenues with these global and local IT companies when they distribute and market their games via them; in addition, under the contract with publishers, they generally have to share the remaining revenue at a ratio of 6:4 or 7:3 with publishing entities. Obviously, this situation invariably confronts them with financial difficulties. Moreover, as foreign game companies (such as Chinese firms) have become more competitive in the global game market since the 2010s, small Korean game companies have been facing bankruptcy, one after another.

In this process, large game companies such as NCsoft and Netmarble have grown their influence by acquiring smaller game companies in economic distress, while small- and medium-sized game companies facing fierce competition tend to adopt a business strategy of mass-producing only genre games that have proven profitable. With the exception of a handful of big companies, many game companies are losing their opportunities for growth. Most of our interviewees directly affirm that mid-sized game companies with the potential to grow into big companies have all but disappeared in the Korean game industry. Under these circumstances, the game genre and content have begun to be homogeneous, focusing on several specific genres such as MMORPG or RPG games characterized by gambling-like selling probability-based game item picking. This business model allows a small number of loyal users to spend a lot of money—so much so that it can generate sufficient revenue to ensure survival in this competitive market. In fact, most of our interviewees worry that the rapid transition to the mobile game market is creating a lack of diversity in digital game content. The even larger problem is that this structural change not only threatens content diversity but also worsens working and living conditions for the creative workers. In the next section, we explain how this structural change actually impacts laborers and the labor process, in terms of deepening precarity, degrading skills, and fragmenting workers.

Deepening precarity, degrading skills, and fragmenting workers in the digital game industry

One of the key problems which the industrial shift toward mobile game production generates is an intensification of labor precarity, in terms of job insecurity, lower pay, and overworking of the labor force. Similar to other information and communications technology (ICT) industries, the Korean gaming industry has a project-based employment practice, in which people gather and scatter on a project-by-project basis. Thus, there has long been a perception that when a project disappears, one should naturally leave the company or team. Nevertheless, in the PC game-centered era, the production period of PC games basically takes 2–3 years or more, so workers could work a relatively longer period once they started into a certain project. However, the production period for mobile games has been severely shortened, exacerbating the problem of job insecurity.

According to a 2017 Game Industry Labor Environment and Health Status Survey (Gurogu Worker’s Welfare Center, 2017), 48.5% of game developers who participated in the survey said that they do not specify the employment period in their employment contract, so they can be fired at any time (Gurogu Worker’s Welfare Center, 2017). In addition, according to our interview with Kim, a member of Game Developer Solidarity, illegal dismissal practices such as forcing workers to resign and switching workers to subsidiary companies and subsequently shutting those companies down are prevalent, exacerbating labor precarity throughout the entire gaming industry. In terms of pay, we found that our interviewees have various levels of income based on company size, work experience, and so on. For instance, Quality Assurance and Customer Service jobs that
require relatively less work experience generally earned 1.5 million won (about US$1500) per month, and programmers with about 10 years of experiences earned more than 5 million won (about US$500) per month. In spite of differences, however, there was a widespread perception that game workers who did not belong to large companies received very low wages relative to their extensive working hours.

Excessive working hours has been highlighted as a chronic problem within the Korean game industry. According to a 2013 IT Worker Survey and Law and System Improvement Plan (National Assembly Secretariat, 2013), 63.3% of IT workers work more than 50 hours a week, while 19.4% of them work more than 70 hours a week. One of the notable practices which symbolizes this overload in work hours in the Korean digital game industry is the so-called “crunch mode,” which refers to the practice of working late-night hours intensely and consistently, often for weeks or sometimes even months at a time, in order to meet a release date. Many of our interviewees refer to this notorious working practice that literally “mills developers into the work machines,” even reminding us of Karl Polany’s famous concept of industrial capitalism as “satanic mill.” Under this circumstance, many workers suffer mental and physical pain from experiencing crunch modes, and it is a key factor in the breakdown of the work–life balance of these digital game workers, greatly reducing the quality of both their work and their lives.

Another problem exacerbated by the transition to mobile game production is that game developers are experiencing a degradation of professional skills. This trend is clearly seen in programmer jobs, which used to be perceived as core jobs in digital game production. In fact, before cheap commercial game engines were widely distributed (as they now are), it took several years for programmers to create their own game developing engines, so that the programmer’s skills were crucial enough to determine the whole “fate” of the project. However, as commercial game engines with multiple development tools are widely used now in mobile game production, game developers’ business and service functions become more essential, so the craftsmanship involved in “creating” high-quality content, algorithms, and programs has begun to decline. More importantly, it has become very difficult for game developers to accumulate expertise, know-how, and independent skills in their work and careers. Moreover, even though the problems of de-skilling emerge regardless of jobs and experiences, they are especially prevalent and impactful for young developers who have short careers and who are just entering the industry.

Finally, what brings the rapid transition toward a mobile game-driven industrial structure is the heightening fragmentation of digital game workers. Increasing labor precarity and degrading skills are a common phenomenon throughout the entire game industry in Korea, but there are differences in how severely these problems are experienced, depending on the size of the company, the job description, the length of career, and gender as well. Basically, even workers employed at large companies such as Netmarble and NCsoft are also experiencing increasing labor insecurity, but theirs is much less significant than that of workers employed at small- and medium-sized companies. Our interviewees shared that game planners and programmers at large companies with more than 10 years of experience generally earn between 60 million won (about US$60,000) and 80 million won (about US$80,000) annually, while those with similar experience in small- and medium-sized companies receive between 40 and 50 million won a year. In the case of entrepreneurial start-ups, only one interviewee, Yong-suk, said that he earned 120 million won per year in 2017, which was based on the successful launch of his own game; in most other cases, it was found that digital game workers generally earn around 20 million won a year in total, which is barely enough for survival.
Regarding the difference based on job roles, so-called “below the line” workers are located at the bottom rung of the industry’s workforce, similar to other countries such as the United States (Bulut, 2015a; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; O’Donnell, 2008). Moreover, the socio-economic gap between older generations with longer careers and newer developers is getting larger in the current Korean game industry environment. Many interviewees revealed that nowadays more companies tend to not hire new developers, and opportunities for juniors to make inroads have been greatly reduced, compared to the past. One of the reasons companies are reluctant to hire new employees is associated with the shorter development cycle. Finally, gender inequality exists as well. The Korean gaming industry is generally a male-dominated field, and so are the users. In these conditions, female developers are more likely to be marginalized or discriminated against because of the masculine organizational culture. Also, the issue of instability in female developers can be related to the fact that female job roles are still quite limited in the digital game industry. In other words, most female workers often tend to be hired in arts, QA, CS, and planning jobs rather than be employed as a programmer. The preponderance of women in QA or CS positions means that women are in a much more volatile situation than men in terms of job and career, as well as economic, instability. It results in fewer women reaching the level of manager or higher.

**Digital game labor as labor of love**

The question of labor subjectivity in the Korean digital game industry has rarely been researched. So far, we have only found some indications from Fung’s (2016) comparative research on Asian creative workers. In comparison to Chinese and other South Asian creative workers, Fung (2016) conceptualizes the key characterization of Korean game labors as “progressive artists,” who can enjoy a similar level of “free expression,” “creativity,” “tolerance,” and “originality” in their labor processes and life styles, similar to US game workers. Although his research has some limitations in that he only interviewed relatively “elite” workers in big game companies such as NCsoft, we could find a parallel tendency and preference in terms of how they identify themselves and what they regard as key labor motivators to stay in the game production field. In fact, regardless of their company size (big or small), length of career (seniors or juniors), and job roles (programmers or QA), our interviewees view themselves—or at least hope to be seen as—a “liberal creator,” “authentic developer,” or sometimes “progressive artist” rather than just as a “worker” in a hierarchical sense. For example, one interviewee, with 10 years of experience as a programmer said,

> During my work, I don’t see all the developers as developers, but rather distinguish between just “workers” and developers. Developers are the ones who want to get a sense of accomplishment by producing good results for their games. However, “workers” just work for their paycheck. These “workers” just make code. But the developer doesn’t just make it. They stay up all night to rebuild it constantly (until it reaches their level of satisfaction). I think I am the latter, and I’m proud of that. And when the results come out well, when the goals of the project are fulfilled, when I did 10% better than others, and when it’s recognized by others, I feel the most fulfilled. And for that sense of accomplishment, we don’t do hard-coding.

For this interviewee, “workers” are ones who do their work without active motivation. Here, we can find what we call “othering practices (Johnson et al., 2004),” which differentiate and distinguish the working and living experiences of developers from those of “laborers,” in such a way as to reinforce and protect their self-identity as authentic developers.² For him or her, “workers” are perceived as simply mechanically repeating a given monotonous job to receive a paycheck. An
authentic developer, in contrast, is recognized as a person who exerts professionalism to the extent that they willingly sacrifice their time and energy to accomplish a satisfying result. In this regard, the difference between developer and worker is hierarchical and oppositional, and the developer’s identity is considered as superior to the worker’s.

Along this line of thought, another othering practice through which developers differentiate themselves from “workers” depends on the degree to which one “loves” performing one’s job. Despite the harsh working conditions, many workers reveal that they want to do game production because they “love” it. Most of the workers whom we interviewed said that the key motivation for game production is not money but passion for game production itself. This notion of creative labor as a “labor of love” is, however, neither noble nor unique to Korean game production workers. Ursell (2000) explains the reason that so many young workers voluntarily accept precarious working and living conditions in the creative industry in relation to the affective and emotional pleasure of creative labor, terming it a “labor of love.” If we accept this argument, we must next ask why they love to do it. In this regard, we find that three prominent shared ones: “creativity in the work,” “fun in the working process,” and “recognition from users and peers.” All three cause them to love their work and retain motivation for doing it well.

Game developers’ experience of creativity through their work is a major factor in why they love their profession. Some of our interviewees describe their creative experiences as similar to actually creating a new virtual world when creating their games. In their minds, in producing this virtual world, the role of a graphic designer is idealized as the person who makes it visible, and the programmer is perceived as the one who makes the algorithm so that it can work. They feel contentment in watching their virtual worlds become an actual game, and this leads to a pride in their work. Another factor that makes game developers emotionally attached to their work is that the work itself is “fun” to perform. This having fun during the process includes various different forms of pleasure, from “the game tester’s fun of playboring” (Kücklich, 2009) as a combination of play and labor to “the pleasure requiring more occupational skills,” such as programmers and graphic designers feel when they create code or graphics. Some interviewees say that the reason for their love of work lies in the fact that game production is like working while playing. Regarding the gratification in their jobs, the company’s organizational culture is younger and more horizontal than any other Korean organization. They tend to feel that their working place is not just a place to focus on their work, but a place to talk freely, exchange interesting information constantly, and collaborate mutually. In this environment, the distinction between work and play is unclear, and they perceive the boundary as blurred.

A final factor that makes developers feel strong affection for their work is the recognition given by their game users and other game developers. To them, recognition from users is one of the most important inspirations and becomes a critical source for their motivation to work. In addition, many workers note that game labor is not accomplished through individual creativity alone. They affirm that game production is a collective work, so effective communication and reciprocal collaboration between colleagues are important values to them. In light of this, they understand that praise and recognition from their peers and coworkers are extremely critical to keep them motivated as “authentic developers.”

Based on this observation, we could re-affirm that a major aspect of game labor is related to romantic subjectivity of the “progressive artist,” “liberal creator,” or “authentic developer.” Unfortunately, however, many of them now feel that it is getting difficult to pursue and retain this romantic vision of labor identity under the given industrial changes. As Bulut’s (2015b) study on
US game labor shows, the rampant crunch practice can transform “fun” in game labor into “pain,” and the mobile game-oriented production system itself hinders digital game workers from pursuing their creativity in game production. This tendency was strongly revealed when our interviewees expressed how they actually feel about the increasing precarity in terms of three different types of anxiety.

First, most of our interviewees express that they feel strong anxiety over increasingly unstable employment and stagnating income. As we mentioned before, the primary employment arrangement within game production labor depends on project-based contracts. On one hand, these project-based labor contracts can provide workers with opportunities to negotiate their income with the new company. In other words, they can raise their incomes and strengthen their careers by changing projects and companies. However, many of interviewees now notice that it is increasingly difficult to move on to newer projects and companies under the rapid market transition in mobile game production. On the other hand, market competition is getting severe, so that the flexible movement which they have enjoyed is no longer possible. This anxiety over unstable employment and its derivative effect of stagnating income is directly connected to their second source of anxiety: the future of their careers. In order to successfully survive as a game developer, it is very critical to build up one’s portfolio to stand out among peers and impress future employers, through changing firms and projects. But the decreasing chance of flexible movement makes them expect a shorter career, to the point that some feel that game labor in Korea is no longer providing any “hope” for a future and provokes nothing but anxiety. This anxiety over one’s career was evident in their responses to our question of what makes it most difficult to work and live as a game developer in Korea. Interestingly, many of them point out that one of the most difficult things to endure is the moment of actually “sensing” the disappearance of their peers in the game industry. This feeling of loss becomes clearer when they explain the reasons their colleagues left the field. The typical reasons include: failure of the published game, age barriers, and economic distress. When they become aware of this disappearance of peers, they conclude that they might be the next one, easily abandoned by this industry at any time.

Finally, workers also feel strong anxiety over managing the work–life balance because of increasing labor precarity. Game production workers know that it is more difficult to ensure their work–life balance when they work in small-sized companies, because the smaller companies generally tend to have the more widespread crunch practices and the less welfare benefits for their workers. Ironically, the problem is based on the fact that the industrial framework as it currently exists, now produces more of these small companies which focus solely on mobile game production, with the result that more workers are likely to be exposed to working in more precarious conditions which can barely guarantee the work–life balance. So how do Korean digital game workers respond to these industrial shifts and how do they cope with their sensed and felt anxieties and the precariousness of the job? More importantly, how can they keep their romantic self-identity as an authentic developer? In the next section, we will focus on the promotion of self-development strategies and the fragmentation of resistance among digital game workers.

“Productive” precarity and the politics of self-development

By analyzing the labor of game testers in the United States, Bulut (2015a) argues that the politics of precarity can actually promote a hard work ethos, a competitive mind-set and self-surveillance
to protect workers’ temporary jobs both in the present and in the future. In this sense, Bulut (2015a) claims that “precarity itself is productive.” Similarly, we also find that various self-development practices function as a primary, common strategy for reducing labor precarity and securing employment stability among Korean digital game developers. Since the very motivation of game production work is based on a strong attraction to game production itself, regardless of company size, career length, and job role, almost all of our interviewees reveal that what they most desire is not making huge financial gain from their work, but being able to do game production as authentic developers for as long as possible. In tune with this, the desire for securing self-identity as an authentic developer leads to constant self-monitoring and persistent self-development. However, we find that attaching “authentic developer” to self-development manifests in two strikingly different modes of labor subjectivities—the “generalist-entrepreneur” versus the “specialist-labor” based on economic and social position. The two models have different self-development strategies.

First, workers who are in small-sized and indie companies tend to think that what is most important for survival in a growing competitive market is to be a “generalist,” one who can control the entire game production by themselves. Some of our interviewees, especially indie game developers, are prone to show that their biggest competitive edge is an ability to produce the whole game by oneself. They expect that the current mobile game-centered market provides more potential for indie games having small budgets and short production periods. Moreover, most of our interviewees affirm that the reason why workers in small firms and indies try to develop themselves as generalists is because the desired talent differs depending on the size of the company. In fact, big game companies, which still produce big budget PC games, want professional specialists who are equipped with top-notch skills in their own fields, but small companies and indies can no longer support and develop this type of specialist due to the tendency toward increasing precarity and degrading skills. The problem is that it is getting difficult for workers who start their career in small firms and indies to move to big companies. Most of the interviewees confirm that workers who work in big game companies can move to small and even indie companies if they want, but not vice versa.

In this situation, one distinct phenomenon, which is more prevalent in workers in small firms and indies, is a tendency toward the development of “entrepreneurial subjectivity” (Scharff, 2016). Since generalist-type game developers are not only involved in the game production process but also in managing and marketing their games, they naturally feel a need to develop an entrepreneurial mentality. In other words, they predict that they can successfully survive only when they correctly target their own niche market in an increasingly competitive industrial situation. In order to find these niche markets and survive securely there, they become aware that they need to be not only “authentic developers” with technical skills and a passionate mind for game production, but also function as a “flexible entrepreneur,” who has both marketing skills and a managerial “can do” spirit to adaptably fit within the given competitive market. This is an indication that the political economic changes that we have observed are actually affecting workers’ labor subjectivities. And yet, the problem is that this entrepreneurial subjectivity is related to neoliberal mentalities stressing individual responsibility, embracing risks, and more importantly drawing boundaries between who is accomplished and who is not (Scharff, 2016).

On the other hand, different from this unique combination of “generalist-entrepreneur” subjectivity primarily found in workers in small companies and indies, we find that it becomes imperative for workers in big game companies to develop and pursue exactly the opposite model of labor
subjectivity reflected in the "specialist-labor.” Most of our interviewees in big game companies generally tend to have relatively longer career periods (mostly over 10 years), enjoy higher salaries, and have a strong pride in their professional skills in their particular fields. They explain that big companies still favor a specialist over a generalist, and many of them actually criticize the current mobile game-driven production system, because it ruins craftsmanship and apprenticeship. Many are concerned about the situation and say that in order to survive in light of the collapsed apprenticeship system, they are forced to continue to dedicate themselves to self-development and build their own special skills on their own. Everything then becomes a source of self-development, such as studying new software tools, culling new information from the Internet, building personal websites, and even playing new games every day so as not to fall behind the trends. However, in spite of this so-called “24/7 on” of constant personal self-education, many workers actually feel that their chances of moving to other companies and projects are waning, and that if they do, they may have to go to a company that makes mobile games. They sense that if they move there, they would be in a situation with much higher labor precarity than is present in their current large game companies.

Under these circumstances, we could expect to see a move in a new direction to cope with the increasing precarity—organizing unions. In fact, digital game workers in two Korean game companies including Nexon and Smilegate announced an organization of company unions in 2018. One of the key factors in development of labor unions is the governmental policy change regarding worktime regulations. The Korean CCI has long been exempted from work time regulations because of the so-called “creative nature” of the profession. However, by revoking the exemption of the worktime regulations for the cultural industry in 2018, the government forced companies with 300 or more workers to implement the maximum weekly work hours from 68 hours to 52, to improve the work–life balance among its workers and enhance labor productivity. Nevertheless, most game workers in big game companies found that companies retained both the notorious crunch practices and the unlawful comprehensive wage system, which makes workers agree to work overtime for free. In this context, Nexon and Smilegate workers decided to organize unions against the companies, so that having a 2-day interval, each company’s workers created their unions with the help of the Chemical, Textile, and Food Industry Division of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions. When we interviewed members of these two unions, both of them pointed out that what they needed most was a channel to share and respond to the growing labor unrest they were experiencing. They claimed that as the game industry grew, these companies became huge dinosaurs, yet still treated their workers with an “informal” and “unprofessional” way of managing labor. However, they argued that these companies have, by far, enough money and resources to handle and negotiate labor unrest in a “normal” or at least more systematical way, and they hoped that the unions would be the main channel as the mediator for both parties. It is still too early to evaluate whether we can possibly find a potential clue of how “precarity” may be transformed into “solidarity” from these cases, but at this point, we can find both possibilities and limitations in their collective actions.

First of all, in terms of labor subjectivity, we could find a new direction from what we call “specialist-labor” subjectivity. In this combination, “specialist” as an expression of the authentic developer identity is connected to what it tends to be viewed as the inferior identity of “labor” not in a hierarchical way but in an equal sense. When we asked how these two contrasting identities can possibly be harmonized or reconciled, one union member had an interesting perspective:
I have thought about that issue a lot. My conclusion is this. I think that the authentic developer identity is at the core of my mind. Then the identity of labor covers that core like a shell. When you see me outside, I think people outside should first recognize me as a worker based on my outer identity as a worker, then people can see my other identity of a developer by passing through that worker identity. On the contrary, when I look at myself, I think I should look at me first as a developer and then move on from that to a worker.

In this remark, the union member is demanding that people outside (here the company) should recognize his rights as a worker first and foremost, and on that basis, he expects that people should then understand his professional characteristics as a developer. It means that game companies should stop pinpointing these workers as “game developers” if it causes them to cease to recognize their rights as workers. On the contrary, when the member reflects on his own labor subjectivity, he claims that he first considers himself as a developer based on his professional characteristics, then moves on to a more general social identity as a worker. This shows that his primary labor motivation is still based on the desire for creative work, expressed in his identity as a developer. However, here, desire for retaining one’s own individuality as an “authentic developer” is newly connected to sociality as “labor,” and it reveals that the potential of risk-enduring self-development subjectivity can be reorganized and altered by this new in-between subjectivity of “authentic developer-solidified labor.”

Despite its positive dimension, however, the question of “Who can organize unions and who cannot?” is still left behind. Actually, many independent workers claim that those organized workers are the ones in a relatively better socio-economic situation than they are, so that they can do that. By looking to Erik Olin Wright’s (2000) concept of “structural and associational power of labor,” in the case of these two companies, their organizational structure is somewhat closer to that of big manufacturing companies, in that they have relatively more well-paid fulltime workers in a single workplace. In fact, because around 2600 and 1000 fulltime workers are, respectively, employed in Nexon and Smilegate, if they can organize themselves, their collective force would be powerful enough to fight for their demands or at least force companies to hear their voices. However, employees of small companies and indie freelancers do not have that kind of structural power of labor, being the ones scattered in a growing precarious market like sand on a beach, thus needing more institutional protection. In this reality, important criticisms on the limitations and problems of firm-based unions need to be further and seriously considered, in that they tend to only focus on defending and securing their member workers’ interests while closing their eyes to broader issues of the rights and interests of workers throughout the industry. What is urgently required, therefore, is the means to share the structural and associational power of firm-based unions with the unorganized to overcome the fragmentation within the industry that they represent.

Fragmented industrial structure and fragmented resistance in Korea’s digital game industry

By examining digital game workers’ subjectivity in close relationship with industrial and institutional conditions of precarity, this study attempted to show what might be political, economic, and institutional conditions to promote the actually existing precarity of digital game workers in Korea. Under this theoretical and empirical consideration, we have found that the common experience of
the Korean digital game worker as “authentic developer” can be strengthened by three different factors including “creativity in work,” “fun in the work process,” and “recognition from users and peers,” as well as othering practices. Also, we have shown how precarization is actually experienced through three different forms of anxiety, threatening the self-identity of authentic developers. Furthermore, we have reported that the fragmented industrial structure of the digital game industry in Korea not only actually fosters contrasting labor subjectivities, but also promotes fragmented resistances such as the “generalist-entrepreneur” and “specialist-labor” among Korean digital game workers (see Figure 3). We have shown that there is a newly emerging distinction between these two different groups of digital game workers, different from the so-called “above the line workers” and “below the line workers” we see in the case of Western counterparts (Mayer, 2011). Finally, we have also observed that new forms of sociality could possibly be derived from the recent uprising of digital game workers’ unions, in spite of their reported limitations. In this context, how should we evaluate this newly emerging movement of digital game workers’ unions? And more importantly, what are the possible clues to how “precarity” may be transformed into “solidarity”?

By analyzing the relationship between the configuration of capital accumulation and the formation of struggle against it, Harvey (2015) argues that “Fordist system generates a Fordist kinds of opposition” based on strong corporatist and unionist kinds of political means. However, since capital accumulation itself is becoming decentralized and more fluid, Harvey (2015) argues that struggle against capitalism is also recently getting decentralized and non-hierarchical in order to rightly reflect the decentralized configuration of capital accumulation. In this regard, MacDonald (2018) suggests that existing firm-centered unions should not just focus on collective bargaining and contract enforcement at the workplace level, but must find a way to reshape labor laws and extend collective agreements throughout industries in which small companies and self-employed workers exist in highly competitive markets. By echoing these suggestions, we think that it is necessary to more closely scrutinize how newly emerging unions in the Korean digital game industry create solidarity with workers outside those large firms. In other words, as we found how precarity fragments and draws lines between workers, the next
critical question of industrial sustainability as well as labor stability would stem from finding a way to bridge the gap and connect them to other unorganized workers.

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Notes
1. We borrowed this sentence from Ching Kwan Lee (2016), a labor sociologist working on the Chinese labor movement.
2. We borrowed the concept of “othering practice” from Johnson et al. (2004).

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