

Remained in Between

The Story of Migrant Game Developers in South Korea



It was the summer of 2024. A tall, white, middle-aged man walked into a café and sat across from me at the table. Like all cafes in Seoul, the capital of South Korea, K-pop music was buzzing around us. I switched on the voice recorder, hoping that the loud music would not disturb our interview. After a brief introduction, the man soon started his story of living in Seoul working as a game developer. “I have a good foothold here,” he said. “I’m a foreigner who speaks Korean and has experience in Korea. That alone is my resume.”

The man, who I will address as John in this article, had spent over 10 years living in South Korea while working in the game industry. John was a passionate gamer since childhood, now living with his wife and half-Korean kids while working full-time in a game company. He said he is proud to be involved in South Korean games and proud of the career that he has built so far. But at the same time, he expressed his frustration with the slow pace of change in the South Korean game industry when it comes to globalisation and diversity – and him being constantly put into the role of a middle person or cultural mediator.

South Korea has a strong game industry, ranked 4th in the world by revenues.¹ The South Korean game industry employs about 85,000 people and is significantly concentrated on mobile and PC games, with Free-to-Play (F2P) being a dominant business model.² Thanks to the decent size of the domestic market – many of South Korea’s 50 million inhabitants are also active gamers – and an abundance of game education institutions that provide a consistent pool of labour for the new workforce, the South Korean game industry has flourished with its domestic-centric market. As a result, a vast portion of the game revenue is collected domestically or from its closest neighbours like China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. So, it was unsurprising to hear John describe how English-speaking people like him are rare in the South Korean game industry. He also said that internationals are often treated as interpreters. Sometimes this is as simple as translating Korean to English, but more often, it also entails explaining to their Korean colleagues what games are like outside of Korea. As John put it, “There are many things Korean game companies only know how to do in the Korean way. When

they are trying either to become a global company or studio or publisher, or if it’s a Korean publisher just trying to sponsor a global game, there are a lot of things that they...either don’t know they need to do, or they know that they need to do but can’t, or know what they should do but don’t want to.” Video games have become one of the most popular forms of entertainment in recent decades. Making of games, so-called “game development” or “game production”, is a creative process that inherently involves various forms of local practices.³ For instance, what makes the game “fun”? How do you make a game “fun” when the concept of fun is highly contingent on cultural, contextual, and individual factors? And from there, how can one make the game that they have created appealing to players across the earth with different cultural backgrounds and in social contexts? This is why the game industry may seem highly technical, but in reality, it is more about working around various cultural customs, social norms, and regional regulations.⁴ It is, therefore, highly specialised and requires various types of communication skills. However, in the case of South Korea, the highly homogeneous work environment of the locals is putting its game industry at risk of market isolation. Despite being one of the major global entertainment industries through its production of K-drama and K-pop, only a handful of games produced in Korea struggle to reach outside Asia. Many Korean games, especially those from small- to medium-sized studios, either lack language support, do not meet the needs of international audiences, or are simply ‘not fun’ for those who play games outside of a Korean context. John pointed out that it is perhaps due to Korean game industry

stakeholders’ domestic-centric perspective and limited understanding of gamers outside: “One of the bosses said, what I think sums up the Korean gaming industry the best. He said, ‘You know, there are four game markets: Korea, Japan, China, and the West.’” Meanwhile, the game industry is becoming more connected and diversified than ever before. People can now play games on their everyday digital devices like smartphones, which can be downloaded instantly by pressing the “download now” button. As the global game industry becomes increasingly connected, the number of international workers in the industry is also increasing. For example, a recent study showed that roughly 30 percent of game developers in Finland,⁵ 34.4 percent in the Czech Republic,⁶ and more than 15 percent of the respondents of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA), mostly in North America, identified themselves as immigrants.⁷ This indicates a growing migrant worker presence in the global game industry, connecting games across borders. But not yet in South Korea. The South Korean game industry remains largely homogeneous and thus slow to adapt to global changes. John and other migrants in the Korean game industry that I spoke with all generally agreed that there are very few internationals working at Pangyo, a municipality near Seoul that is home to many South Korean game companies. This is not surprising considering that South Korea is one of the most ethnically homogeneous societies in the world, with only about 5 percent of the population recognised as ‘foreign residents.’⁸ Of course, the Korean game industry stakeholders appear to acknowledge their limitations in the global market and are attempting to make adjustments. That is because the recent economic downturn is also affecting the game industry, with a shocking number that nearly 50 percent of Korean game studios recorded zero profits in 2024.⁹ They are therefore actively seeking alternative revenue sources, such as game markets in the Global South and Europe. However, the homogeneous workspace in the Korean game industry continues to slow down the pace of change and poses challenges to innovation. The process of making games in Korea is optimized so well with a homogeneous pipeline, unable to or unwilling to embrace different points of view and create diverse types of games. As John

put it, “You get a lot of gotcha, semi-strategy, semi-RPG, fantasy RPG games. No matter what games we make, the marketing copy would be something about ‘new,’ ‘fantasy RPG,’ ‘unlimited strategy,’ etc. It doesn’t matter what game it is.” John and other internationals were often expected to assimilate fully into a certain ‘Korean way’ of communicating and socialising at work, which is often hierarchical and masculine. Furthermore, Korean developers and their leadership often refuse to take insights from abroad as they are deemed not aligned with the ‘Korean way’ of making games, and most do not have experience working with people outside their comfort zone. John’s story was echoed by Emily, another migrant working in the South Korean game industry. Emily said during her interview that she is satisfied working in her current job at one of the largest game developer and publisher companies in the country. Similar to John, Emily is fluent in the Korean language and was working hard to blend into the Korean way of making games. However, she was often excluded from fully immersing herself in the Korean social group: “Are there advantages to being a foreigner in a Korean company? Yes, obviously. I’m not expected to adhere strictly to the hierarchy. But, you know... maybe it is not an advantage.” On one side, these migrants were expected to work seamlessly in the ‘Korean way’ of making games, helping create games that are deemed as the norm in Korean game studios. On the other side, however, they are expected to remain as others who bring outsiders’ views to help game studios make changes. These contradictory expectations are an alarming sign of marginalisation, when migrants cannot fully engage with either the native culture from home or the dominant host culture in the new country; instead, they remain isolated as a middle person somewhere in between. With the abundance of a highly educated specialised workforce and decent domestic market scale, the South Korean game industry perhaps never needed to import game development talents, unlike game industries in Finland and Czechia that rely on foreign exports. However, with the growing interconnectedness of the game industry, Korea is now facing a turning point, where it must break out of its comfort zone and create games that can also excite audiences outside of Korea and Asia. For that, Korean game studios must look outward and be prepared to embrace changes. But can they do that? Are they fully ready to embrace the disruptions to their comfort zone? Only time will tell.

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Notes

- 1 Newzoo. (2022). *Games Market Reports and Forecasts 2022*. Newzoo.
- 2 KOCCA. (2025). *Game Industry White Paper 2024*.
- 3 Kultima, A. (2018). *Game Design Praxiology*. Sotamaa, O., & Švelch, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Game Production Studies*. Amsterdam University Press.
- 4 Park, S. (2024). *Embracing Global and Local: How Game Industry Expatriates Work Between Global and Local Game Development Practices*. *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, 7(1), 47–87. Keogh, B. (2023). *The Videogame Industry Does Not Exist: Why We Should Think Beyond Commercial Game Production*. The MIT Press.
- 5 Neogames Finland. (2025). *Finnish Game Industry Report 2024*.
- 6 GDACZ. (2023). *Czech Games Industry Study 2023*.
- 7 Kumar, S., Kwan, E., Weststar, J., & Coppins, T. (2022). *IGDA Developers Satisfaction Survey 2021—Diversity in the Game Industry Report*. IGDA International Game Developers Association.
- 8 Ministry of Justice, Republic of Korea. (2024). *Border control statistics—Foreign residents*.
- 9 KOCCA. (2025). *Game Industry White Paper 2024*.

Fig. 1 (above): Pangyo Techno Valley located in greater capital region in South Korea (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons user lmtotallykorean and reprinted under Creative Commons license).

Fig. 2 (right): A selection of well-known South Korean video games. (Collage created by the author, 2025)

